

Every Conceivable Way

UNCORRECTED ADVANCE PROOF

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*For my mother, for Bill, for Evander.
I love you in every conceivable way.*

Author's note

I never intended to write this book.

My nine-year fertility journey has been intensely personal; a clandestine operation that I have kept under lock and key until now exploded into an extraordinary story.

My circle of friends was broadly aware that my husband and I were undergoing IVF, but I didn't fill them in on much of the detail. Keeping it quiet was the strategy I used to protect myself from worried expressions, well-meaning advice and disappointed looks.

I was determined that this one small slice of my existence would not consume me, that I would be grateful for all of the other wonderful things in my world. My life continued to go in the way that it always had – with exciting new experiences, travels to exotic countries with my soulmate and celebrations of milestones, large and small.

But our situation became extremely intense – this was not your typical IVF journey – and so keeping my mind on other things became futile. I found myself experiencing the full gamut of emotions – hope, despondency, grief, resilience and much, much more – on my path to having a baby. And most of the time, my husband and I went through these feelings privately, which ultimately was at a disservice to ourselves and our loved ones. We had a village of people to lean on, but we mostly chose to go it alone.

In the few instances that I have been forced to open up for logistical reasons – to doctors, specialists, work colleagues, close friends – it has become clear that the path I have taken is a subject of fascination, even amongst the medical professionals I go to for guidance. When nurses, doctors and medical receptionists ask you about how international surrogacy works, you know that you are at the forefront of something.

So, allow me to share with you our adventure.

Prologue

Warm sunlight streams into the sparse waiting area in the sonographer's makeshift clinic, flickering onto dust particles in the air. I have been delivered here by my driver, Manoj, through the backstreets of a crowded Mumbai neighbourhood to this unmarked doorway. The crumbling frame and deteriorating façade do nothing to calm my nerves.

My husband, Bill, and I have flown from Melbourne into the belly of Mumbai to pursue surrogacy. Our genetic material – my eggs and Bill's semen – will be collected to make embryos. These embryos will be implanted into an Indian woman to carry a child for us and make a long-standing dream possibly ... finally ... maybe ... come true.

My coordinator, Raj, does the talking for me. At 5'7", I tower over the small-framed Indian women crammed into this space. There's barely any room to stand in, the seats are all taken and patients line the hallway and staircase. Like an awkward baby giraffe, I stand in the middle of the room, the only white person here, my blond hair and blue eyes the subject of fascination. To add to my discomfort, the receptionist asks an Indian woman to stand up so that I can sit down. I wish I could just melt into the plastic chair and become one with it.

Bill stands outside in the hallway along with the other men. He is my security guard and – at 6'3" – is imposing. No one gets in or out without going past him.

The thought of an internal examination on my first day in a very foreign land has me on edge. Most women can't stand going to the gynaecologist in their own country, where they speak the language and know the rules and etiquette. Here I am completely ignorant.

We are far outnumbered by mosquitos. I have been advised not to take malaria pills because they could have a negative effect on the outcome of my fertility treatment. The buzzing of possible malaria-carrying mosquitos sends me over the edge. Seriously, what have I done? Why did we come up with this crazy idea? I am sweating profusely, partly because of the suffocating heat but mostly due to fear.

Everything in India is new to me. I desperately wish I was here for another purpose, then I could approach it the way I would normally observe a new destination. For a moment, I tell myself to pretend that I'm just a traveller. I look around at the beautiful women of all ages here with me, their dark luminous skin adorned by intricate henna artwork. The saris and khurtas are in every colour of the rainbow. Their love of jewellery is obvious: nose rings, multiple earrings on each ear, bangles stacked in cylinders on their arms, ankle bracelets, toe rings. Where there is skin, there is jewellery.

I wonder why these other women are here. Are they pregnant? Are they undergoing IVF? Are they facing their own fertility issues? Are they surrogates? But these are complex questions. And I am a stranger in a strange land and I'm told only what I need to know.

