

hope o baker



finding  
hope

A BIRTHMOTHER'S JOURNEY INTO THE LIGHT

## **FINDING HOPE**



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**A BIRTHMOTHER'S JOURNEY  
INTO THE LIGHT**

*Hope O Baker*



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*A Birthmother's Journey into the Light*

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*To my beautiful son, I loved you then, I love  
you now, and I will love you always.*

*For all of the women and men out there who are going  
through a hard time, I believe in your pain and in your  
strength. We can all do this. We will find our light.*

*—Hopey*



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*Note: In the following pages, some  
names have been changed.*



# Introduction

This past Christmas, for the first time in six years, I didn't need to take a break to cry alone, slumped in a sobby mess on some cold bathroom floor.

It was the first time I could say that about a holiday—*any* holiday—in all that time. The years since my son was born. The years since I placed him for adoption.

This year, I wasn't bawling. I was baking.

Cupcakes, actually. And wearing an apron, even. The whole bit.

As I stood at the sink, I looked out at the commotion going on in my home. There was my fiancée, the man I love. There were my stepkids, causing a ruckus. I was surrounded by friends, too. It was crazy, but a good crazy.

*My crazy.*

For the first time in a long time, on a day that was supposed to be a celebration, I could actually celebrate. I could be present. I didn't feel like I needed to self-medicate or go ugly cry in the bathroom—at least not the whole time. I knew I would see my son soon, on my upcoming visit.

And you know what? I felt it, then—something warming, something a long time coming: I was okay.

But I wasn't always.

## **A LONG ROAD**

At twenty-one years old, I placed my son for adoption. I opted for the open route, and I met (and even lived with) my son's adoptive mother before he was born. I knew it was the right decision for my son's life at the time, even if it didn't feel best for mine. I did it for him.

As mothers, that's what we do, right? We make the best decisions we can for our children, even if those decisions break us.

And let me tell you, I was fucking broken. Over and over again, a little more every day. We'll get to that later.

Even today, after a long journey of finding my way back to the light, I'm still not all the way healed. Yes, I have a wonderful fiancé and beautiful stepkids who fill my days with love. Yes, I love my family and friends. Yes, I am successful professionally. Yes, I have found a way to love myself again. Yes, I get to see my son on our scheduled visits, and that time together is more precious than gold. And yes, he is thriving with his adoptive mother—someone so perfect for my son, someone who is a wonderful mother to my son.

I'm better than I was during all those on-the-floor Christmases and better than I was during my downward spiral into depression and addiction. I'm blooming now, again. My fiancée and I have even discussed the potential of having a child of our own—a complicated decision I'll cover later in this book. There are many considerations: How would my son feel if I did that? Will I ever be able to show him that he was always enough for me, but I wasn't always enough for him?

Time will tell. In the meantime, I'm still moving forward into possibility. Into Hope. It's been a long road, and I'm still on it.

If you're reading this, you're likely on a long road of your own. I'm here to walk with you.

## YOUR PAIN IS YOUR PAIN

If you're a birthmother, I want you to know that I see you. It's the worst pain you've ever felt, right? Living and existing in a completely separate world from your child? You can't hug or kiss them. You can't smell them. You can't cheer them on from the sidelines. Maybe you feel like a vessel—an empty one, when it's all said and done. I know I did.

I've been on the other side of the story, too. I got pregnant in high school, even though I was on the Depo shot. I found out at nine weeks. I remember getting sick at school and having my mom come pick me up. (Turns out it was morning sickness.) She drove me to a Walgreens and we bought a pregnancy test. While we waited for the results, I sobbed. *How did this happen? I'm on birth control*, I wondered.

After we saw a positive result, we drove to Fargo, North Dakota, to get an abortion. I remember protestors at the clinic. I remember having to stand before a judge and say why I wanted an abortion—a required act when both parents weren't present to consent to the procedure for a minor, and my dad wasn't there. I remember sitting in the little waiting room, reading letters other women who'd also gotten abortions had written. I remember having a couple emotional breakdowns in the car on the way home. I remember being in pain.

