

**IT'S  
ONE  
OF  
US**

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# PROLOGUE

## A STORY

A woman is missing.

Unbeknownst to those who love her, a placid lake holds her deep in its clutches. Its inhabitants watch her drift and dance in tune to gentle currents. They sneak little bites of her flesh, becoming one with this intrusion until they are no longer startled by her. They coexist. They play. They nestle deep in her hair and build ecosystems in the crevasses of her body. She gives of herself; she becomes their home. Generations are born that never knew a time without her. She is as much a part of their lives as the water around them, as familiar to the decomposed effluvia as the fallen trees and the limestone lake bed.

When the sun shines at just the right angle, and a small breeze ruffles the water, those magic days after heavy rains when the algae blooms disappear to the edges of the bank, the shadow of her can be seen from the surface. A ghostly flicker; here, then gone.

She exists for them now.

\*

A woman—missing, or otherwise—is best viewed in parts. It takes away her power. It eliminates her strength. If she is broken into pieces, dehumanized, depersonalized, she is no longer a threat. She is only eyes. Breasts. Hips. The number on the tag in the back of her jeans. The color of her hair, especially when enhanced. Bejeweled, adorned, shaved, plucked, contoured. Acceptable only when twisted into someone else's ideal.

A woman is told so many things. Cross the street when you feel uncomfortable. Smile, you're so much prettier when you smile. Don't wear that ponytail. Learn to defend yourself. Here, drink this. You said yes. He didn't mean it.

A woman feels so many things. More than emotions. The hand on the shoulder, knuckles grazing a breast. The accidental nudge from behind when bent over. The laughs, the whistles, the fumbled passes, the never-ending worry, the dirty jokes. The stares.

Yes, when viewed in parts, a woman no longer matters.

And sometimes, as now, this kills her.

She cannot rise with a boot on her chest. She cannot move when her body is straddled by an immense weight. She cannot breathe when large, rough hands encircle her delicate throat and squeeze, squeeze, squeeze.

A woman always knows when the end has come. She has always known it would end this way. Scrabbling in the dirt with a beast larger, bigger, more determined. Be it man or psyche, disease or time, she fights to live because she must.

*Breathe. Live. Survive.*

Women are, at birth and death, closest to their basest instincts.

Women begin, and end. Alive, they are a compilation of moments. But when they're dead, if there's something in between, something good, or something bad, or something left behind, ultimately, it doesn't matter.

\*

This particular missing woman, this compilation, this aggregate of body and hair and smile and sweet and brains and misconstrued affirmations, a sum of her parts, is no longer.

And near her, a man despairs.

He's never been this close to someone dead before.

He can't look at her, not directly, not without remembering everything, so he looks at her in parts.

Feet, bare, toenails painted a vivid red. A tiny shaving cut on her ankle.

Knees, scuffed, the flesh torn, gravel embedded deep in the flesh.

Hips, exposed, her dress rucked up and floating, underwear missing. She groomed herself for him.

Breasts, pale half-moons spilling from black lace.

Collarbone, four dark circles; a ring of black around her throat.

Eyes, open and unseeing.

He relives the moment her breath stopped, over and over. It is a nightmare. A fantasy. A favorite show he binges again and again. A horrifying wreck he can't look away from.

She smiled, until she didn't. Said kind words, until they turned sour.

He panicked.

He didn't mean to do it.

Did he?

Into the water. He needs to weigh her down, but how? Options parade through his mind, none good. He knows she will rise eventually. He can only hope that with enough time in the water, any evidence of him will sluice away.

What has he done?

Can he be blamed?

The idea of it has consumed him, and now...

Corrosive fear, day after day. He cannot eat. He loses weight. He dreams of her there. Alone.

But she is not alone. Not really.

\*

Her terrestrial family worry, then panic, then grieve, then come to uneasy terms with her loss. They hold out hope that she is still alive while knowing in their hearts that she is gone. A light dimmed in the foyer the night she went missing, and her mother, ever attuned to her daughter's soul light, knew something was dreadfully wrong. It was then she sent the first text. A reply was started, but nothing ever materialized.

