

EMILY PAIGE SKEEN

*For Better
or Worse*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-8



*Love endures
all things*

For Better or
Worse

Emily Paige Skeen

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

For Better or Worse

COPYRIGHT 2017 by Emily Paige Skeen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Prism is a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC

www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

The Triangle Prism colophon is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

Prism Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9758-8

Published in the United States of America

1

Scarlett's breath caught at the site of blood. She'd never been pregnant before now, but she understood the implications. Panicking, she screamed for her husband. "Aiden! Something's wrong!"

Seconds later, Aiden burst into the bathroom. "What is it, babe?"

With trembling hands, Scarlett pointed to the contents of the toilet, her blue-gray eyes clouded. The expression on Aiden's face confirmed Scarlett's fears. She slumped to the floor, arms clasped around her abdomen.

~*~

"Come on. We're gettin' you to the hospital." Aiden moved immediately into protector mode, scooping Scarlett into his arms and rushing through the front door of their tiny one-bedroom apartment. He carried his shaking wife down two flights of stairs and set her gently in the front seat of his old truck. Brushing golden brown hair from Scarlett's face, he planted a soft kiss on her forehead.

"Shoot! The keys. Sit here. I'll be back." Aiden backtracked and exploded into the apartment. Once he found the keys, he dashed back to the truck, jumped in, and slammed the door. He paused long enough to notice his wife's pale skin, wide eyes, pursed lips. He took a deep breath and attempted to reassure her. "It's

gonna be fine, Scar. I promise. Everything's gonna be fine."

A sob escaped Scarlett's throat. "It doesn't *feel* fine," she choked out.

They rode the rest of the way in silence as Aiden navigated through traffic with lightning speed. Scarlett stared straight ahead, silent.

Aiden prayed, begging God not to take their baby. Pleading with Him to spare his wife this horrendous, debilitating loss.

~*~

Early the next morning, Aiden and Scarlett made their way home from the hospital with heavy hearts. The baby couldn't be saved, and surgery completed the process of the miscarriage. The doctor had given Scarlett the option of waiting for her body to pass the remains of her child on its own, but the thought was too much for her to bear. She needed the pain to be over. She needed to move on with her life.

But she could no longer imagine a life without her little one.

It had been only twelve weeks since conception, but already she'd begun dreaming of decorating the nursery. She'd even chosen baby names, one for a girl and one for a boy.

Remembering those names now stabbed at her heart. She would never get to meet her child. Her perfect, precious, innocent, unborn child to whom one of those names belonged. And she couldn't comprehend how to even begin to deal with it.

What had she done wrong? She'd been careful of her diet, completely cut out caffeine, and avoided

alcohol. She exercised every day, with the need to be in control of her changing body right from the start. Maybe she'd overdone it?

Tears escaped and flowed freely down her cheeks. She'd held it together at the hospital, but there was no controlling her grief now—not in the stillness suffocating her in the tight quarters of Aiden's truck. The thought she'd done something to hurt her baby played repeatedly in her mind.

This is my fault. I killed my child.

Aiden took her hand in his as the first sob escaped her throat. He didn't say a word, and for that she was grateful. Her emotions didn't leave room for speech.

Back at the apartment, Aiden helped Scarlett out of his truck and led her into their home as she leaned against him. *Thank God for my husband.* He was her rock. Maybe she'd get through this someday. As long as he didn't leave her... *Oh, God, will he leave me now?* Would he blame her for this? Then she'd be all alone.

But he should blame her. *It's my fault.*

"Can I do somethin' for you?" Aiden asked quietly as Scarlett sank into the cushions of their hand-me-down sofa.

"I'm gonna lay down for a while," she responded. "I'm so tired. So, so tired..." Her eyes drifted shut.

Sleep didn't come easily for Scarlett. She tossed and turned for hours, dreaming of her unborn baby.

A little while later, Aiden woke her from the disturbed slumber. "Darlin', it's lunch time. You should eat something. What can I make you?"