But it was the right choice. All that's to say that I am not writing this book about being a birthmother because I'm anti-abortion. I'm not. I want to make the point that pain is pain. I've seen it everywhere, including watching my mom and sister suffer miscarriage after miscarriage.

But there's light through all that pain, too, even if it's hard to see sometimes. And I'm writing this book because I want you to know that you deserve good things in life, too, even though it can be hard to see right now. I know where you've been: to hell. The deepest hell, because it was one you had to consciously *choose*. Whether that was out of love for your child or an understanding of your circumstances or both—that's no matter. What matters is that you went down a path you knew would be covered in thorns, and you stepped out onto it anyway. You bled. You did what you had to do.

Maybe you're not a birthmother. Maybe you're an adoptive parent. Maybe you chose to keep your child and raise them on your own. Maybe you chose to have an abortion. Again, no matter. Your choices are your choices—as a mother and as a human—and I respect your right to make them. I'm not saying my path is the only path, by any means, but it *was* mine. This is my story, and I want to use my voice to tell it in the hope I can reach more women who are struggling. My message is simple: *you are not alone*.



The subtitle of this book is *A Birthmother's Journey Into the Light* for a reason. It is a journey. I still have bad days. I still fall down. My pain is my pain, just like your pain is your pain, no matter where it comes from. You are entitled to feel it, to grieve. To crumble on *your* bathroom floor if you need to. Or any floor. You're allowed to take up space in this world.

This shit hurts. Let it. Slowly, you can start to let light in little by little. I'm proof that getting there won't be perfect, but it's possible.

### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

In this book, I will share my journey—all the pieces—authentically and without reservation. And let me tell you right now, it isn't always pretty. (I haven't been baking cupcakes all these years.)

In the end, I'm writing this book as a woman hoping to empower other women. I'm writing this book to help you if you find yourself in a similar position. Looking back, if I spoke about my feelings and felt supported enough to reach out in those rough moments, maybe I wouldn't have felt so alone. I wish I wouldn't have gone through those years of having to get high or drunk to talk about my son, of self-destructing because I didn't know what else to do. I can't go back in time, but I can

go forward. And along the way, I can spread this message of Hope.

This is a story of my brokenness, and this is a story of my healing. This is a story that shows *birthmother* isn't a dirty word. This is a story that shows adoption can be messy, but also that it can be beautiful. This is a story that says *whatever* choice you make, that's okay; you are still worthy of love. I will stand by you.

You walked this path for your child, as I did for mine. Mostly, this book is a love letter to my son.



## CHAPTER ONE



# *An Unexpected Pregnancy*

“You’re pregnant,” the nurse told me, her voice soft. Like she was walking on eggshells. Like she knew what she said might break me, even before she said it. I couldn’t look at her.

I’d come to the clinic because I knew I wasn’t feeling well. Something wasn’t right, and I’d been trying to figure it out for weeks, months maybe. I’d gone to two different clinics, but never once had anyone tested my urine for pregnancy. I hadn’t thought to, either, because of my medical history. I’d been on the Depo shot in the past, which had stopped my periods. I just didn’t think of being pregnant.

Neither did the doctors, apparently. In fact, they gave me a CT scan in the beginning of my pregnancy, but ultimately they said I was probably paranoid given my mom’s

diagnosis. They called it phantom pain. Eventually, they treated me for a severe urinary tract infection, mostly, but it wasn't helping. I'd just returned from an x-ray, as the doctor was trying to determine the cause of my symptoms. My mother—who had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and was fighting her own battles—sat in a different room to wait, likely fearing the worst.

Instead of a tumor, though, they found a baby.

*Pregnant?* I thought. *What? I'd never thought that was possible.*

I remember laying back on the cold bed, looking at everything around me. From that angle, it all seemed so tall, so out of reach.

“Wait, what?” I asked, this time aloud.

“The x-ray technician who did your procedure saw a skeleton on the scan,” she said. “And we've now tested your urine. It's positive for pregnancy.”

*A skeleton?* I can't believe they used that word.

