

OLIVIA

Hours passed like seconds. Seconds like hours. Olivia's body twisted inside out, and waves of heat and cold rippled across her skin. She smelled blood and meat. Her mouth watered. She swallowed against the nausea only for it to come roaring back.

"Ready?"

She shook her head, worrying what would come out if she opened her mouth.

"It's okay, Liv. It'll be okay."

Something inside her ripped and she felt liquid seep down her legs, soaking the sheet beneath her. She shivered.

"Get ready, Olivia. We're almost there."

The room had taken on a smoky quality. She blinked and it cleared for a second. Long enough that she saw the bloody fabric by her feet. The murky puddle on the floor.

"Is she supposed to—there's a lot of—"

"It's fluid."

A giggle choked the back of her throat. Of course blood was *fluid*. No. Wrong word. *Viscous*.

Vicious.

Viscera.

Coppery and unnervingly cold.

"Up on your elbows, now."

Olivia didn't have elbows. Or arms. Or legs. She was on fire.

"Here we go, and—"

Push.

After it was all over, after they whisked the baby away, leaving Olivia spent and sweaty and broken in the middle of the bed with fresh stitches between her legs, a janitor mopped her fluids up off the floor while a ring of keys jangled merrily on his hip.

"Don't worry," he said, "I've seen worse."

The midwife popped up from between her legs, waving a white cloth like the last few hours had been some twisted magic trick. "There. You'll have to keep an eye on that for a few weeks. You'll want to avoid wiping while that heals. We'll send you home with some stool softeners and a fun little squeeze bottle. You'll be fine."

Olivia's midwife's name was Happy. She liked breathing exercises to the beat of "Another One Bites the Dust" and fun little squeeze bottles and tie-dyed hair wraps.

She patted Olivia's thigh before easing her leg down flat. The epidural had only worked on the left side of her body, so while her right side had been in agony, she'd screamed at the nurse to catch the left leg before it fell off the bed. She still

couldn't feel it and in her post--birth haze imagined herself a one--legged Barbie, hopping on tiptoe through her pink and purple dream house.

"You did good," Happy said. "Really good."

On the other side of the room, Olivia's baby shrieked. Her skull tingled with the force of it.

"Is she okay?"

"More than okay. The louder, the better."

Olivia's wife, Kris, didn't seem to think so. Kris leaned over the side of the bassinet where another nurse poked and prodded and cooed.

Kris frowned, deepening the lines around her soft gray eyes. At some point she'd sweated through her nice shirt—a navy button-down with faint pinstripes she'd insisted on wearing because this was the first time they were meeting their daughter and she'd wanted to make a good impression—and was now wearing a T--shirt Olivia didn't recognize. "She sounds scared."

Happy nodded. "She probably is."

"She sounds angry."

"She probably is." She winked. "She'll feel better once she's had a bath and something to eat."

"Sounds like someone else I know." Kris smiled at Olivia. "She's right, you know. You did good."

The baby shrieked again, a sharp yelp of pain.

It was like a needle to the pain center of Olivia's brain. "What are they doing to her?"

"Shots," Kris said. "It's okay."

"It's *not* okay. Are you listening? It sounds like they're *murdering* her." Olivia started to pull herself up, but her leg lay there useless, and any movement sent waves of pain up her middle. She felt a gush and, for a hot, humiliating second, thought she'd pissed herself. An excellent start to motherhood.

"Done," the nurse chirped.

But no amount of petting and shushing would calm the baby. Her screams were like ice water down Olivia's neck. Her heartbeat thumping in her ears, her temples, her throat, Olivia leaned as far over the side of the bed as she dared, but the nurse blocked her view of the bassinet.

Happy gently grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back against the pillows. "Better bring her over. Mom's getting antsy." Mom.

The word startled Olivia. She was only brought back into herself when the nurse placed a bundle on her chest, a squirming, writhing thing wrapped tight in a thin blanket that smelled like lavender and laundry soap.

"Remember the latch," the nurse said.

The baby's mouth gaped wide, her tiny tongue trembling with the force of her cries. Her face was purple.

The nurse helped Olivia wrestle her breast free of the hospital gown and within a few seconds, the baby was latched. Her daughter made throaty *kah, kah, kah* sounds as she swallowed. The purple in her face faded to a soft pink.