Clouded as I am with anxiety and jet lag, time passes slowly, heavily. Some women swat at mosquitos. Others shift in their seat. The clock ticks away on the wall. When I look away, I can feel eyes staring at me – and when I look back, I catch them in the act. I have travelled sixteen hours on two planes to get to this other land. My land of opportunity. I am strong and I will go through with this.

After hours of waiting, I am called into the tiniest of rooms into which someone has squeezed a pint-sized desk, a chair for small

children and a bed that looks fit for a dollhouse. I am Alice after she's eaten the cake, having grown big while everything else stays the same.

I am instructed to take off my shoes before entering the procedure room. The room does not look very 'medical'. Nothing looks sterilised or hygienic. It's as if someone's spare room is being used for medical procedures.

A female assistant tells me the very basics of what I need to know. We are here to do a follicle count, to see how I have responded to the fertility drugs. Typically, only one ovarian follicle will ovulate an egg during a woman's cycle. The purpose of the IVF injections I've been giving myself is to force the body to produce multiple eggs in the cycle, giving IVF a better chance of success. The size of my stimulated follicles will determine when I'm ready for harvest. By any definition, today's an important day.

I remove all clothes from the waist down and am directed to lie down on the mini bed with mini towels that do not look fresh. My worry shifts from whether I have enough follicles to whether I will leave here with my health intact. I tell myself that whatever comes into contact with my skin doesn't matter, as long as whatever goes inside of me is hygienic.

I see the familiar wand that will be used for the internal exam. I have had this exam way too many times in Australia over the past six years – none of which have been enjoyable in the slightest – so I know that despite appearances it will fit comfortably into a woman's vagina.

Without a word, the matronly assistant unwraps a fresh condom out of a packet. For a split second I feel like I've been signed up for the wrong procedure. My relief is immense when she unrolls it expertly onto the wand.

The sonographer pushes aside the curtain. He is a serious man with a serious moustache and does nothing to acknowledge my presence. The examination moves ahead without a hitch; there is no discomfort and it's very quick. He expertly calculates the number of follicles and

their size at lightning speed, with his assistant furiously noting it all down. I am surprised that I have to ask in order to be told how many follicles I have. I'm shot an irritated look, but at least I get my answer: six follicles that should be mature at collection and another four that might grow in time. Not too bad, if I do say so myself.

Before I know it, I can put my clothes on and collect my dignity at the door.

I hope this is worth it. The risk, the nerves, the emotions that hang in the balance. Deciding to pursue surrogacy is a very weighty decision; I wonder if it will finally deliver to us the one thing we want most in the world: the opportunity to be parents.

1

Many years before Mumbai, before the language of IVF and embryos had even appeared on our radar, Bill and I have a simple idea: to have a baby. It is 2006 and it is with great excitement that we decide that it's time - and not least because of all of the fun we are going to have trying to make one.

Bill is thirty-four and I am twenty-nine. Twenty-nine is a great number. Not too young to start a family, not so old to be in that murky territory of dropping fertility rates. We have been married for six years, long enough to become familiar with each other's quirks, to get silly fights out of the way and to muddle through those rocky few years of learning to live with someone who has grown up with a completely different handbook to life. We have travelled a lot, living up to our promise to each other that our marriage will not be one of drudgery but one of adventure and new experiences. We promise not to ever take each other for granted. With each passing year, we grow closer. Life is good.

It is with this outlook that we start trying to have a baby. There is no rush; this is just a pool of water that we will dip our toes into and see what happens.

The first few months, there is no keeping track of days of my menstrual cycle to work out our fertility window. Just plenty of sex because we think that's how you make a baby.

After a few months of trying – and what I naively think is an eternity – we familiarise ourselves with the surprisingly tiny window of opportunity you get to make a baby each month. I'd spent so much of my twenties trying not to fall pregnant, I had no idea of how small that fertility window is.

Three months on and we are standing in our bathroom, the home pregnancy test rested on the granite bench. Bill is making small talk and trying to act as if it's no big deal, but we are both holding our breath waiting for a long two minutes to pass.

