

Chapter 1

Bianca Morgan

*18 Years Ago
South Carolina*

Tears filled my eyes as I entered the hospital nursery to say good-bye to my newborn daughter. Last night, I'd given birth to a beautiful baby girl. Today, I would be signing away my parental rights. Was I doing the right thing? I hoped so.

"She's wide awake," the nurse said, wrapping my baby in a blanket before lifting her out of the bassinet. "Have a seat in the rocking chair and I'll bring her to you."

Wincing, I lowered myself to the chair, careful not to sit directly on my stitches. Giving birth had been more painful than I'd imagined, but it was the soreness afterward that surprised me. For some reason, I thought there wouldn't be any pain once the baby was out. How naive I'd been.

Smiling, the nurse placed the baby in my arms. As I gazed down at my daughter, a rush of love and wonder filled me. How in the world had someone like me produced such a beautiful baby? Everything about her was amazing from her tiny fingers to her long eyelashes.

"She's beautiful," the nurse said. "What are you going to name her?"

The question hit me hard. Maybe insisting on holding my daughter one last time had been a mistake. "I'm not keeping her, so I didn't name her."

"You're giving her up for adoption?"

I nodded. "I'm too young to raise a baby on my own."

"What a brave thing for you to do." The nurse's tone was accepting and nonjudgmental, something I sincerely appreciated and needed at that moment.

I gently stroked my daughter's cheek. I'd never considered my decision as being brave. If I was truly brave, wouldn't I be keeping her like I wanted to?

Then again, my dad was probably right. I couldn't exactly give her a very good life.

I wasn't ready to be a mother. Well, not a real mother anyway. No, I was just one of those girls who'd gotten knocked up by a worthless boy at a drunken high school party on the beach last summer.

Stop being negative, I told myself. My time for motherhood would come. Right now, I was simply making the best of a difficult situation by giving my baby to a couple unable to have children of their own. At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

"Do you know anything about the family adopting your baby?" the nurse asked, surprising me by sinking into the chair opposite me.

I shook my head "no" and explained that I'd agreed to a closed adoption. "I just hope they'll love her as much as I do. And I hope when she's old enough I'll be allowed to see her again."

The nurse absently stroked her thumb over the ragged scar that ran from the corner of her eye down to her mouth. What in the world happened to cause such a visible scar?

"I just met my birth mother," she said.

"You did? How was it?"

She hesitated a moment before smiling. "It was wonderful. She looks just like me."

“Wow.” I gazed down at my baby. Did she look like me? I couldn’t see any resemblance now, but maybe she’d eventually have my auburn hair and brown eyes.

“How was your delivery?” the nurse asked.

I cringed. “It was awful.”

“What happened?”

Because she seemed genuinely interested, and I was incredibly lonely, I told her everything. Not just about the birth, but about keeping the pregnancy a secret, being sent from my home on Rose Island, and now feeling my heart pulled out of my chest at the thought of leaving my daughter and never seeing her again.

“I just want her to be happy and have a good life. I want . . .” I choked back tears. “I’m sorry. Thank you for listening to me. My aunt has been kind, and my mother has been supportive, but—”

The nurse reached out and squeezed my hand. “I understand. Sometimes you just need another mother to talk to.”

“You’re a mother?”

She nodded. “I have a newborn daughter, so I understand. You just want what’s best for her even if that means sacrificing your own happiness.”

Wiping my eyes, I smiled and glanced at the nurse’s name tag. Tiffany Jackson. “Thank you for saying that, Tiffany. I do want what’s best for her.”

Behind me, the door opened. Tiffany looked up and glared at the person who’d entered. “Yes? What is it?”

“I wanted to hold my baby,” said a young woman with an accent I couldn’t quite place.

“She’s sleeping.” Tiffany spoke in a harsh voice, and her facial scar seemed to turn red with anger. This other mother had obviously done something wrong.

“Can I not hold my baby when she’s sleeping?” the other mother asked.

As though responding to the tension in the nursery, the other baby began to cry. Nurse Tiffany rubbed the scar along her face a little harder. When she saw me watching, she gave an exasperated sigh. “It’s my mark to remind me that the gods despise me.”

I frowned, not understanding why she’d say something like that. Then, she rose and left me.

Looking down at my daughter, I blinked back tears. It was time for me to go. Time for me to say my last good-bye and walk away.

Please take care of my baby, Lord. Give her good parents who love her and understand what a gift she is. I know she wasn’t conceived under the greatest of circumstances, but I also know that every child is loved by you. Bless her life, always let her know I love her, and when she’s older, bring us back together again.

A flash of light interrupted my silent prayer. Glancing up, I saw Tiffany holding one of those instant cameras I hadn’t seen in a long time. The picture slid out, and she handed it to me. “This is for you, so you’ll have a way to remember your daughter.”

I took the photo, incredibly grateful. I hadn’t thought to bring a camera or ask for a picture of my baby. A camera had been on the list of things to bring to the hospital, but I hadn’t thought it’d applied to me. Plus, neither my aunt nor my mother had encouraged any photos.

I stared at the dark picture, watching it slowly come to life. “Thank you, Tiffany. Thank you so much.”

She gave a curt nod. “Well, are you ready?” She held out her arms for my baby as though knowing the sooner I left, the sooner I could start to heal.

Gathering all my strength, I nodded and surrendered my child. Then, without looking back, I left the nursery, clutching the picture and praying I’d done the right thing.