Blinking, Scarlett shook her head. "Not hungry," she muttered before rolling over. After her nightmares, she couldn't bear to face him. An overwhelming dread filled her soul. He'd leave her eventually. He'd blame

her for the death of their baby. While she would understand, that didn't mean it would hurt any less when it happened.

Scarlett drifted in and out of sleep the rest of the day. When she finally awoke, it was dark outside and past dinner time.

"You feel like eatin' yet?" Aiden asked from his spot next to her.

"No," Scarlett responded, still lying down.

"I know you're upset, babe, but you gotta eat something. Tell me what you want, and I'll make it or go get it. Anything."

"I'm not hungry."

"Scar..."

She bolted upright. "I can't eat! OK? So stop asking!"

He winced. "I'm only trying to help. I get what you're feelin—"

"No! No, you don't. You don't have a *clue* how I feel right now. If you did, you wouldn't keep buggin' me about eatin'. My baby just *died*. It was livin' inside me, and then it was dead. *Inside* me. You don't 'get' how it feels. So, please, stop tellin' me to eat. I don't wanna put anything into my body right now."

The taut, pale expression on his face pierced her. She'd hurt him. But for some reason, she couldn't help it. He made her so angry, worrying about food at a time like this.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a tiny voice told her he wasn't actually worried about food—he was worried about *her*. But she wasn't in a place to listen to reason. Only turbulent emotions controlled her mind, leaving no room for logic.

Aiden stood slowly. "I'll give you some space. I'll

be in the bedroom if you need me." He started down the hall, stopped, and turned to face her again. "I lost a baby too."

2

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. Before long, Christmas loomed. Scarlett and Aiden's life took on a new normal. Scarlett enrolled in her last year of college, and Aiden earned a promotion to Project Manager at his construction job. With the coinciding raise, the two lived comfortably and began saving to buy a house.

She took classes while he worked, and they spent evenings out with friends or having movie nights together at their cozy apartment.

On the outside, it appeared as though they were the perfect couple with the perfect life. Aiden doted on Scarlett even more so than before the miscarriage. He'd always adored her, but losing their baby seemed to double his expressions of love.

Scarlett's affection, on the other hand, went only surface-deep. Inside, her heart was a dark, bottomless pit where desperation never ended. She grew incapable of truly loving *anyone*—even the man she'd vowed to love for life.

Her heart shut itself down out of pure necessity, because when it did work, it simply ached.

She played her roles well: loving wife, devoted college student, humble Sunday school teacher. She busied herself with school, church, fundraisers, and social events, refusing to show even the slightest sign of weakness.

What should've been an exciting time in Scarlett's young life was silently destroying her. Her friends, none of whom were thinking about babies—or even marriage, for that matter—couldn't possibly understand what she was going through. She often envied their carefree existence. None of them suffered a worry in the world aside from finding something crazy to wear to the ugly sweater Christmas party.

But at twenty-two, Scarlett was dealing with things she'd never imagined—a strained marriage, the devastating loss of a baby, and incapacitating guilt.

She resented Aiden for being able to move past the loss so quickly, for being strong when she couldn't, and for not having to endure the endless guilt or emptiness she experienced day and night.

~*~

It was 5:30 on a cold Saturday morning the week before Christmas, and Scarlett drifted in and out of sleep. Her fall semester classes were over, and most of her and Aiden's friends had left campus to be with family for the holidays. It was only the two of them.

In years past, this was her favorite time—having Aiden all to herself, wandering aimlessly through the mall hand-in-hand during the day, sipping hot chocolate and watching Christmas movies at night.

Everything was different this year. And the worst part was Aiden didn't even realize it. Or so she thought.

"Which movie tonight?" Aiden asked sleepily, rolling over in bed to pull Scarlett close. Her fidgeting had awakened him.

"You pick." Scarlett stretched in a maneuver to

subtly slip out of Aiden's arms, but the move didn't fool him.

"What's wrong, Scar?"

"Hmm? Nothin'," she mumbled.

"Why'd you pull away from me?"

"What are you talkin' about? I didn't."

"I'm not gonna argue with you, Scarlett. You've been distant lately. It's like you're just goin' through the motions or somethin'."