Kris leaned over the both of them, kissing their heads. "My girls."

Olivia gently stroked the soft down of the baby's head. Her eyelashes were long and pale, and her fat cheeks trembled with the force of her swallows. Her eyelids fluttered over blue--gray eyes. Olivia searched for a piece of herself in her daughter's face, anxious to claim the curve of an earlobe or subtle swoop of the nose.

She didn't notice Happy and the nurses leaving, but when Olivia finally looked up, the three of them were alone.

Kris pulled a chair beside the bed and set a cup of coffee on the table, pushing aside the stack of books Olivia had brought, thinking there'd be time to read (because there was always, always time to read), and rested her head on Olivia's shoulder. "She's beautiful."

Olivia frowned, only to snatch it back. New mothers weren't supposed to frown. "She's a stranger."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she doesn't look like me."

"Sure she does."

"I don't see it."

"She's a baby. Babies change, like, hourly. You'll see."

Olivia hoped so. They'd chosen artificial insemination over in vitro mainly because of the cost. Olivia was an adjunct English professor, and Kris worked in human resources for a tech firm that always seemed on the cusp of going out of business. They didn't have a ton of extra money and, thankfully, it only took two rounds for the pregnancy to take. But every day she was pregnant, Olivia couldn't help thinking that the baby growing inside her was half of someone she would never meet. She would look into her child's face and see someone she didn't know. Their biggest fight had been over whether to ask a friend to donate sperm. Kris had hated the idea, saying she didn't want to risk losing their daughter to a guilty conscience and biased court system. Olivia had wanted to tell her that their friends wouldn't do anything like that, but she couldn't. She hadn't realized until that moment, but she didn't know their friends all that well because, at the end of it, they were all Kris's friends.

"She's still going," Kris said, impressed, as she wiped some dribbled milk from the baby's cheek.

Olivia's back was starting to ache and the tug on her nipple had gotten sharp, but she didn't dare move.

A good eater, Olivia's aunt Erin would have called her. Olivia smiled, oddly proud at the thought.

My daughter, the good eater.

Olivia remained perfectly still, her lower half still throbbing with pain and her arm falling asleep. Soon, she thought. Soon she would feel that rush of warmth, of fierce protectiveness. Soon she would feel like a mother.

They named her Flora, after Kris's grandmother. Olivia signed the paperwork over Flora's head as she fed, the third time in an hour. Olivia, however, hadn't eaten in almost forty--eight hours, dreading that first trip to the toilet. Her insides felt wrung out and weak, and each time she felt her own diaper fill with blood, her stomach rolled. It didn't stop Kris from trying to ply her with vending machine chocolate, egg rolls from her favorite Chinese restaurant, and a slice of apple pie from the hospital cafeteria.

"You have to eat something," Kris said, holding the egg rolls under Olivia's nose. "You gotta be starving."

If Olivia was starving, she didn't feel it. Hours after giving birth, it was like she was a passenger in her own body, seeing through a thick pane of glass and going through the motions, detached. The pain was someone else's. The weight against the pillows was someone else's. The arms holding Flora were someone else's.

"What I need is a break." Olivia arched her back, only to quickly readjust when Flora lost her latch and immediately started to whimper.

"Already?" Kris said. "You just got her." Seeing Olivia's face, she added, "I'm kidding."

The barb had already hit home. Kris was right. Of course she was tired. Of course it was hard. That was what it meant to be a mom.

Better not to say it though. Not out loud.

She gently brushed the bridge of Flora's nose with her fingertip, and Flora's eyes fluttered open. She remembered their birthing class—the one they'd signed up for as a joke, two in the morning and laugh--drunk after Lamaze, breathing at each other for so long they almost passed out—and how they told her babies couldn't see more than a couple of inches in front of their faces. Olivia could swear Flora saw her just fine.

I'm your mama, Olivia thought. I love you very much, and I would never do anything to hurt you.

Flora's eyes fluttered closed, and her eating slowed. Soon she was asleep.

"There, see?" Kris said. "You're a pro."

"You'd sleep too, if you drank your weight in warm milk."

"No. It's you." Kris kissed her. "You're the best."

The room went briefly out of focus as Olivia heard a murmur in the back of her mind. It sounded like a rush of air, like hot, expended breath. It sounded like *lies*.

