

a novel

mothers daughters

Rae Meadows



SAM

Sam was hungry for pound cake. Or at least for the making of it, for the recipe's humble simplicity—one pound each of flour, butter, eggs, and sugar—which had a certain elegance. The old-fashioned-ness of pound cake appealed to her, too, its satisfying solidity and lack of pretension, its buttery richness. Blame it on Wisconsin, she thought.

The trees had begun to change with the sugar maples leading the way, their golden-red leaves glowing through the rain-spattered windshield. It was October. Sam loved the ephemeral majesty and beautiful decay of fall, yet she couldn't enjoy it. Winter loomed. The promise of cracked lips from parched indoor heat, burned cheeks from pinprick winds, the grit of sand and salt everywhere. This would be their third winter in Madison, and she wondered how she would bear it, stuck inside with Ella, who was increasingly mobile, crawling circles around the living room, as darkness closed them in by four o'clock.

She sat in the backseat nursing Ella across the street from her friend Melanie's large Arts & Crafts house near

Vilas Park on the Westside. She ran her thumb across Ella's forehead, the skin poreless and heartbreakingly soft, and then traced the tiny curlicues of her ear. Ella's hot baby hand braced against Sam's chest in close-eyed concentration. How easily Sam was forgetting the last eight months, each developmental milestone quickly replaced by another. When had Ella first smiled? Rolled over? Sat up? It would soon be lost in a fuzzy hodgepodge of that first year, of "when Ella was a baby," the specifics no longer interesting or important.

Today was the first time she would leave Ella with a babysitter. She didn't want to, but she was doing it to show Jack that she was normal. He had been urging her to get back into her studio for months. She knew he was starting to find it worrisome that she never wanted to leave Ella, that she thought she was the only one capable enough to look after her.

Jack was right. Sam did think that. The fear of something going wrong with the baby was overpowering. No one would be as watchful and anticipatory as she was. What if Ella fell back and cracked her skull? Swallowed a penny and choked? Got stung by a bee and went into anaphylactic shock? At times she resented the primacy of her role as mother. She felt all-consumed by her daughter, a need to smell her neck and see her breath and feel her weight and warmth. Jack was bemused by her irrational scenario spinning, wondering what had become of the woman who used to exude composure. A twenty-pound being had inverted their life together and made it unrecognizable, his wife unrecognizable.

But it was more than just leaving Ella. There was the matter of the commission. A teapot for the head of the English Department, an old-guard scholar whom Jack needed to win over. A gift for the man's wife, requested almost a year ago. Sam knew Jack had to restrain himself from mentioning it as the months ticked on. She hadn't used her studio since she was six months pregnant, when her belly made it impossible to center clay on the wheel properly. She did miss the damp-chalky smell of her porcelain. The luminous gray-white glow of pots not quite dry. The centrifugal birth of opening a shape, a vessel, from a lump. Something from nothing. But now going back to work spun an anxiety that was new and ferocious. With porcelain she had to bring total consciousness, to be vigilant with form, because there was no roughness to hide behind. She had a lingering fear that her hands would no longer work in steady tandem, that she had lost her ability, her eye. Or, almost worse, that her pieces would be lackluster, relegated to craft fairs or a tent at the farmers' market, her creativity lost to motherhood. Cobwebs now ran from the window to her tools, and a strange crystalline mold grew up from her wedging table.

Ella pulled away and sat up gurgling and, with a large burp, dripped milk from her satisfied lips. Sam still got up a few times a night to nurse her. She couldn't bear to let her "cry it out"—to let her scream for an hour until she collapsed in exhaustion—as if a baby's need was something to be drained. Jack didn't mind Ella's wake-ups since he slept right through most of them. To the pediatrician and her friend Melanie, Sam lied and said Ella was sleeping through

the night, not wanting to defend herself, expose her weakness. Sam had become the type of parent she used to disparage: the pushover, the hoverer, the handmaiden to the royal empress.

The rain had stopped, and the stately neighborhood was drenched in shiny yellow and red leaves. Ella twisted and squawked, climbing up Sam's front.

"Okay, okay, baby," Sam said. "We're moving."

Her phone rang as she got out of the car, bobbling Ella and baby gear. She banged her knee against the door and spilled the diaper bag.

She answered her husband with a clipped "Hi," trying to keep the baby from flipping out of her arms.