With a heavy sigh, Scarlett threw the plush white blanket off her and slung her legs over the edge of the bed, pushing herself into a sitting position away from the man beside her. "Please drop it, OK? It's too early for all this."

Aiden propped up on one elbow and clutched his wife's arm. "No, I won't drop it. It's always too early or too late, or you're too tired. I don't even know what 'all this' is! Please, Scar. What's goin' on with us? Why do I feel like I'm losin' you?"

Tears pricked Scarlett's eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She didn't want to have this conversation with him right now. She couldn't.

She was afraid she'd say something she might regret.

"Babe, look at me." Pleading, Aiden reached around and gently tugged Scarlett's chin toward him. "Talk to me."

Exasperated, she lost her cool composure. "I don't know. OK?" she exclaimed, jerking her chin out of his grasp. "I don't know why you feel how you feel. I don't even know why I...actually, I don't know *what* I feel, never mind *why* I feel it. I ..."

"What?" Aiden waited for her response.

Nothing came. How could she explain emotions to

him she didn't even understand herself?

Finally, she muttered, "We're in different places." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Aiden's forehead creased in confusion. "What are you talkin' about? School? I thought we had a pretty good plan. You finish up while I work, then when you're settled in your teaching career, I'll take classes at night."

Scarlett stood and crossed their bedroom to stare out the window at the tree-lined parking lot below. She watched windblown leaves scurry across the ground. All scattered, tossing and turning with no real destination. Trapped by the very breeze meant to set them free.

There it was, the emotion eating at Scarlett that she couldn't quite put her finger on—trapped.

She was trapped by obligations, trapped by school, trapped by friends she no longer felt connected to, even trapped by the man whom she'd always thought of as her safe place. Her rock on solid ground.

Now, that rock smothered her. She no longer stood on top of it, but rather, under it. And she needed to get out.

The desire to leave hit her as hard and fast as the loss of her baby on that dreadful day had. She needed to escape, to start over. Alone.

Suddenly, Scarlett spun to face Aiden. "I can't be with you anymore!" she blurted.

Aiden flinched. "Wha—"

"I'm sorry," she said before he could talk her out of her decision. "It's not you. I...I need to get out of here. I have to be on my own for a while. I can't..." She hesitated. The words she was about to say would crush him. Was she ready to devastate the man she'd loved

for as long as she could remember?

"You can't *what*, Scarlett?" Aiden catapulted himself from his position on the bed. "Whatever it is, whatever'll make you feel better, go on and spit it out."

Scarlett inhaled a shaky breath and closed her eyes. "I can't love you anymore."

"You don't love me anymore?" He sank back down.

"No, no... That's not what I meant. It's not that I *don't* love you; it's that I...I...*can't*. I'm numb. I don't think I'll ever love anybody again. Not the way I did before."

Aiden stood once more and walked slowly toward her. "Before what, Scar? The miscarriage?"

The word caused Scarlett to wince and subconsciously grab at her abdomen.

"Is that what this is about, babe?"

Scarlett's eyes widened. "Of course it is. It's what *everything's* about. Or did you already forget? It must be so easy for you."

"No, Scarlett, it's not easy for me. I won't act like I understand how you feel. There's no way I could. But I loved our baby, too. *I* lost her too." He paused, taking his wife's hands in his. "But I won't lose *you*. I can't. I won't let us fall apart."

"Don't you see, Aiden?" Scarlett implored, pulling her hands free of his. "It's too late. We *already* fell apart. I gotta get outa here." She pushed past him toward the closet and grabbed her suitcase from the far corner. She tossed clothes from her drawers into the luggage, moving around the once-peaceful room at a frenzied pace.

"Scar, stop. You're not goin' anywhere." Aiden caught her in his arms. "Calm down. Everything's

gonna be OK.”

She jerked away and continued to pack. She ran to the bathroom and threw a few odds and ends into a smaller piece of luggage. Next, she grabbed a ponytail holder and pulled her hair back, pausing only momentarily to glance in the mirror. There was lunacy in her eyes.