Olivia tried to sleep while Flora slept, but Kris's anxious pattering around the room—fixing pillows, unpacking and repacking Olivia's overnight bag, reading through their paperwork, messing with the television—jarred her awake every few minutes. Finally, when she was within grabbing distance, Olivia snatched Kris's sleeve and refused to let her go until she promised to sit down and be quiet.

It didn't matter.

The movement had disturbed Flora, and pained wails shuddered through her little body.

"What should I do?" Kris asked. "How can I help?"

Olivia shifted Flora to the other arm, careful not to disturb the intricate Jenga of pillows propping her arms up. Only when Flora was plugged in and eating happily did Olivia finally look up at her wife. "I love you. Please leave."

Kris pouted. "I don't want to."

"Well one of us has to go or I'm never going to sleep. And if I don't sleep, I can't promise either of us will survive."

"But, I mean, will you be okay?"

"Definitely."

"You're sure."

Olivia waved using Flora's tiny hand. "Bye, Mama."

Kris shook her head, but she was beaming. "Okay, okay. I'll go. But I'll be back first thing in the morning."

"We wait with bated breath."

Kris kissed Olivia's forehead. "Jerk."

"Love you."

"Love you more."

The second the door clicked behind Kris, Olivia felt a rush of panic. Her overtired imagination looped through a disjointed reel of images, flashing across her consciousness in bursts of red and shadow. Olivia leaving the hospital with Flora still attached at her breast, only to find themselves alone. Lost. She imagined walking the side of a

highway, rocks in her shoes and dirt in her mouth. She imagined finally finding her house only to realize it was empty, that the phone wouldn't connect, that she was completely, utterly alone.

Olivia readjusted, earning a gargley squawk from Flora. She told herself that would never happen. She was being ridiculous. All she needed was a little sleep. Kris would be back in the morning, when they would take Flora home and they would be a family. Complete. Happy.

She kissed the top of Flora's fuzzy head, her heart fluttering at Flora's powdery scent.

Yes, she thought, gratefully. We will be happy.

Over the next several hours, it seemed every time Olivia fell asleep, a nurse knocked on the door. They needed to check her vitals, to have her take a short walk, to give Flora a once--over, like she'd spontaneously grown a tail. All of them asked about bowel movements—hers and Flora's—clearly the pinnacle of litmus tests for health, and encouraged Olivia to let Flora sleep in the plastic bassinet beside her bed.

"She'll be plenty warm," one nurse told her. "Don't worry about it."

Olivia didn't tell her that she'd tried, that the moment Flora was more than a few inches from her, the whimpering and writhing began—hers *and* Flora's.

Instead, Olivia thanked the nurse and promised to give it a shot.

Finally, around 10:00 p.m., the knocking stopped. Flora had been snoozing for several minutes and looked like she might finally be down for the count. It unnerved Olivia, how still Flora was as she slept. Her tiny chest barely rose and fell with each breath, and Olivia's eyes ached from not blinking as she watched, assuring herself that, yes, Flora *was* still breathing.

Olivia ordered herself to close her eyes. She was desperate for sleep, and something inside warned her that this would be her only chance. But every time her eyelids drooped, it was like something prodded her awake. A feeling of unease, like someone watching her, that she couldn't explain. She shouldn't have sent Kris away. Kris would have soothed her worries, would have promised to watch Flora throughout the night so Olivia could rest. Or, at minimum, she would have reminded Olivia that even if she hadn't just given birth, even if her hormones weren't spiraling and her body wasn't trying to find a way back to itself, she had never been able to sleep well in a place that wasn't home.

Sleep, she imagined Kris saying. Sleep, sweetie.

Though Olivia's back was twisted in a weird direction thanks to a few pillows that'd come untucked, and her bladder throbbed with the need to pee, she finally closed her eyes and sank quickly, deeply, asleep.

Until a sharp pinch yanked her back.

She had been dreaming of home, not their house, but the house she grew up in. The woods that butted up against their yard. She had been running between the trees, away from or to something, she wasn't sure. One of the trees had turned, its trunk twisted and seeping sap, and reached fingerlike branches toward her, only to scrape her chest as she twisted away.