"Hey," Jack said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fumbling everything. Heading into Melanie's."

"Oh, sorry. I thought you'd be on your own already. I'm proud of you, you know," he said.

"It's just a babysitter."

"Still."

"We'll see how it goes." She felt herself love him again. Since the baby, it seemed her feelings toward him required moment-to-moment readjustment.

"The rooter guy is coming today," Jack said.

"I know," she said quickly, irritably. She had, of course, forgotten.

Roots from the big maple tree in front had invaded their sewer pipes, and every six months they had to be drilled out. Sometimes Sam would lie awake and feel their old house decomposing around her, the foundation cracking, the roof leaking, the wooden clapboards rotting. What a transparent metaphor, she clucked to herself, but she was still

powerless against the feeling that their home was going to seed faster than they could repair it. One of these days as she bathed Ella she was sure the claw-footed tub would fall through the soggy floorboards into the basement.

“Hey, you know how I told you about the committee search for David’s job? How Samuels wants a theory person even though that would leave no one to teach Modern American?”

“Uh huh.”

Sam still didn’t know much about the esoteric workings of academia, but she supposed Jack didn’t know what *raku* meant, or what *terra sigillatta* was, or how a glossy brown-black *temmoku* glaze would turn yellow-green in a salt firing. Their professional lives were secret lives, to some extent, the details not really part of the marriage. She wondered if this made their work dangerous or necessary or both.

Jack lowered his voice. “There’s some stuff going on here.”

“Dadadadada,” Ella said, yanking Sam’s hair with her dimpled fist.

“Got to go,” Sam said to Jack. “I’ll call you in a bit.”

Sam squatted to pick up the diapers, now wet and dirty from the pavement, and tried to stretch her free hand under the car to get the pacifier that had rolled underneath, all without bumping the baby’s head. She stood, blew the hair out of her face, and kicked the door closed behind her.

“I’m walking, honey,” she murmured. “Let’s get inside, shall we? I’ll only be gone for a few hours. Nothing to worry about.”

Sometimes Sam thought that having a baby allowed her

to act like a crazy person, talking to herself in public, even singing, and not always in a desperate move to placate her child. Her old self would surely have mocked her.

“Samantha!”

Melanie waved from the porch, her hair in a tousled shag with just the right highlights. She wore expensive jeans and an olive-hued, crushed velvet jacket, so chicly unlike the crunchy non-style of Madison. She and her husband, Doug, had moved from San Francisco—he was an anthropology professor—and she liked to complain about the provincial quality of Madison, the awkward Midwest pauses, the lack of irony and edge, even as she loved being a big fish here, a novelist (her book had been made into a movie) and a local celebrity. Jack found her aggressive and self-indulgent—and, Sam was pretty sure, attractive—but he liked Doug, who was quiet and cerebral, and the two couples had fallen into an easy sociability, their get-togethers never coming around too often to feel stifling.

Melanie and Sam had met three and a half years before in prenatal yoga, both newly arrived in Madison, both newly pregnant. And when Sam dropped out of class at week eighteen of her pregnancy, Melanie sought her out, and Sam would always be appreciative of that. It was her unadorned, to-the-point manner, her self-preservationist spirit that made Sam tell her the truth about the first baby. In fact, Melanie was the only person other than Jack who knew. Everyone else, including her mother, believed the pregnancy had ended with a late miscarriage. Sam tried to remember this when Melanie irritated her.

Sam waved and bounced Ella back onto her hip. “Hey.” She smiled. “You look as fabulous as always.”

“Your standards have dropped. Come on in. This weather is ridiculous.”

Melanie’s daughter, Rosalee, careened by and disappeared upstairs. Melanie took Ella and nuzzled her.

“Look at those cheeks. God, she’s cute. I can barely stand it. You know I *really* don’t want to have another one, but I still sometimes crave giving birth. I ogle pregnant women. I tape those ridiculous Baby Stories on TV and watch them one after another in a misty-eyed trance.”

“I’m sure there’s a support group for that,” Sam said, setting the diaper bag on the polished concrete counter. She was surprised by Melanie’s admission and liked her more for it.

“Don’t tell anyone. I wouldn’t want to lose my heart-of-stone reputation.”