And there they are: the two most glorious blue lines that I have ever seen. They appear slowly and unfold magically, the symbol of our baby dream becoming reality. They instantly put everything into soft focus – making our existence rosy and dreamy. It is the natural progression of a love that is so strong that we can't wait to manifest it in a beautiful baby.

We will keep it a secret from our families for now. With every soft glance at each other, we know we hold the keys to paradise and can't wait to unlock it.

Bill is the type of guy who would do anything for his family. His thoughts are constantly on how he can help them, how he can fix their problems, how he can share in their joys. For our nieces and nephews, he is the eternal child, always making them laugh and teaching them lessons along the way. And for this, they adore him.

These nurturing qualities even extend to his relationships with his clients. Bill is a financial adviser, but he has this uncanny ability to find out about his clients' hopes and dreams, the fears and concerns they have in their lives. In these appointments, he's ended up resolving family disputes, giving dietary advice, even inspiring people to change their exercise habits. One time he came home from work and couldn't wait to tell me about his client. Six months prior, he'd had a meeting

with a couple who had been clients of his for years. The man had been battling obesity for as long as Bill had known him, and the doctors had given him months to live. The couple came to Bill to organise their affairs before it was too late.

During the meeting, Bill turned his attention to how to motivate his client into losing the weight. After some probing, it turned out that his client had always had a love for motorbikes, but because of the weight gain was no longer able to pursue his passion. So, Bill identified a concrete, measurable goal that the couple readily agreed to: if his client lost 30 kilos – the amount doctors had suggested – he would buy himself a Harley.

Six months later, Bill opened his diary and saw that he had an appointment with this client. He was still alive. This guy arrived at the office on his Harley, having shed 30 kilos.

Bill ran out of his office in pure excitement to greet him, ‘You bought the bike! You look fantastic!’

‘It’s all because of you. You gave me the will to do it.’

‘What did the doctors say?’

‘They’ve given me a clean bill of health. They can’t believe it.’

‘So, what’s your secret? How did you lose all the weight?’

A man of few words, his client replied, ‘Steamed dim sims.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Steamed dim sims. I’ve been eating them every day since I last saw you.’

Bill was beaming as he told me the story. ‘I don’t know if steamed dim sims is the healthiest way to lose weight, but he’s alive.’

Bill has changed a lot of people’s lives. He has a huge heart and a lot of love to give. So now, with our positive pregnancy test, you can just imagine the grin that Bill can’t wipe from his face - and the hope that we have projected onto our next nine months.

In these early days, there are no scans or check-ups during the first ten weeks. Just one appointment with my sister’s beloved obstetrician,

Dr S, to talk due dates and book a hospital and all that fun optimistic stuff.

If Bill could wrap me up in bubble wrap during this period, he would. We playfully pick names out, one for a boy and one for a girl. We wonder who the baby will look like, maybe it will take on Bill's dark hair and my blue eyes. All the dreamy fantasies that you should be having when you have a baby on the way.

*

Growing up in New York, home life was quite lonely for me. My dad wasn't consistently around, and this meant that my mum was the main breadwinner for the family. She worked as a hairdresser - long hours on her feet, six days a week. My sister was nine years older than me. She had school and her friends and after-school activities. By the time I was nine, Sophia had gone off to college.

I craved a big family and I found it in my aunties, uncles and cousins. My mum was one of eight siblings; big families were common in her village when she was growing up. I adored all of my uncles and aunties, who doted on us, but most of all I enjoyed how loud it was when we all got together. We are Greek, after all. My family are boisterous and fun, opinionated and involved, and they are there for each other. My most cherished memories are from the times when we would all get together for the holidays: a house full of fun-loving adults, tables loaded with platters of food and homemade sweets.

We children would run amuck through the house, only slowing down if one of the adults managed to catch us. The adults would tell stories and sing songs and laugh until their faces were red. We didn't know what they were talking about half the time, especially because they would all talk over each other and interrupt constantly.

