

Chapter 1

Her mother and mothers in movies and strangers at the grocery store loved to tell her about the instant, indescribable love they felt when meeting their infant for the first time. This gave Beth hope. She even allowed herself to believe that a baby may be her ticket to a brighter existence while optimistically rubbing her still-flat belly and downloading an app that compared the size of her growing fetus to fruits. But, when Beth's baby was born, she felt nothing. The only thought that crossed her mind while looking at her infant son, whom she'd spent close to thirty-nine excruciating hours expelling from her body, was that he looked like a creature who belonged in outer space.

"He's here love, our son, isn't he perfect?" her husband Ethan said with tears running down his stubbled cheeks as he looked lovingly at the purple, puffy infant resting on her chest, covered in white goo. Beth glanced down again to try and see what Ethan was seeing, but all that caught her attention was the iridescent blue umbilical cord, thick and inhuman, still tethering her son to her womb. It looked like something a mermaid would use as an accessory. She thought of that blonde bitch from prenatal—Ana? Ava, maybe?—who framed her umbilical cord stump in a shadow box as a keepsake. The thought of holding onto any remnant of this alien-like cord made Beth want to retch.

The OB handed Beth her baby, now swaddled and scrubbed clean of the white gunk. She felt the weight of him in her arms and the soft peach fuzz that covered his wrinkly body. While slightly cone-shaped, his head appeared mostly unscathed despite hours of agonizing pushing and one forceful suck from the vacuum. His nose was undeniably Ethan's and his indigo blue eyes were carbon copies of her own. Ethan wrapped his arm around them and she felt his joyful tears wet on her shoulder. "Isn't he beautiful?" he asked again, but she knew this wasn't a rhetorical question. He was searching for proof that Beth was here in this moment with him, euphoric with maternal love. The weight of his expectation felt suffocating. All she wanted to do was sit in a scalding-hot bath and let the clinical scents of birth and the hospital wash away.

The late September sun streamed in, bathing the room in a golden light. Beth was sure her husband had never held a baby before, but she watched with envy as he rocked Noah in his strong, capable arms—already a natural. She felt like an intruder watching them effortlessly settle into their roles of father and son. “It’s hard to feel a connection now, but the hormones released in the golden hour after your baby is born will help you forge a primal bond. You’ll see Beth, it will all just click,” Naomi the midwife, said during one of their final appointments before the birth. Her words had been a life raft during a long pregnancy filled with a hollow sadness she couldn’t shake. But this moment felt grey instead of golden, and she knew with complete certainty that giving birth hadn’t broken the spell. The life raft had failed her. She was sinking.

As Ethan swayed in his gilded bubble of baby bliss, Naomi sat at the foot of her bed and spoke softly about breastfeeding and the importance of skin-to-skin contact to encourage her body to start producing milk.

“This is your time to be present with your baby,” she said with a knowing smile as she pushed dark-rimmed glasses over her wiry, silver-streaked hair. Her smile made Beth want to scream. She knew a good mother would be reaching for her baby, fussing with his swaddle, eagerly feeding him every last drop of her colostrum. Beth didn’t have the energy to pretend to be that mother, or any kind of mother for that matter. Only a few moments into the gig, and she realized that motherhood was just another thing that seemed to come naturally to everyone but her—like feeling happiness during milestone moments, loving anything or anyone in earnest, and maintaining any sort of relationship with her parents. Beth didn’t want to try, she just wanted to escape.

“I know this pregnancy hasn’t been easy, Beth, but you *can* choose to prioritize your peace through the postpartum period,” Naomi said while nodding at Ethan, subtly inviting him into this delicate discussion. Beth had never felt further from peace as it became clearer that her fantasy of rewriting her mom’s sad, detached version of motherhood into something hopeful and idyllic was just that—a fantasy.

“You remember what Naomi said about the retreat, right, Bethy? It could be just what you need to get through this adjustment period. Garbha was made to help mothers

like you heal,” he said hopefully. She hated the way he said Garbha, with a hard *h*. Beth hated everything she knew about this retreat, including its bullshit appropriated Sanskrit name—meaning *womb*—and highly-curated Instagram feed filled with inspirational quotes about motherhood and candid portraits of its Gwyneth Paltrow-wannabe founder, Alannah Ford. While yet to host a guest, Garbha had a years-long waitlist of moms and mama-to-be's who could afford the exorbitant nightly rate.

“As a healer and member of the birthing community, Alannah gave me permission to extend preferential acceptance to any of my patients who I think could benefit from her offering,” Naomi informed her after Beth shared more concerning answers to the standard perinatal mood disorder screening questionnaire: *I have felt scared and panicky for no reason: Yes, quite a lot. Things have been getting to me: Yes, most of the time I haven't been able to cope at all. I have felt sad or miserable: Yes, most of the time.* Naomi handed Beth Garbha's tastefully-designed promotional booklet with a blush pink cover and woo woo descriptions like:

Learn from our team of postpartum experts whose wisdom spans lactation, early infant care, birth processing, womb healing and more. In addition to a private room with sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean, you'll have access to our 24/7 nursery monitored by our dedicated Care Team. You can put your complete trust in our baby whisperers who will attend to your little one while you get some well-deserved rest.

Beth fought to conceal an eye roll at the thought of *healing her womb* and stuffed the book in the bottom of an old Paris Review tote bag.

“And she's offering a cut on rates to my patients, which is helpful because Garbha certainly isn't cheap,” she mused with a chuckle. It wasn't about the money, though—Beth knew that her in-laws wouldn't bat an eye at the cost and that Ethan would give anything to make the darkness that lived inside her go away. Forever. It was that Beth had no interest in surrounding herself with privileged blonde waifs who believed that adaptogenic smoothies, crystals, and sound baths were the answer to the problem of motherhood.

Beth went deep into Garbha's Instagram after her midwife appointment and landed on Alannah's personal page—@alannahheals. Every photo of her—always in some gauzy caftan picked up at a street market in Morocco—garnered thousands of comments from her devoted supporters. *You are the reason I believe I can and SHOULD be a mother. Keep shining your light, the world needs more people like you. You saved my life at the breathwork event you led at In Goop Health.* She scrolled past a clip of her on a podcast discussing her belief that maternal mental health issues are a manifestation of toxins in the body and a low vibrational frequency. Alannah showed off her skeletal frame in a matching flesh-toned set with a caption touting the benefits of her dedication to daily celery juice, intermittent fasting, and regular colonics. The comment section was filled with more impassioned praise and some hate and judgement about her weight. *Eat a burger. You'd really look so much better with more weight on your frame, hun. My friend paid huge money for one of her wellness programs and developed a crippling ED—DON'T trust this psycho.* Beth paused on a video of Alannah looking directly at the camera while rhapsodizing about cosmic motherhood and something called “vibrational immunity support” as an alternative to infant vaccinations. She couldn't stop scrolling. There was something luminous about her, the kind of presence that locked eyes with yours and made you think—*she knows the way out.* Was it her lithe frame and angelic blonde hair that made her so mesmerizing? Was she full of shit or was she really onto something? Beth wasn't sure about Alannah, but she was even less sure about motherhood. She would go to Garbha, she decided, and follow Alannah's strange protocol despite her reservations. However bizarre it seemed, it was an exit, and she couldn't risk waiting around for a feeling of maternal bliss that may never come.