“Believe me, I get it,” Sam said. “I didn’t know my mind could capitulate so easily to my body. Or what is it, to the propagation of the species?”

“Gross,” Melanie said. “And here we thought we were evolved.”

Sam looked around the newly redone kitchen, a pasta water spigot over the stove, a deep rectangular stone farmhouse sink, a butcher-block island, a Subzero refrigerator. She wondered if all this was thanks to movie rights or if there was family money. It certainly wasn’t funded by Doug’s university salary.

Melanie, having had her fill, handed back the baby. Her large sapphire ring—“Diamonds are tacky”—caught on Ella’s sweater.

“Shit,” she said, freeing herself. “So sorry. This sweater is charming, by the way.”

“My grandmother knit it. For me. Eons ago,” Sam said. Her mother’s mother had died when Sam was just an infant, and Sam cherished the small sweaters and blankets—complete with MADE BY GRANDMOTHER tags sewn in—she’d made.

“Ah. You have craftiness in your genes, ” Melanie said.

Sam smiled but felt a slight rankling. Of course pottery was craft in the traditional sense, and she was proud of the utilitarian nature of her ceramics. But was a set of her nested bottles in a crackled jade glaze less a work of art than Melanie’s book about a woman’s relationship with her Jack Russell terrier? Melanie, she thought, is someone who believes the compliments she receives.

Sam put Ella on the floor to crawl around on the terracotta tiles.

Melanie downed the last of her coffee, and Sam saw that the mug was one she had made, one of her earlier styles with an hourglass middle, glazed in a milky *shino* with deep orange flashes, fired in a wood-fire kiln that she had helped feed for ten hours, a quick flare-up singeing her eyebrows. She remembered the giddy thrill she’d felt when they’d pried the door open the next day to see what had become of their pieces. The base of the mug was a little too narrow, she saw now, with a bead of glaze that had crawled, lodging itself clumsily at the base of the handle in a smooth nub.

Sam felt abashed for her snide thoughts about her friend, who had always been loyal. What is wrong with me? she thought. How puerile. How unattractive, her mother would have told her.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Melanie said. “If all goes well

today, you could start dropping off Ella a few days a week. Sarah told me she's looking for more work. She's game."

Sam inwardly shrank. Before she could say she wasn't ready, Ella bumped her head on a drawer handle and, after a long pause, her face red, her mouth wide, unfurled a howl. Sam rushed to her and swept her up, cradling her head against her shoulder, Ella's cry still a painful tripwire to Sam's core. She felt her breasts harden with milk and begin to leak.

"Think about it and let me know, okay? It would be good for you. If it's the money, we'll figure something out." Melanie waved her manicured hand in the air. "I would love, love, love to have you cranking out pots again."

Rosalee, her dark hair cut in a flapper's bob, ran in and crashed into her mother's legs.

"Careful, please."

"Mama," Rosalee said. "Mama. Mama. Mama."

Melanie sighed. "Yes, Rosa."

"Juice, juice, juice, juice."

Melanie poured a little apple juice into a sippy cup and doubled it with water.

"Sarah?" Melanie called to the nanny, and then said quietly to Sam, "She was on the clock at nine."

"I'll be right there!"

Sarah jogged down the stairs and into the kitchen. She was what they called a "Sconnie," a UW student from Wisconsin, apple-cheeked and sturdy-framed, as opposed to the "Coasties," the more sophisticated, moneyed kids from New York and California who lived off-campus and ate sushi.

"Sorry about that. Hi," Sarah said, waving to Sam. "Oh,

and hi to you.” Ella smiled as Sarah touched the pad of her little nose.

“Hi, Sarah,” Sam said. “Here’s her diaper bag. I’ll put the bottles in the refrigerator. There’s a jar of squash and a jar of sweet potatoes. And a thing of Cheerios. She’s not a great napper, but she’ll fall asleep in a sling if you don’t mind wearing her around. Oh, and she can sit up okay, but you have to watch her because she’s not that stable and can fall back and hit her head.”

“No problem,” Sarah said. She exuded a warm confidence that Sam had never been able to pull off. “We’ll have a great time together.”

Melanie crossed her arms and smiled, amused by Sam’s worry. Sarah expertly fashioned the sling around her body and waited for Sam to relinquish the baby.