Hours later, the mother called the police. Days later, weeks later, months later, there is still no word. Only those three small dots flickering on her screen, haunting the mother's every waking moment.

What was her daughter trying to say?

\*

The police search, diligently, in all the wrong places.

They follow dead-end leads. They interview everyone who knew her, and many who didn't.

They lose sleep, are barked at by superiors, fight back the urge to quit this job, this daily devastation.

They drink too much. They rail against an unjust God. They get up with the sunrise and do it all again.

They search, and search, and search.

They do not find her until it is too late.

\*

Despite the despair, or perhaps because of it, he visits. Often.

The lake is almost always calm, serene. It is used to keeping secrets. It has held his for weeks. The idea of her there, her many parts quiet now, fills him, with joy or fear or pleasure, he is not certain. He just knows he is better when he is near, and when he is apart from her, he can only remember her in pieces. Remember the moment she was his no longer.

A noon sun shines on the lake's glossy surface, reflecting into the leaves, making their undersides gleam and shine. He's learned the paths, the vantage points. He knows what lies beneath that murky water, imagines her decay. He walks for hours, circling her, drawing an invisible target for them to find.

Some days, he is happy. Some days, he is sad. Some days, he is afraid.

Some days, he brings his fishing gear, and casts, again and again, not sure what he is trying to catch.

When the police come, at last, searching, searching, he pants with the effort to keep himself still, to not run away screaming. He can't risk drawing attention to himself.

Will they find her today? Will she rise at last?

Every day, every visit, always the same irrational concerns.

What if her blood is still on him? What bits of her cling to his clothes, his skin?

And what of him resides in her?

And when they find her, what then? What happens?

He walks the path around the lake like all the others to make sure he's not noticed, and remembers.

*Her screams bleed away. The scuffle has ended. Silence now. Nothing but the breeze, rustling the early fall leaves, urging them toward their own death. The creatures of the forest are still, waiting, watching, to see what he will do.*

*He waits with them, quiet, calming himself. Looking at her. As the initial disgust wanes, he is suffused with curiosity.*

*When she first sagged in his arms, head lolling back, mouth agape, hair matted with blood, he'd panicked and dropped her with a cry of revulsion.*

*Now she seems peaceful. Desire mounts. But no. There is no time. He must end this.*

*He ties rocks into her dress, wades into the water, the shale at the shoreline loose and glistening under his feet, and heaves her body as far from solid ground as he can manage. The moonlight shows her bob on the surface, feet, hands, and head rising as if to wave a last farewell. Then she slips under the cool, dark water, and is gone.*

*He stays until the sky begins to lighten, listens to the forest come back to life, watching, waiting, in case she breaks the surface. But she does not.*

\*

A woman is found.

At last, she is going home. Disrupting the watery life she's been forced to create in favor of a new one nourishing the earth nearby. Her grave will be less peaceful, near a divided highway, under dirt and grass and soot from the air. A poorer resting place. She will be missed by her aquatic brood.

Her mother is relieved, in a way. To know is so much better than to imagine.

\*

And now, we begin anew. Attention circles, first, from the one who knows the truth, and then, from the rest. The heartbroken, and the curious. The determined, and the furious. From the one who prays not to be caught.

A new obsession is born by her new, exposed, too exposed, grave.

Will they find him?

Will they find him before he does it again?

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE WIFE

There is blood again.

Olivia forces away the threatening tears. She will not collapse. She will not cry. She will stand up, square her shoulders, and flush the toilet, whispering small words of benediction toward the life that was, that wasn't, that could have been.

She will not linger; she will not acknowledge the sudden sense of emptiness consuming her body. She will not give this moment more than it deserves. It's happened before, too many times now. *It will happen again*, her mind unhelpfully provides.

There is relief in this pain, some sort of primitive biological response to help ease her heavy heart. Olivia has never lied to herself about her feelings about having a child. She wants this, she's sure of it. Wants the experience, wants to be able to speak the same language as her sisters in the fertility arts, her friends who've already birthed their own. And she loves the idea of being pregnant. Loves the feelings of that early flush of success—the soreness and tingling in her breasts, the spotty nausea, the excitement, the fatigue. Loves remembering that moment when she realized she was pregnant the first time.