She blinked hard, trying to clear the image of the nightmare. But the room was pitch black, save for the eerie green glow from the machines like nocturnal animal eyes peering through the brush. Her feet tingled, like she'd been running for hours, the dark of the dream lingering. In that place between asleep and awake, long--fingered shadows reached for the corners of her eyes and she bit her tongue to keep from shouting, remembering at the last second where she was.

When she looked down to make sure Flora was still snuggled and asleep, she saw her hospital gown had been ripped open at the neck, exposing both her breasts. Flora had latched on to one, eyes wide and unblinking. Milk had spilled down both her cheeks, soaking the blanket beneath her head. Razor--sharp nails grazed Olivia's tender flesh as Flora clung to her, the throaty *kah, kah, kah* noise the only sound in the dark.

CHAPTER TWO

SHANNON

I never wanted to be a parent.

When I was young, most women wouldn't say that. Not out loud. Most women were cowards.

It wasn't that I didn't like children. I liked them just fine—helped my mom and aunts raise enough of them—but I didn't want to be stripped down and cracked in half in order to have my own. My mother used to say a woman forgot the pain of childbirth almost immediately. Had to, to convince her to do it all over again.

That's a lie.

A woman doesn't forget the feel of a vice squeezing her until she can't breathe. She doesn't forget the way her hips separate and split her in two. She doesn't forget the meaty, irony smell of herself, the hot drip of blood down her thighs. The fire between her legs. The tearing.

No. A woman is convinced to do it all over again because some things are worth the pain.

I never wanted to be a parent, until I saw your face. Those curious eyes, attentive and fixed on me. The curve of your chin, your patchy dark hair and pink lips. It was like I'd made you on my own, with no trace of your father on your body. I knew then that you and I were meant for each other. You would understand me. You would love me.

Doesn't mean I don't have regrets. Can't get through life without them. Biggest of them all is having spent most of my life locked away from the world. The way I hear it, though, there's worse places, and I'm inclined to believe it. Jo told me about one hospital they slip tranquilizers in the milk to keep everyone nice and complacent, and Jo's no bullshitter. I don't mind sharing a room. Jo has her side, I have mine. Jo has her things, I have mine. I get three hot meals and snacks in between if it's been a good day, and I have more and more of those lately. Gained a good ten pounds in the last few months. Jo says they look good on me.

It's a strange thing knowing my meals come like clockwork, that I'll eat until I'm...not full, but satisfied. Growing up in a house of eight meant hoarding and scrounging, all of us little mice creeping into the kitchen in the middle of the night. One time my sister, Erin, snuck an entire jar of cake icing into the bedroom we shared, and we ate it with our fingers, unable to sleep with the sugar high. Most nights, though, all we wanted were a handful of saltines to bridge the gap.

You eat and be grateful.

I'm getting hungry just thinking about those days. Feels like I'm always hungry. Always trying to fill the empty space where you used to be. Lately, though, I am *ravenous*.

It's easier to go back to *that dinner* with the tang of tomato sauce on the back of my tongue. Spaghetti with jarred sauce. One of about three things Mom could fix for all of us without breaking the bank. Once in a while we got slices of bread with it, and we'd all pile the spaghetti into sandwiches, slurping noodles as marinara dripped down our chins. Can't stand the stuff now, but back then, it was my favorite. I suppose that should have been my first clue.

No sooner were my siblings at the table did they start chewing, making a limp sign of the cross when Dad gave them the look. I twirled noodles around and around on my fork, stomach sloshing.

"You're green," Erin said.

My older sister always had a way of pointing out exactly what you didn't want pointed out.

"I don't feel good," I said.

"Period?"

"Gross." John Jack, one of my brothers, mimed puking into the spaghetti.

He was seven, second youngest and none too happy about the way things turned out, birth-order-wise. Erin was the eldest, so she got the respect. At six, Patrick was the baby, so he got all the attention. Smack in the middle, John Jack and me got whatever was left. It wasn't much.

Mom eyed me from across the table and I couldn't help but squirm. Didn't matter that I was sixteen, a woman in my own mind. I could feel her probing around in my head looking for the thing I'd done wrong, or would do wrong in the future. She fancied herself some kind of behavior oracle—she could tell with one look whether you'd be getting into something you shouldn't, even before you did, and made sure the punishment was swift and fierce.