The kids would retreat into one of the kid's' rooms and start dealing the playing cards for gin rummy. All the cousins knew how to play by

the time we were four years old. We would get really loud over whose turn it was to deal, then someone would throw the entire deck of cards into the air and the game would be over. Running back to the adults, we would all find a place on someone's lap – it didn't matter whose – and pile our plate high with sweets. My heart overflowed with love. Here, I felt complete. I was part of a tribe. This was my world, where I belonged.

So when I was home alone, I would pass the time by imagining all the children I would one day have. I would draw up my fantasy house from above, like a draftsman would. I would be very specific and with a ruler draw up every room and in what proportions they would be in. Often this house was based on my uncle Kosta's house, where I spent many of my summer holidays and had some of the happiest times of my childhood years.

Happiness bubbled up in me every time I played this game. Where would each of my daughters sleep, and where would my sons play? Who would get along and who would argue? I played this game countless times in every permutation.

2

I am in my tenth week of pregnancy and Bill and I have just come home from the cinema. After guzzling a litre of water and being trapped in a three-hour film, I can't get to the toilet fast enough.

But rather than feel relief, I find bright red blood on the toilet paper. I am perplexed, absolutely stunned for that matter. I can't understand what I am seeing. And then the penny drops and my reaction turns to sorrow.

I just know that the pregnancy is over; that everything has been lost in an instant. As I leave the toilet, Bill sees the look on my face and runs to me. Through quivering lips, I tell him that the blood must mean the end. He cradles me in his strong arms. They are so long that they wrap all the way around me and then some. As is his way, he calms me down, telling me not to jump to conclusions until we see the doctor the next day. Later I realise that despite the strong front he put up for me, he took the worry to bed with him that night.

The ultrasound is with a local sonographer who we've never met. The conversation is bubbly and jovial, Bill and I having convinced ourselves that everything will be okay. The doctor goes quiet while he observes what is up on the screen. He tells us that he can find a gestational sac, but no baby and no heartbeat. Just a black blob without signs of life. When you receive news like that, the whole room becomes lifeless. There is no sound, no movement, it's as if no one is breathing

and time has stopped. No one wants to be the first to speak, so the sonographer goes into further description of what he sees to diffuse the silence.

I am lying down and quiet tears stream down the sides of my face. I don't care to wipe them or make a sound or even take a breath, I just want to be swallowed up into a sinkhole. But Bill scrambles to get me a tissue, the only thing he can do to try and fix the situation. He wipes my tears with such care it's as if he might bring our baby back to life.

You learn a lot about yourself in times of distress. My way of coping is to not bother anyone, keep it as quiet as possible and deal with it myself. That way, I feel strong and independent. I am still capable and no one can feel sorry for me.

And this is true even for my miscarriage. I decide that I won't bother Dr S with news of my pesky problem. He has more important things to do, dealing with proper pregnancies and delivering healthy babies. I have failed everyone, but I will take care of this myself. I don't need anyone feeling sympathy for me.

I send Bill to work, despite the cramping I'm starting to feel, and tell him that I will be fine. I choose not to tell my mum and my sister; I don't want to upset them. I figure there is nothing anyone can do to help. The miscarriage will just have to run its course. But in my desire to make things easier for everyone else, I diminish the value of a shoulder to cry on.

My pain gets worse, so I make my way to a public hospital that I have never been to before and wait my turn in the busy admissions area. The nurses don't know me, I am on my own and couldn't be more anonymous. After a long wait, the nurse takes me into a small, drab room. She is sympathetic and informs me that my symptoms show that I am having the miscarriage naturally, that there will be no need for intervention. She leaves me by myself in that bare room, but not before

giving me mild painkillers. Laying down on the hospital bed, I stare at the grey cracked ceiling above me. This room has seen a lot. I feel the intensity of my uterus cramping, my lower back throbbing and aching, my body shedding itself from the inside. I can feel what is left of my baby leaving my body, with only my quiet tears for company.

Afterwards, I drive myself to my sister's house. My mum is visiting from New York, and now instead of announcing my beautiful pregnancy news, I have to share my loss with her face to face. My mother and my sister both answer the door together, knowing from my voice on the phone that something is terribly wrong. I fall apart as I tell them the news, feeling like such a disappointment to everyone. My mother would tell me afterwards that I was white as a sheet.