“Where is my mom?” I managed to choke out between tears as I rocked back and forth in the bed, cradling myself. “What are my options?”

I repeated those two questions over and over. They were the only words I had.

## **TROUBLE IN ALEXANDRIA**

When I found out I was pregnant, I was twenty-one years old and in college. I didn't think kids were ever part of my plan. I always wanted to be the "cool aunt." I had no clue what to do. Disbelief and shock rocked me to my core.

Before finding the skeleton—which still bothers me, to this day, that they worded it that way—the doctor had me on an IV because my kidneys were failing. As soon as they discovered I was pregnant, the nurse rushed to switch the medication in the drip.

The nursing staff quickly sent me down for an ultrasound. Upon arrival, the technician spoke to me about God during the entire examination. I was crying uncontrollably, unable to look at the screen, as she continued to explain that this situation was a gift. She told me stories about her son, who was once "living in sin" and had gotten his girlfriend pregnant. She went on to tell me they'd gotten married, had the baby, and done "the right thing." Throughout the examination, she'd stop every so often to cry and tell me point blank that this was one of God's children, and this baby was God's gift to me.

I didn't know I needed to be saved.

I *did* know I had just learned I was over twenty weeks pregnant. Yes, twenty.

I was vulnerable, still in shock, and would have given anything to get out of that room with that woman. The woman I *wanted* was my mother, who had been told I was moved to ultrasound, but not why—likely making her fear that I had cancer all the more real. I asked if she could be in the room with me while a nurse explained the situation. I wanted us all to be there together so everything could be clear.

That didn't happen.

When I finally made it back to my room and my mom walked in, I didn't have to tell her the news. The nurses already had, against my wishes.

My mom looked at me then, and I could see her heart break for me. There's this face my mom makes when she's going to cry but is holding it back, and she made that face then. She held my hand, acting as my advocate. She said we would look at all our options and make an educated decision based on the information we had. All we wanted was more information. We both asked a version of "What are my options" at least eight times, but

the nurse and the OB doctor on call only answered with statements like, “You’re halfway done,” or “There are people out there who would want this child.”

I couldn’t stop shaking. My mom was getting pissed.

The nurse and doctor left us alone for a moment, then returned to the room with news: there was an employee in their clinic who wanted to meet me immediately. She was interested in adopting my child “no matter what mental issues and deformities the baby might have because of my lack of prenatal care for the first half of my pregnancy.”

I remember that direct quote with my whole being. Yes, they said that.

*Wait, would my baby even be okay? Was he hurt?* I had a whole new set of worries. I couldn’t breathe.

The doctor then said I should be checked in to the hospital immediately to be started on medicine and receive prenatal care. She added that a social worker would come talk to me about adoption—which I’d never once requested. My mom saw the look of fear and hurt on my face. The Christian rhetoric, the over-the-top language, the refusal to answer my questions, the stranger who wanted to adopt my baby two hours after I found out I was carrying him—it was too much. I had to get out of there.



We left then, against medical advice, and agreed to come back the following day to follow up because I was, after all, still very sick. It was a risk not to go to the hospital as advised, but I didn't want to be trapped or persecuted more. That night, my mom took care of me. Together, we researched the options they wouldn't tell me about in the office. We made calls, even reaching out to organizations to help with costs associated with not only the abortion, but travel, etc. I needed the help because, even though my parents supported the abortion, they weren't going to pay for it. And, as a poor college student, I didn't have piles of money laying around.

That night, my mom and I found so many resources and so much support. We learned there was a clinic in Kansas City that would perform abortions past twenty weeks, and we decided I would go there. I felt then that I just couldn't do it. I couldn't have a baby. In truth, I was still reeling from the events of the past twenty-four hours.

In the morning, I debated going back to the clinic in Alexandria. I didn't want to, but I wasn't sure what else to do. I was so ill that my skin was turning gray, and I needed my medical records to take to Kansas City. When I checked in, the nurse who wanted to adopt my baby stood behind the counter—a skinny woman with long, dark straight hair. She was waiting for me. We looked at one another, but never spoke.

*You've got to be fucking kidding me*, I thought.