She'd known even before she took the test. She could feel the life growing inside her. Feel the quickening pulse. A secret she held in her heart, managing several hours with just the two of them, alone in their nascent lives. Every room of the house looked new, fresh, dangerous. Sharp corners and glass coffee tables, no, no, those would have to be tempered, replaced. The sun glancing off the breakfast table—too bright here, the spot on the opposite side would be best for a high chair. The cat, snoozing in the window seat—how was she going to take an interloper? The plans. The plans.

After a carefully arranged lunch, fresh fruit and no soft cheeses, she'd driven to the bookstore for a copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, accepted the sweet congratulations of the bookseller—think, a complete stranger knew more than her family, her husband. She tied the plastic stick with its beautiful double pink lines inside two elaborate bows—one pink, one blue—and gave it to Park after an elegant dinner.

The look on his face—pride and fear and terror and joy, all mingled with desire—when he realized what she was saying. He'd been struck dumb, could only grin, ear to ear, and pat her leg for the first twenty minutes.

So much joy between them. So much possibility.

Olivia replayed that moment, over and over, every time she got pregnant. It helped chase away the furrowing, the angles and planes of Park's forehead, cheek, chin, as they collapsed into sorrow when she'd miscarried the first time. And the next. And the next. Every time she lost their children, it was the same, all played out on Park's handsome face: exaltation, fear, sorrow. Pity.

No, the being pregnant part was idyllic for her, albeit terribly brief. It's only that she doesn't know how she feels about what happens ten months hence, and the lifetime that follows. The stranger that comes into being. But that's normal; at least, that's what everyone tells her. All women



feel nervous about what comes next. Her ambivalence isn't what's killing her babies. She can't help but feel it's her fault for not being certain to her marrow what she wants. That God is punishing her for being cavalier.

Of course, this internal conversation is moot. There is blood. Again.

She hastily makes her repairs—the materials are never far away. If she stashed the pads and tampons away in the hall cabinet, it would be bad luck. Too optimistic.

Not like they're having any luck anyway. Six pregnancies. Six miscarriages. IUIs and IVF. Needles and hormones and pain, so much pain. More than anyone should have to bear.

With a momentary glance at the crime scene in the toilet, she depresses the handle.

“Goodbye,” she whispers. “I'm so sorry.”

Olivia brushes her teeth, pulls a comb through her glossy, prenatal-enriched locks, rehearsing the breakfast conversation she must now have.

How does she tell Park she's failed, yet again, to hold the tiny life inside her?

\*

Downstairs, it is now just another morning, no different from any over the past several years. Just the two of them, getting ready for the day.

The television is on in the kitchen, tuned to the local morning show. Park whistles as he whisks eggs in a bright red bowl. Park's breakfasts are legendary. Savory omelets, buckwheat blueberry pancakes, veggie frittatas, yogurts and homemade granola—you name it, he makes it. Olivia handles dinner. If she cooks three nights out of seven, she considers that a success. They eat like kings in the morning and paupers at night, and they love it.

She pauses at the door, watching him bustle around. He is already dressed for work, jeans and a button-down, black lace-up brogues. His “office” is in the back yard, in a shed Olivia converted for his use. A former—reformed—English professor on a semi-permanent sabbatical, Park has launched a second career ghostwriting psychological thrillers. He claims to love the anonymity of it, that he can work so close to home, and the money is good. Enough. Not obscene, but enough. They've been able to afford four rounds of IUI and two in vitros so far. And as he says, writing is the perfect career for a man who wants to be a stay-at-home dad. There's no reason for him to go back to teaching. Not now.

A pang in her heart, echoed by a sharp cramp in her stomach. They are throwing everything away. She is throwing everything away. This round of IVF, she only produced a few retrievable eggs, and this was their last embryo.

My God, she's gotten clinical. She's gotten cold. Babies. Not embryos. There are no more frozen *babies*. Which means she'll have to do it all again, the weeks-long scientific process of creating a child: the suppression drugs, the early morning blood tests, the shots, the trigger, the surgery, the implantation. The rage and fear and pain. Again.

