

\$8.00

THE
Rook
Volume XXVI



Committing to Courage

Savannah Phillipson

I always liked the color of my father's eyes, though I never knew their origin. My father was placed for adoption just days after he was born by an unmarried woman who thought she was too young to care for him, and while my adoptive grandparents were amazing, godly people, he never looked like them. He never acted like they did. How they sneezed or snorted when they laughed was never translated into my father's biological makeup. When looking at them as a whole, he was set apart. Perhaps that was the biggest factor in my decisions when I fell pregnant at a young age. Too young, some would say, though given the history of civilization and the circumstances of being a woman, my body was made for it.

I was never quite able to pinpoint when I made the decision to keep my baby, but upon reflection, it feels as if there was never a choice. The day was unordinary besides the two vivid pink lines that popped up on the test while my stepmother stared at me with a shameful gaze. I had sat on the edge of the bathtub for three excruciating minutes with the test face down on the sink, and no words were said, yet the tension cut through me like barbed wire. And when she finally reached for it, holding it above her eyes into the fluorescent of the vanity, she didn't utter a word, just sighed and extended her hand to me so I could feel the crushing of the world fall down upon myself.

It wasn't the harsh, acidic smell of the bathroom cleaner that made my stomach churn but the feeling of a great loss. The things I felt I deserved were violently stolen from me at that moment. And I was faced with a choice that I wasn't able to understand the immensity of.

I had seen each angle of what my life could potentially play out to be. My father was adopted, and aside from what I could physically see, I know the pain that comes from his unanswered questions about his birth parents.

For far too many nights, I heard him weeping to my mother about what kind of life he could have had. And my mother. She was forced to abort her first baby when she was younger than me. She named her afterward, and when she thought no one was around, you could catch her drifting off, slow tears streaming down her face as she envisioned what kind of a life that baby would have had. I watched my sixteen-year-old sister fall pregnant. I saw her drop out of school and move away. I saw her struggle to do it on her own and the hardships she had to face. I saw her fail time and time again. But also saw her succeed.

That added to my courage.

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I saw each scenario of my future play out before my eyes like a Shakespearean tragedy, yet none were the life I wanted for myself or for this unknown being growing inside me. And even then, knowing that I was considering keeping the child, I wondered what somebody of my age, my education, and my now lost potential in life would be capable of. I questioned if I would be good enough. Strong enough to endure the hurdles. Courage is something one must develop, and I had none.

I was broken.

Up to that point, my childhood was riddled with pain and abuse rooted in drugs and generational trauma. And though I didn't understand the concepts at that time in my life, I worried that my trauma would carry on in the line of generations and be passed along to my children—this child. I didn't know how to stop that. I didn't know how to give someone a childhood they didn't have to recover from when I was still recovering from mine.

We confided in his parents, first. My stepmother insisted on formulating a plan before allowing me to utter a word, fearing the news might send my father into a tailspin. Yet, youth often overrides caution, and together, we sat on the edge of his bed while his mother and stepfather stood in the doorway, beverages in hand. Colter mumbled, head down, "Savannah's Pregnant." It was quiet at first as surprise set in, then a long overdue sigh. April, his mother, had Colter as a teenager, and she knew the struggles we were about to face. Her demeanor on the whole situation never lingered on the side of anger but more of a deep sadness for what we're about to endure. My father, on the other hand, didn't look me in the eyes for weeks.

I moved away that summer, fourteen and fourteen weeks pregnant, taking the midnight Greyhound Bus after my dad decided to stop giving me the silent treatment. He never had a kind word to say to me about the situation, and even years later, as I have grown and blossomed into the woman I am now, he always finds a way to aggressively intrude his grief with reminders of what I had lost.

Perhaps it was a good thing that life had thrown me from childhood into adulthood within the blink of an eye. It wasn't until then that I saw the world's true colors. A tandem hue, like raw sienna or burnt umber, that carries depth reflecting the complexities, vulnerabilities, and the unrefined essence of human experiences.

Of my experience.

My father and I rarely spoke after that. He got sentenced to a drug rehab program, where he stayed the rest of my pregnancy, and I moved in with my mother (if you can call her that), who fought her own battles with substance abuse. What would have been the beginning of my high school era was replaced after I moved away. All my friends were starting high school, and there I sat on the navy-blue couch in the rundown trailer park, isolated in loneliness. I still remember the echoes of my mother's words as she sat down next to me one morning and told me she was protecting me by

not letting me go to school that year, but I knew it was because she was ashamed of me. The adolescent in me was still able to read between the lines of what my parents didn't have the courage to say to their children.

As my stomach swelled, my friends moved on with their children, period class and lunch outings. I was questioned endlessly if I had found good parents for my baby while they were asked to dances and on first dates.