Aiden begged her to stay, attempting to take her luggage from her. His expression grew wild. With visibly trembling hands, he followed her down the hallway, straining to grab and hold onto her. She struggled out of his grasp each time.

“Babe, don’t go. I need you. Please. *Please!*” His voice was desperate, quivering.

Scarlett shook her head, tears streaming down her face. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But I need to.” She was gone before his outstretched hand could pull her back.

3

An hour later, Scarlett's crying forced her to pull to the side of the road. She didn't even pretend to know where she was going. She'd been driving toward her childhood home, but she couldn't face her family. What reason could she possibly give them for leaving Aiden? They'd call her hysterical and send her packing.

No, she couldn't go to her parents'. So, where?

Mandy, her best friend growing up. The two of them had been inseparable practically from birth. Their mothers were friends, so their own friendship naturally bloomed after only a couple of playdates. In fact, Scarlett couldn't remember a time before Mandy was in her life.

One tiny problem. They hadn't seen each other in almost a year. When Scarlett left for college in Savannah, she and Mandy had vowed to stay best friends forever. Then life happened. Scarlett got busy with classes and a social calendar, while Mandy stayed behind to attend community college with some of their old crew.

Aiden and Scarlett made new "couple" friends. It was too easy for Scarlett to let Mandy drift out of her life, even if unintentionally. Mandy was single, in an entirely different city, and much more interested in partying than getting married and settling down.

Still, something deep inside Scarlett's heart told her she could count on live-life-to-the-fullest, never-

boring, throw-caution-to-the-wind Mandy. With a few deep breaths to calm herself, Scarlett pulled her cell phone out of the purse that had been tossed haphazardly on the passenger's seat.

She was forced to rein in her sobs once more when she saw the ten missed calls and almost as many text messages from Aiden. She hadn't purposely ignored him.

Not that she would've answered if she had heard the calls come in. She had no explanation for her meltdown other than the one she'd given him, and she suspected it wasn't enough of an answer to explain throwing seven years together and a marriage down the drain.

Shaking her head to clear it, Scarlett scrolled to Mandy's number. Her finger hovered over it as she hesitated. *No other choice.* She connected the call.

"Scar! How the heck are you? How've you been?"

Simply hearing Mandy's voice broke down all Scarlett's resolve. Instead of responding to the questions, she cried into the phone. She feared Mandy would think she'd gone crazy.

Mandy had no idea she'd lost a baby and a husband. Even though she'd called Mandy with news of her pregnancy right away, Scarlett hadn't done the same after her miscarriage.

This was going to be a long, complicated talk.

"Scarlett? What's wrong?"

"I...I...need a...place...to stay," Scarlett managed to mutter through her sobs.

Mandy didn't hesitate. "Of course. Do you need a ride? Where are you now?"

Scarlett took a shaky breath and managed to cease her crying. "No, I'm fine. Just hearin' your voice..."

Anyway, I'm already halfway there. I was headed to my parents' house, but then...well, that's not a good idea."

"OK. I don't know what's goin' on, but I'm sure you'll fill me in when you get here. My curiosity can wait. Be careful drivin'. You sure you don't want me to come get you? I don't want anything to happen to you or the—"

"Positive. I'm good now. See you in about two hours." Scarlett interrupted before Mandy could say the word "baby."

"K. Scar?"

"Yeah?"

"Whatever it is, I'm here for you. Anything you need. I mean it. *Anything.*"

"Thanks." After hanging up with her childhood friend, Scarlett inched her car back onto the two-lane road. Bare-branched trees whizzed by as she picked up speed. The gray winter sky reflected her mood. No sunshine—merely cold, lifeless nature to remind her how empty her own life was.

When she finally made it to the interstate, Scarlett cranked up her car's radio to drown out her thoughts. It didn't help. No matter how loud the music blared, her mind screamed louder.

You've ruined everything. You hurt the man you love. You killed your baby. The last thought was the loudest.

You killed your baby.

You killed your baby.

When would the guilt end? When would she finally be able to breathe? Scarlett couldn't answer either question. She just needed to keep moving.