"If you're gonna be sick," Dad said, "leave the table."

"I'm fine," I said, feeling not fine at all.

I thought it was guilt. Growing up Catholic, I knew it had a way of eating a person inside out. I went to my first confession when I was nine years old and talked the poor priest's ear off about coveting my sister's new clothes and stealing food and lying to Mom about stealing food—little things that, looking back, didn't matter much. But this was something else.

His name was Matthew. He was eighteen. Mature. Even had a job. I figured I loved him well enough, and that he loved me well enough, so what was the harm in letting him do things to me? He'd liked it. Gave me long, sweet kisses and called me his girl after. It was all incredibly romantic, I thought.

"I just don't want spaghetti," I said when Mom wouldn't stop her eye probing. "We always have spaghetti."

Dad pointed at me with his fork, the tines bloody. "You eat and be grateful."

Around the table, my siblings stared at my plate, still full while most of their dinner was long gone. Seemed we were always leaving the table hungry. I knew I'd better eat up or I'd be sitting at the table staring down a plate of cold spaghetti all night—spaghetti any one of them would have gladly taken off my hands—so I set my jaw and twirled the noodles and shoved as much as I could into my mouth. My eyes watered as I started to choke, but Mom gave me that look again so I chewed and chewed and chewed until finally I swallowed.

I flashed Mom a weak smile, but it only hardened her expression. I could tell she was trying to dig into me, to see what I'd done. I silently begged John Jack to shove Patrick, or for Erin to say something obnoxious, anything to get her attention off me.

My throat felt tight. I coughed and a bit of spaghetti came up. I swallowed it before I could think, and then the acid started bubbling up and my face got hot and cold at the same time and Mom stared harder, leaning toward me, so I scooped up another bite thinking I could force my body to behave, but it was all too much.

I cupped my mouth and ran to the sink.

"Go lay down," Mom ordered once I'd finished gagging and rinsed the sink and my mouth.

I passed by the table where my plate sat empty and bloody. I caught John Jack's gaze and he shrugged. *Every man for himself.*

Later, Mom took my temperature—normal—and studied the back of my throat for those little white pustules that meant strep.

"You eat something funny?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"You been drinking?"

"No," I said.

She went into the bathroom to find the puke bucket to set by my bed, and when she came back, her face had twisted into something I didn't recognize: stony, with hair--thin cracks on the surface.

She held up the garbage bin from the bathroom. "You see this?"

I nodded.

"Should be full of sanitary napkins by now. You and Erin typically start your period within days of each other."

"So?"

"So, it's practically empty." She sat on the edge of my bed and looked me hard in the face. "I'm not going to ask you, because I know you'll just lie. So instead I want you to go in my bathroom and grab a test from the box under the sink."

I tried to argue, but Mom wouldn't let me. She frog--marched me into her bathroom and practically peed on the test stick for me. We sat in a heavy silence for ten minutes, until the little pink plus sign appeared.

I'd expected her to scream, to rip another slat out of the already broken cabinet door to spank me. She didn't do either of those things.

I suppose I should have been worried for myself. Frightened for my future, for what that little pink plus sign meant. But all I could do was stare at my mom, fascinated. Four children, two cars that never seemed to work, rowdy boys with broken bones and teeth too expensive to fix properly, an empty wallet and food stamps that always ran out the week before the end of the month, and *this* was the first time I had ever seen her cry.

Doctor James Call--Me--Jim Tran spotted me writing yesterday and spent the rest of my leisure hour telling me how proud he was that I'd taken his advice. His tone changed lickety--split when he asked to read it and I refused, until I called it my confessional.

He smiled that crooked--tooth grin and said, "Writing our feelings is often the first step to properly processing them. We take them out of ourselves and analyze with detached rationality. Well done, Shannon."

It'd been a long time since I'd earned a *well done* from anyone, let alone the doctor, so I don't feel any shame in telling you I fluffed up and preened like a little bird.

This isn't a confession. Not exactly. But if I'm lucky, it might be the tool to my salvation.

I'm writing this from the leisure room, my third day in a row with my pen to paper in direct view of Doctor Call--Me--Jim and his cronies. They smile and nod, and every so often, Doctor Call--Me--Jim scribbles a note in my file.

It's all going to plan, my little girl.

I'll see you soon.