The money. It costs so, so much.

She has frozen at the edge of the kitchen, thoughts roiling, and Park senses her there, turns with a wide smile. The whisk clicks against the bowl in time with her heartbeat.

“How are my darlings feeling this morning? Mama and bebe hungry?”

She is saved from blurting out the truth—mama no more, bebe is dead—by the ringing of the doorbell.

Park frowns. “Who is here so early? Watch the eggs, will you?”

Even chickens can do what she cannot.

It's infuriating. House cats escape into the woods and sixty days later purge themselves of tiny blind beings. Insects, birds, rats, rabbits, deer, reproduce without thought or hindrance. Nearly four million women a year—a year!—manage to give birth.

But not her.

She's not depressed, really, she's not. She's come to terms with this. It happens. Today will be a bad day, tomorrow will be better. They will try again. It will all be okay.

Mechanically, Olivia moves to the stove, accepts the wooden spatula. Park disappears toward the foyer, shoulders broad and waist nearly as trim as the day she met him. She will never get over his handsomeness, his winning personality. Everyone loves Park. How could you not? He is perfect. He is everything Olivia is not.

The television is blaring a breaking news alert, and she turns her attention to it, grateful for something, anything, to focus on beside the intransigent nature of her womb and the fear her husband will abandon her. The anchor is new, from Mississippi, with a voice soft as honey. Tupelo? No, Oxford, Olivia remembers; Park took her to a quaint bookstore there on the square one summer, long ago.

\*

“Sad news this morning, as it has been confirmed the body found in Davidson County earlier this week belongs to young mother Beverly Cooke. Cooke has been missing for three months, after she was last seen going for a hike at Radnor Lake. Her car was found in the parking lot, with her purse and phone inside. Metro Nashville Police spokesperson Vanda PRIORITY tells Channel Four Metro is working with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation and Forensic Medical to determine her cause of death. The Cooke family released a statement a few minutes ago. ‘Thank you to everyone who has helped bring Beverly home. We will have more information on her burial soon. We ask for privacy during this difficult time.’ Metro now turns their attention to identifying a suspect. In this morning’s briefing, Homicide Detective William Osley stated that Metro has a lead and will be pursuing it vigorously. Next up, time to break into the cedar closet, it’s finally sweater weather!”

\*

Olivia sighs in regret. That poor woman. Like everyone in Nashville, Olivia has followed the case religiously. To have a young mother like the woman she's so desperate to mold herself into disappear into thin air from a safe, regularly traveled, popular spot, one Olivia herself hikes on occasion, has been terrifying. She knows Beverly Cooke, too, albeit peripherally. They were in a book club together few years ago. Beverly was fun. Loud. Drank white wine in the kitchen of the house and gossiped about the neighbors. Never read the book.

Olivia stopped going after a few meetings. It was right before she'd started her first official fertility treatments, had two miscarriages behind her, was hopped up on Clomid and aspirin, and all anyone could do was talk babies. Beverly had just weaned her first and was drunk for the first time in two years. She alternated complaining and cooing about the trials and joys of motherhood. Olivia couldn't take it, this flagrant flaunting of the woman's success. She stood stock still in the clubhouse kitchen, fingers clenching a glass of chardonnay, envisioning the myriad ways she could murder Beverly. Cracking the glass on the counter's edge and swiping it across Beverly's pale stalk of a neck seemed the most expedient.

Honestly, she wanted to murder them all, the sycophantic breeders who took their ability to procreate for granted. They had no idea what she was going through. How she was tearing apart inside, month after month. How she felt the embryos detach and knew it was over. How Park's face went from joy to disdain every time.

Some people wear their scars on the outside.

Some hide them deep, and never let anyone in to see them.

Olivia is still staring at the screen, which is blaring a commercial for car insurance, processing, remembering, fists balled so tightly she can feel her nails cutting the skin, when she hears her husband calling her name.

"Olivia?" His voice is pitched higher than normal, as if he's excited, or scared.

Park enters the kitchen from the hall between the dining room and the butler's pantry.