4

Two endless hours later, Scarlett pulled down a driveway leading to Mandy's rental home, a redbrick 1970s ranch-style house, complete with a low-pitched roof and three large bay windows in the front.

Although old, the house appeared immaculate and welcoming. The outside entry, which boasted a small covered patio, was surrounded by a beautiful flower garden splashed with a variety of bright colors. Underneath each window was a white window box holding gorgeous pink and purple geraniums—the wonders of early winter in the South. The front door was painted a pale blue, which was a surprising complement to the deep red of the walls.

Wow. Mandy had become quite the domestic goddess, from the looks of things. Completing the vibe was a fabric wreath hanging on the door, with the word “Welcome” spelled out in pink wooden letters attached across the middle.

Scarlett pulled to a stop in front of the two-car garage, slipped out, and headed up the unnaturally clean sidewalk toward the perfectly maintained front patio. As she reached the door and raised her fist to knock, every ounce of courage fled her body.

What am I doing? Scarlett hadn't seen this woman in *so* long. She didn't even know her anymore. The Mandy she'd known was somewhat of a slob who never cared about home decor, much less gardening. *This is crazy!*

With wide eyes and a huff, Scarlett quickly turned to go. Maybe Mandy hadn't seen her.

"Scar? What're you doin'?"

Or maybe she had.

"Um, I...uh, left somethin' in my car." Scarlett scanned her brain for something—anything—she could grab from the car that would make sense, but nothing came to mind. With a deep breath, she gave up and slowly turned to face Mandy. "But never mind. It's not important."

Mandy gasped. "What—"

"I lost the baby," Scarlett explained rapidly, before the question escaped her friend's lips.

Mandy's face paled. "When?"

"Um, not long after I told you I was pregnant. I didn't make it to the second trimester." Scarlett couldn't meet Mandy's eyes. Instead, she appraised her friend's outfit—brown riding boots over dark skinny jeans, paired with a beige oversized knit sweater. Large pearl earrings and a pretty plaid scarf around her neck completed the ensemble. Her long blonde hair fell in soft curls around slim shoulders, and her skin was unusually tan for the middle of winter. She was so...put together. Wearing the latest fashion, hair and makeup the picture of perfection.

Mandy looked like a model, while Scarlett...well, Scarlett appeared as if she'd been through the ringer. She was still wearing her pajamas, since she'd left her apartment in such a frenzy. Pink flannel pants and a plain white camisole underneath a baggy sweatshirt wouldn't win her any pageants, of that she was certain.

Scarlett's hair rested in a messy bun on top of her head, and her face was free of makeup, which, given how much she'd cried, was probably for the best. At

least she'd thought to slip on a bra when she pulled over to call Mandy.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Mandy's words came out barely above a whisper.

Scarlett winced at the pain so evident on her friend's face. "I'm sorry. I...I don't know. I couldn't bear it, I guess. I couldn't even say the words. We'd only told a handful of people about the pregnancy, so it was pretty easy for Aiden to let them know what happened. He offered to call you, but I said I wanted to tell you in person. But then...I was so embarrassed about how I'd gone on and on about the pregnancy. Braggin'. I couldn't face you."

"You should've called. I would've gone to your apartment. I would've—"

"I know," Scarlett said. "I can't even tell you how sorry I am."

Mandy paused, her lips pursed. Finally, she broke the awkward silence, shaking her head. "What's wrong with me? You've had a horrible thing happen, and here I am gettin' mad about somethin' stupid. I'm so sorry, Scar. I can't even imagine what you went through." She pulled Scarlett into a tight hug, and Scarlett clung to her.

Scarlett's tears were uncontrollable as she sought comfort in the arms of her long-lost friend. Soon, Mandy's shirt was soaked. When she finally settled down, she drew back and peered into Mandy's eyes. "I'm so sorry I've neglected you lately. Even before the...before I got pregnant, I wasn't a very good friend."

Mandy dismissed her apology with a wave of her hand. "Don't give it a second thought. Life happens. We sorta drifted. But no matter what, you're always