I walked to the OB-GYN side of the clinic and checked in. When my mom and I met with the doctor, we explained we'd done our research and that I'd be going to Kansas City to get an abortion. The doctor urged me not to and said it wasn't right. My mom and I knew we were within a couple days of the cutoff to be eligible for an abortion—and the doctor must have known that too, because the dates she included on my forms made it appear I was further along and thus ineligible for the procedure.

Even though so much was up in the air, I was never fuzzy on the dates. I didn't know what to do next, but I of course knew exactly how it happened. My son was conceived when I was twenty. It was a Christmas party. A drunken night. A college, one-time thing. Both sides made mistakes. There's nothing more to say about it, other than I was sure of the date more than I was sure of anything else in that moment. The day after it happened, I drove home and learned my mom had cancer, and I wasn't sexually active after that. There was no doubt in my mind.

My mom and I had to ask the doctor to rewrite the dates on the forms to prove how far along I *really* was—which she did, after a struggle. Eventually, she scribbled out the falsified dates while pleading with my mother to make me reconsider, as if it were her choice and not mine.

It took a concerted effort between my mom and I to get the records. The clinic kept telling us they weren't ready, or they couldn't find them, etc. After arguing, we finally got the papers. When we picked up the ultrasound picture, I couldn't look.

I left the clinic in Alexandria and never went back.

### **TO THE ABORTION CLINIC AND BACK AGAIN**

My mom and I started the drive to Kansas City immediately. On the road, she got a call from the Mayo Clinic saying she was cleared for her hysterectomy—a surgery she'd been waiting on—so we had to turn around. When we got to Mayo, I got very ill. I had to tell them I was pregnant, and they gave me fluids. My sister, Amber, met us there. I didn't have much time, so Amber dropped everything—literally, she left work and got in her car—to help me get to Kansas City.

I don't remember the car ride. I don't remember what I was thinking or feeling. I think I blocked it out. Looking back, I wonder what my mom must have felt like then: I was exercising my reproductive rights while she was losing hers.

My next memory is being in the hotel that night. We'd used my mom's points to book the room, and I recall

emailing my college professors to ask for extensions on my finals. I took one final that night, too. Everything else is a blur.

It's funny, really—what you remember and what you don't when your mind is trying to protect you. Except it's not really funny at all. Not even a little.

The next day, we went to the clinic. The doctor there was kind and supportive. My memories here come in snippets. I can still hear the voices of the staff..

“It'll be cutting it close. You may need to go to New Mexico, where they perform abortions a little later.”

“You're right on the line. It might be touchy.”

“This is your choice. Is anybody pressuring you to do this?”

“Whatever you decide, we're here for you.”

At one point, I looked up at my sister. We locked watery eyes. I knew it, and she knew it: I couldn't go through with it. I just couldn't. She knew my face. She knew she needed to get me out of there.

When the doctor said it would be touchy, I felt relief. Maybe in my head, I was looking for a reason for it not

to work out—but not because I thought I wanted to keep the baby. I didn't. I was so confused: I knew I couldn't have the baby, but I didn't want to abort the baby, either. To this day, my strongest memory of that clinic was telling my sister, "Get me out of here."

After we checked out of the hotel room and started our drive back to Minnesota, my sister and I stopped at a gas station. We'd been driving for a while, and we'd been eating chips and snacks we'd packed for the road. I had a tight shirt on. As we got out of the car, I think I just let go. I stopped sucking my stomach in. I'd known I was pregnant for almost a week at that point, but I never let myself *feel* it until that moment. Everything had been too traumatic.

In that moment, I looked at my belly—my damn near four-month pregnant belly—and thought, *Holy shit. This is real.* I know my sister saw it, too. We both smiled. I hadn't smiled in a while.

We faced a difficult conversation for the remainder of our trip. At the time, Amber was trying to get pregnant, and she and her husband were having fertility problems. She offered to adopt the baby, but we didn't know how it would all work. Would she give him back when I was ready? Would I be an aunt? A mom? How weird would that be at Thanksgiving? What would that look like? We

decided that for our situation, it was best if we didn't pursue that option. Amber said she'd stay in my corner no matter what, and she's never wavered.