"Honey, they found Beverly—" she starts. But her words die in her throat when she sees two strangers, a man and a woman, standing behind him, people she knows immediately are police officers just by their wary bearing and shifting eyes that take in the whole room in a moment, then settle on her appraisingly.

"I know," Park says, coming to her side, shutting off the gas. She's burned the eggs; a sulfurous stench emanates from the gold-encrusted pan. He takes the spatula from her carefully. "It's been on the news all morning. Liv, these detectives need to talk to us."

"About?"

The man, stocky, slick smoky-lensed gold glasses, perfectly worn-in cowboy boots and a leather jacket over a button-down, takes a small step forward and removes his sunglasses. His eyes are the deepest espresso, and hold something indefinable, between pity and accusation. It's as if he knows what she is thinking, knows her uncharitable thoughts toward poor dead Beverly.

"Detective Osley, ma'am. My partner, Detective Moore. We've been working Beverly Cooke's case. I understand you knew her? Our condolences for your loss."

Olivia cuts her eyes at Park. What the hell has he been saying to them?

"I don't know her. Didn't. Not well. We were in a book club together, years ago. I don't know what happened to her. I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"Oh, we understand. That's not why we're here." Osley glances at his partner. The woman is taller than he is, graceful in the way of ex-ballet dancers, even in her street clothes, with a long, supple neck, hooded green eyes devoid of makeup, and blond hair twisted into a thick no-nonsense bun worn low, brushing the collar of her shirt.

"Why are you here, exactly?" Olivia asks.

Park frowns at her tone. She's come across too sharp, but my God, what she's already handled this morning would break a lesser woman.

"It's about our suspect in the Cooke case. Can we sit down?"

Olivia reigns in her self-loathing fury and turns on the charm. The consummate hostess act always works. Park has taught her that. "Oh, of course. Can I get you some coffee? Tea? We were making breakfast. Can we offer you some eggs, or a muffin? I have a fresh pan here—"

"No, ma'am, we're fine," Moore demurs. "Let's sit down and have a chat."

Olivia has a moment of sheer freak-out. Was it Park? Had he killed Beverly Cooke? Was that why they wanted to talk, because he was a suspect? If he was a suspect, would the police sit down with them casually in the kitchen? Wouldn't they want something more official? Take him to the

station? Did they need to call a lawyer? Her mind was going fifty thousand miles an hour, and Park was already convicted and in prison, and she was so alone in the big house, so lonely, before she reached a hand to pull out the chair.

She needs to knock off the true crime podcasts. Her husband is not a murderer. He is incapable of that kind of deceit.

Isn't he?

Sometimes she wonders.

"Nice kitchen," Osley says.

"Thank you."

Olivia loves her kitchen. It is the model for all her signature looks. Airy, open, white cabinets with iron pulls, leathered white marble counters. A black-granite-topped island just the right size for chopping and serving, light spilling in from the big bay window. A white oak French country table with elegant cane-backed chairs. It was the heart of her home, the heart of her life with Park.

Now, though, it is simply the site of his greatest betrayal. Forever more, from this morning—with the burned eggs and the somber police and Park's face whiter than bone—until the end of her tenure here, and even then, in remembrance, she would look at this precious place with fury, and sadness for what could have been. The ghosts of the life they were supposed to have clung to her, suckled her spirit like a babe at her breast never would. Everywhere she looked were echoes of the shadow existence she was supposed to be living. Here, a frazzled mother, smiling despite her fatigue at the children she'd created. There, a loving father, always ready to lend a hand tossing a ball or helping with homework. And look, a trio of towheaded boys and a soft blond princess girl, the teasing and laughter of their mealtimes. How the table would seem to grow smaller as the boys got older and took up more space. The girlfriends came, the boyfriends. The emptiness when it was just the two of them again, the children grown, with their own lives, the table bursting at holidays only. The grandchildren, happiness and racket, the noise and the joy creeping out from the woodwork again.

She is alone. She will always be alone. She will not have this life. She will not have this dream. Park made it so.

\*

As the detectives continue to speak, softly, without rancor, and her world splinters, Olivia hardens, compresses, shrinks. She watches her husband and holds on to one small thought.

*I have the power to destroy you, too. Dear God, give me the chance.*