When you fall pregnant for the first time, you think that a miscarriage is this horrible thing that happens to other people. That's what we thought anyway. We never entertained the idea that it would end like this. We are totally shocked and ill prepared for the sadness that encircles you afterwards for a long time.

It leaves a gap in your life, a hollow space that for a few months was full of hope. You try to fill this gap with fun and love and laughter, the healing love of your friends and family. And although it feels like you'll never fill that aching space, you do. You fill it with hope and positivity for the future.

We are in the finishing stages of building our holiday house on the Great Ocean Road in Lorne. The sparkling beach here is long and sandy with rugged waves. It butts up against gorgeous protected national park. When I was growing up, my idea of a clean beach was the day they fished the syringes out of Rockaway Beach in Queens one summer.

I never in my wildest dreams thought I would have a beach house to call my own. But here I am, consulting with architects, builders

and tradesmen, imagining how this house can work for us. Bill and I plan for this to be a retreat for the whole family, a place where we can all gather and catch up. Bill, his brother Phil, and their dad are keen fisherman and love nature, so I can see the house being a place where they can gather for adventures.

So we need lots of bedrooms for our siblings, parents, nieces and nephews to have a space of their own. We fight with the builder to have a huge floor to ceiling window upstairs to take in the beach views. We design the balcony to be as large as the strict local council will allow, with space for the ubiquitous Australian barbecue, a big table for hungry Greeks and a handrail where colourful rosellas can land, waiting for a handout. I make sure to incorporate an outdoor shower because it reminds me of the beach rental where I spent childhood summers with my extended family.

Bill and I make a good team. I love to be busy and to meet new people, but my flaw is that I want to make everyone happy and so hate confrontation. On the other hand, Bill never backs down if he believes in something. So any time I hear the word 'no' from the builder – which is pretty much every time I suggest something – Bill gets on the phone to tell him how he can make it happen. And while Bill never takes no for an answer, he somehow manages to win the other person over while still making them feel heard, understood and respected. Half the time the other person feels like they haven't given in. It's a gift.

Bill's persistence is the reason we are together today. We met under the most awkward of circumstances. Sophia was living in Melbourne, married to my outgoing brother-in-law, John. They had just had their first daughter, Georgia, and their life together was growing roots in Australia. I was still a twenty-one-year-old, living in New York, working out what sort of adult I was going to be. As each year went by, my sister and I were missing out on major milestones in each other's lives.

Sophia set out to do something about it. She and her best friend, Soula, had found me the perfect mate. This was all part of Sophia's

master plan to inspire me to move to Australia. I was in love with the place, but I didn't like her chances for introducing me to the man of my dreams when I was nowhere near ready to settle down.

I'll give her points for slyness, though. I was in town for Georgia's christening, so there was no harm inviting Bill along. Though mortified at the thought, there wasn't anything I could do about it. The invitation had already been made.

The day of Georgia's christening was a steaming hot day. St Vasilios Greek Orthodox Church was crammed with what felt like 10,000 of Sophia and John's closest friends. The christening of your first-born child is a very big deal in Greek culture – the whole family was there: parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins and at least three guys named Petros. Guests with cameras were recording from every angle and you couldn't even cast a sideways glance without it being filmed.

And under the stained-glass windows and glaring camera lights, Bill and I met for the first time. My mother was standing next to me, the priest an arm's length away and Greek Big Brother was always watching.

Out of the corner of my eye – using every degree of peripheral vision that I had – I could see Bill approaching. He was the most gorgeous man in the room: tall, dark and very Mediterranean. Just my type. The blood had rushed to my cheeks before he even started to speak to me.

'Hi there! You're Despina, right?' he said in a sexy Aussie accent. Some Aussie accents sound worse than nails on a chalkboard, but then there is the type that is a complete turn-on. Even in church.

'Um, yes,' I wittily replied.