“And my cell phone number—”

“On the refrigerator already,” Melanie said, grabbing her keys from a pewter hook. She had an office space near the wine store on Monroe Street where she went to write every day until four. She’d gone back to work when Rosalee was just four weeks old and said she’d never regretted it. She was not about to relegate the importance of her creative life, her career.

“It’s better for everyone,” she had said, “not the least of whom is me.”

At the time Sam thought it impressive, a model for her to aspire to. After she had Ella, though, she couldn’t help but think her friend selfish.

“Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama. Come with me. Come to my room,” Rosalee whined, tugging at her mother’s hand.

“Come on, Rosalee,” Sarah said. “Why don’t you show me your new Pocahontas dress?”

Rosalee thrust out her bottom lip and stamped her foot. Sam held out Ella to Sarah and tried not to let the tears leak out.

“Believe me, Samantha, you’re going to get used to this,” Melanie said.

From Sarah’s arms, Ella smiled at Sam with six little teeth, the two front ones spaced far apart, her eyes gray-blue and impossibly large. Sarah tucked Ella’s chubby legs into the sling and hammocked her, and then took Rosalee’s hand and whisked out of the room with a “Bye” over her shoulder.

“I’ll walk you out,” Melanie said, picking up her laptop bag.

Sam was embarrassed to be crying in front of Melanie, who was derisive of the earth-mother culture of Madison. “Spare me the hippie bullshit,” she’d say.

The sun streaked through the cloud breaks, warm on Sam’s head.

“We’ll talk,” Melanie said. “Get back in the studio, woman. Okay?”

They hugged, and Melanie clicked away in her heeled boots toward Monroe Street. Sam stood in her open car door and strained her ears through the birds and a leaf blower down the block, thinking she could hear Ella’s cry. But she couldn’t be sure. She sat behind the wheel.

She wished she could call her mother. She called Jack.

“So?”

“I’m out here and she’s in there.”

“You did it,” he said.

“I don’t feel liberated.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I guess I’m headed home.”

“Your studio awaits.”

“I’m scared.”

“I know. Just get a feel for things. Get your hands dirty. Clear out the cobwebs.”

“Literally. Have you seen it in there? It’s like *Tales from the Crypt*.”

“I thought I’d bring home Matsuya for dinner.”

“What if I suck?”

“Sam.”

“Okay. I miss her already.”

“You’re a good mom.”

“My usual. Spicy tuna roll, shrimp tempura roll.”

“I’m going up for tenure.”

“Already? What happened?”

“The department is shifting. Daniels was forced out. He’ll retire at the end of the year. I think the timing is right.”

“Wow. That’s huge. Not that I didn’t know you were the ‘it’ kid.”

“It doesn’t mean I’ll get it.”

“You’ll get it. You get everything.”

She’d meant this as a compliment, because he was one of those people who got the grants, the jobs, the fellowships he applied for, one of those people who was well liked because of an easygoing exterior that belied the smart and driven man underneath. But her words hung in the air a

moment too long and she couldn't tell if she'd sounded a little bitter. She couldn't tell if she'd been mean.

"That's not true," he said. If he was stung, he didn't let on. "I'll tell you more about it later."

"I love you," she said.

"I love you, too. Hey, Sam?"

"Yeah."

"I hate to be a nudge. But."

"The teapot."

"I need Franklin's support. He's already on the fence. I don't want to give him a reason, you know? He asked me about it last week."

She hid her face in her free hand. She had to throw the body, the spout, and the lid, trim a base, pull a handle, assemble the parts, making sure that the piece actually worked, that it poured easily, while still looking graceful and light, with smoothed joints and upward lines and energy. Then the bisque firing, which might bring out cracks and warping, which would mean starting over. All this before figuring out the colors that would best suit the shape, the precise measuring of chemicals and minerals, and applying the glaze. And then another firing. It was an exhausting, teetering climb to imagine, and she couldn't get quite enough air.

"When?" was all she could get out.

"Two weeks."

Sam dropped her head against the steering wheel. "Oh, Jack."

"You can do it. I know you can. For me."

She chucked the phone into the passenger seat and tried to regain her breath. She glanced back at Melanie's house

and started the car, willing herself to drive away from Ella. But she couldn't bring herself to go home and face her studio. She felt a curious new sensation of being cut loose. The day stretched out in front of her.

She could do whatever she wanted.