### **FOR A REASON**

Looking back, I'd gotten pregnant at the perfect time for my life situation. Before that, I was a typical college student—drinking, smoking, and partying, as people do. Then, my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, and a switch flipped. I started to mother my own mother. I had to. The need to be there was fierce within me.

It was interesting because my mom and I always had a hard relationship. When she got sick, we were in a rocky place. There were times before that when we wouldn't speak for months because we'd gotten into a blowout argument. Still, when she was diagnosed, I couldn't imagine not being there for her. It was instinctual.

I went into full-on caretaker mode, driving from Minneapolis to Alexandria, Minnesota, where my mom and stepdad lived, regularly. I was there to help care for my little brother, who was and still is a shining star in my life. And, of course, for my mother, who underwent twelve surgeries over the course of her treatment. After her double mastectomy, I remember separating her pills, laboring over the medication schedule to make sure I got it right,

and setting alarms to administer the meds in enough time to ensure she didn't wake up in pain.

Taking care of my mother consumed me. Internally, I knew what I wanted was more time with her. More time to be close. More time to have a mother. More time to be a daughter. I almost took an entire semester off school because I got so far behind during that time, and I was grateful that the professors really worked with me. I got so much support from them and even the president of the school. It was touching.

During that time, I also battled anxiety over my own health, working out and striving to eat healthy to avoid the risk of cancer in my own body. In reality, my own body was working on something of its own that whole time: growing a baby. My beautiful boy.

My mom getting cancer was one of the hardest things I'd ever had to deal with at the time, but looking back, we both agree it was a blessing in disguise. We had all these experiences for a reason. My son is here for a reason.

### **“YOU'RE NOT KEEPING IT, RIGHT?”**

I'd gone to Kansas City pregnant, and I was leaving Kansas City—still pregnant. I had people to call.

As Amber drove, I dialed. I called my mom, telling her I'd gotten to see the baby and couldn't do it. She said she'd help me get to another abortion clinic that would do late-term abortions in New Mexico, if that's what I wanted to do. She said she'd support me either way.

I called my girlfriend Jill, who'd just had a baby. I called my dad, who said I could move in with him and offered to turn one of his bedrooms into a nursery. I called my other sister, Abby, who was so excited that I'd be the first of my siblings to have a baby. I kept calling those close to me as the miles passed, trying to get feedback. Trying to make it more real the more I said it aloud. Looking back, I wonder how my sister felt, listening to those conversations while she was struggling so hard to conceive herself.

When I got back to Minnesota, I was still unsure what I was going to do. I met up with Jill—who brought her baby along—and my best friend, Bethany. We went to get shakes, and I spilled the news. Bethany's reaction stuck with me:

“You're not keeping it, right?”

It was completely reactive. Bethany had known me for years. Ultimately, I knew she'd support me no matter what, and I don't blame her for responding that way.

I got similar reactions from others, too.



When my dad pitched the idea of moving in with him—in his tiny, conservative Iowa town—I thought that sounded absolutely miserable. There’s nothing wrong with that sort of place; it’s just never been my ideal home. Plus, he was having challenges of his own with drugs. It was only five years later, when my sister called me, that I’d learn he had been arrested for meth. All I knew at the time, though, was that I felt like he’d abandoned me—I didn’t know he was fighting his own demons. I declined the invitation, and we didn’t talk for a long time after that.

Once, when I was still making up my mind, I went to Target. Among other items, I bought a soft baby blanket. When I showed my mom, she was pissed—*very* pissed. We stood on the staircase in her house, five stairs apart, arguing.

“Hope, you can’t do this,” she screamed. “You are *not* going to be a good mother.”

I’ve blocked out a lot, but I can never block that out—even though, sometimes, I think I want to.

Whatever decision I was going to make didn’t matter then, because what my mother said is what I believed. Her approach wasn’t the best, but in the end, she didn’t want me to get hurt.

That comment solidified it: I wouldn't be a good mother. From that moment on, I never looked back. Adoption it was.