'I hear you're in town for only a couple of weeks. I'd love to show you around.'

And that was it. The man worked fast. Confident, direct and unintimidated. I liked his style.

Bill was different from anyone I had ever met. He took me to the bustling Bluetrain cafe at Southbank on our first date. He introduced

me to Cointreau and spoke with passion about everything from living life with meaning to how well he could do an Irish accent. He was brave enough to tell me a terrible joke about an Irish leprechaun. (He still tries to convince me that it's funny). We had the same outlook on life – that life is meant to be lived, there should never be a dull moment, life should be big. Big achievements, big goals, big love, big fun. He was wonderful and weird and philosophical and funny and deep. We were so lost in conversation that we didn't realise the cafe had closed and all the chairs had been turned over and onto the tables.

We proceeded to walk down the Yarra in the middle of the night, Bill shocked that I loved all of his favourite movies – Pulp Fiction, Reservoir Dogs, Goodfellas. He tested me by starting quotes from the films and seeing if I could finish them. I completed them all. By the time we finished reciting Samuel Jackson's quote from Pulp Fiction on Ezekiel, we had walked all the way to Alexandra Gardens. It was there that I saw my first possum, the only time I would ever think they were cute. I think at that moment, Bill saw how weird and wonderful I was, too.

He courted me until it was time for me to board my plane out of Melbourne. By the time I arrived at home in New York, there was a message waiting on my answering machine, 'I miss you. I can't stop thinking about you. Call me so I know you're home safe.'

When he sets his sight on something, he doesn't waver. That's how he got the girl. And how we would get our perfect holiday house.

During this busy time, the Lorne build is all I can think about. When I have a goal, it becomes my single-minded focus – everything else takes a back seat.

In contrast, no matter how busy he is, Bill always makes time for what's important. One night the lights are dim and we are lying in our bed, a rare quiet night in. He runs his fingers softly down my leg.

My immediate thought is 'ooh, someone is in the mood', but his brow furrows and he says, 'What's this?'

He is motioning to a barely perceivable bump on my left hamstring. I dismiss him with 'I can't see a thing', but he won't let up. 'Look, when you bend your leg, this bump rises out from your hamstring, see?' I can sort of see what he is talking about it, but it seems pretty unimportant.

Every night for a week, Bill points it out again and I know he won't give up until I have it looked at. Finally I give in, just to keep him quiet.

I sheepishly visit my local doctor and present him with my nearly invisible concern. He doesn't seem too fazed. 'Have you had a sports injury to this area before?'

I've never had any injury or illness, so I shrug it off with 'No, never had an injury to that area. Sorry to waste your time.'

'Just to be on the safe side, I think you should have an ultrasound'. Oh no, another appointment that I just don't have time for right now.

Three weeks later, I'm lying on an examination bed in a dark room with only the ultrasound screen glowing eerily in the darkness. The ultrasound shows a dark mass on my hamstring. Even when three different technicians are called in to give their further opinion, I still don't cotton on. Interesting how powerfully we can convince ourselves of what we want to believe.

Dozens of phone calls, an MRI and CT scan bring us to the best soft tissue sarcoma specialist in Melbourne. Dr B has been referred to us by my cousin John, a well-respected medical specialist who always drops everything to help us out. If it wasn't for John's personal connections, we would never have gotten an appointment with Dr B so quickly.

Dr B is the most energetic, optimistic, positive-thinking doctor I have come across. We are a great match. He is a pocket rocket – a charismatic ball of energy. He greets us with a smile, 'Bill! Despina! How are you?!' As if we are long lost friends, not patients waiting for a cancer diagnosis. As he greets us, he energetically ushers us into his office and launches into the diagnosis:

‘Blah, blah, blah, sarcoma, blah, blah, blah, malignant, blah, blah, blah, mass, blah, blah, blah tumour.’

This goes on for ten minutes. Bill looks like he has just seen a ghost. I, on the other hand, am utterly in the dark.

‘Dr B, do I have cancer?’

‘Yes, you do. But I will do everything I can to make sure you survive.’