And though it was dark times, I still found the slivers of light that peeped through my life like blinds covering a window. I was experiencing something that many of my peers wouldn't experience until they were far from theirs, it was still a magical time. There's something so profound about carrying a life inside you that is scarcely talked about in teen pregnancy. I felt its first flutter early one morning as I laid on my bed. The sky was a vibrant orange with licks of purple hues. It was in one of those moments of just lying there envisioning what kind of life this child would have, what they would look like, what their eye color would be, and if they had dimples like you or not, and there it was. It was a small, fleeting moment that brought a sense of hope.

It was the small things that felt like victories. The small movements of your unborn child moving inside you, the adorable but absolutely terrifying ultrasound pictures of a small skeleton. The buying of onesies and pacifiers that would eventually come in handy and finding out you're about to have a daughter.

I wanted to be surprised about what she was, but Colter wanted to know. He had, for the most part, dissociated himself from the situation, but on the rarity when he asked about the baby or wanted to be involved, I felt the sequins of thoughts about a white picket fence and happily ever after begin to form. And though I was young, a sense of excitement still related me about bringing this baby into the world. I remember after that ultrasound; I had the technician put one of the pictures into an envelope that told us what the gender would be. Five hundred miles separated us, but we wanted to find out together, so we waited until late that night, on the phone, I opened it.

If it were a boy, we'd name him Jacob James, after Colter's middle name and our friend at the time. But when I pulled out the ultrasound picture, the word "girl" boldly sprawled across the center. That's when it all hit me.

I was about to have a daughter, and having grown up with all sisters, I knew the needs and wants of young girls. I became excited about the fact that even though I was a young mom, I'd be able to have the energy to keep up with her. I'd still be well-versed in the realm of what was hip and cool, but mostly, I was excited that I would be able to live a life long enough to experience what it felt like to be a lively grandmother, a great-grandmother, and maybe even more.

After that night would name her. We'd go through every baby name that seemed like it sounded good. Sandra, Kassie for stars in the sky as punishment, queen sitting on the throne of the world, and the mythical figure. The middle name was easy during the darkest days.

With the following months decided this wasn't the time. I never would say "I can't do this," because I've grown wise. I've come to understand that I wish his life to be almost as if she were never born.

Pain pained me. Short and miserable nights, alone, automatic, that throbbed into my pillow, tingling the scalp, a little longer, calm again.

For into an embrace, her first breath, her on my chest, months went by.

It at me with a tender. The dulled at her great life for t

After that night, there were long conversations about what we would name her. We couldn't seem to agree on anything, and we searched through every baby book and scoured the Internet, never finding anything that seemed like it suited her. Eventually, we decided to name her Kassandra, Kassie for short. I'd been browsing a list of names related to constellations when I came across Cassiopeia, and while she was placed in the sky as punishment, I liked the fact that her constellation represented a queen sitting on her throne. As mothers, we only wish to give our children the world, and there are many sacrifices we must make to do so. As a mythological figure, Cassiopeia knew those sacrifices all too well. Her middle name was easy, 'Hope,' because that is what she brought me in the darkest days.

With the never-ending list of to-dos to prepare for a child, the following months came and went. Just days before my due date, Colter decided this wasn't the life he wanted for himself. I was devastated at the time. I never would have thought that a text message saying, "I'm sorry I can't do this," could send my life spiraling even more. As the years passed, I've grown wiser, learning to release the grip of pain that once bound me. I've come to understand that a fifteen-year-old boy, like Colter, wouldn't wish his life to be forfeited for a child. Perhaps that's why she came early. Almost as if she knew I needed her there now more than ever.

Pain pierced me like Cupid's arrow on his day of celebration. Short and mild, then breathtakingly painful. I labored all through the night, alone, curled on my bed. My mother had told me to stop being dramatic, *that they were trying to sleep*, and I needed to be quiet. So, I cried into my pillow, attempting to muffle my pain. I pour bath after bath, letting the scalding water wash over, promising myself that it would only be a little longer. I just had to get through this next wave, and it all would be calm again.

For thirty-six hours, I labored alone until the doctors rushed me into an emergency cesarean. Then, at five-thirty-seven, I heard her take her first breath of life, letting out the quietest of cries. The nurse placed her on my chest and the wave of all the hardship I had faced in those nine months washed away.

It was triumphant. I created that innocent little life that looked up at me with big blue eyes and asked the world of me. Nothing else mattered. The pains of this world and the fear instilled in my heart were dulled and replaced with hope as I promised to give her a future worthy of her greatness. Of our greatness. Accepting nothing less than a beautiful life for the now two of us.