

Chapter 1



Stormy Beginnings

My grandson, Aiden, squirmed against the cushion of the mahogany booth and reached for another warm, flaky cheddar biscuit, sending crumbs across his coloring sheet. Our visit to Red Lobster’s all-you-can-eat shrimp extravaganza had become a birthday tradition. The familiar shiplap walls and smell of seafood always took me back to the memorable day when a baby boy came home with a hurricane.

“Aiden, do you remember why the day you were born was so special?”

He responded with a mouth still full of biscuit. “Because of the big storm.”

I paused as a waiter refilled our drinks.

“That’s right. You had to stay at the hospital a few extra days because of Hurricane Ike.”

Not that the delay had mattered as I sat on that teal hospital couch, holding the sweetest bundle of perfection I had ever seen. Sure, massive sheets of rain pounded the window behind me, power was out all over town, and trees were being snapped in half or uprooted—it didn’t matter. My heart was overflowing with an intense love for this brown-eyed baby boy holding my pinky finger in his wrinkled little hands.

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He was here. We were safe. Named for my husband, Aiden Jay Green had already captured my heart. The raging love of this nana for her first grandchild bested the storm.

The waiter stopped by again, this time to slide a steaming platter of shrimp onto our table.

“When we finally brought you home,” I continued, “we had no electricity. We were all so hungry that we decided to go eat at Red Lobster while we waited for the power to come back on. So that’s why we come every year—to remember.”

My daughter, Ashlei, wiped a smear off Aiden’s mouth with a napkin and ruffled his hair.

“Yes.” Ashlei laughed, rolling her eyes in mock disgust. “What a day that was!”

Aiden scribbled a crayon across his sheet of paper, more interested in his drawing than in the details of his birth. But I held the details close, never wanting to forget the story that made his birthday as special and significant as he is.

The storm had begun long before the day he was born. Ashlei, seventeen and in love with her high school sweetheart, had moved out long enough to get her heart broken and to get pregnant. For days after she returned home, I sobbed under the bed covers, grieved about how having a child would alter her life. I knew all too well what you had to give up as a teen mother. I knew the cynical stares and judgmental looks she and her child would receive. I knew the mountains of baggage that came from stepping outside of God’s design for sexuality. I knew the challenges of single parenting and the destruction it could cause to both their hearts.

I also worried about how this pregnancy would alter *my* life. What would people say? A church youth director with a teenage daughter pregnant out of wedlock? Why would the parents of my students want me to continue teaching their students when I had failed my own child so completely?

This was not the way I had pictured grandparenting. But that day,

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sitting in a Red Lobster after a storm with a tiny bundle of pure joy, my heart was beyond full. The love I had for him was bigger than any love I'd ever felt in my life. Different. Unlike me, he was wanted.

Ashlei had never considered abortion, and I had hope that my daughter would not have the same experience as I'd had. She had Jay and me and a church community as a support system. I could celebrate, knowing how much better life would be for Aiden than it had been for his mother and for me.

I relished the tradition of retelling my grandson's unique birth story because my own birth story had meant so much to me. For as long as I could remember, I'd been told about the spectacular moment in sports history on the day my mother brought me into the world: the longest ever doubleheader in baseball. Every year my aunt called or wrote to repeat the story.

"Out of all my nieces and nephews, your birth is the one that I remember the best. Grandma and I were at a Yankees game, and it turned out to be the longest doubleheader in the history of baseball. Grandma kept checking with the hospital to see how much time we had before we needed to get back. You waited to make your appearance until the game was over. As a die-hard Yankees fan, I appreciated that!"

Despite my ugly childhood, this story somehow made the day I was born seem monumental and meaningful. Little else in my life made me feel validated, so I pinned my significance on this special connection. Even as an adult, I clung to it. I wanted Aiden's story to make him feel special too.

That night, after a delicious, hurricane-free shrimp dinner, I decided to Google the date of my birth, just for fun. I wasn't expecting some flashing billboard to pop up with my birth announcement, but I did expect to find something about this astonishing sports feat.

Nothing.

I searched again. Maybe I needed to use different keywords.

Still nothing.

I frantically searched every way I knew how to look. It had to be

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on the web somewhere. I'd been told this story my entire life. But the details I did find didn't line up. The games in question had occurred the day before my birthday. And while it was a doubleheader, it wasn't the longest in history. Nothing about the games was remarkable or special.

The realization that this story wasn't true began to sink in. Each empty search brought suffocation to my lungs. The tears of despair finally made their way to my eyes as I sat battling within, trying desperately to hold them back. My world crashed over me in waves, and with it, my self-worth. I knew it was silly to feel so emotionally tied to a simple story, but it was the one consistent thing in my life, the one thing that had made me feel wanted—like my birth had meant something. The tiny shred of significance I had held had just drowned in a sea of false existence. The one story I had was a lie, and that made me feel like my entire life was a lie. The day I was born wasn't significant to anyone, not even a group of strangers watching baseball.

Worse, my aunt later denied ever having told me the story. Her rejection stung as much as anything. I pulled up her old messages, desperate to prove I hadn't made it up. The validation didn't wash away the heartbreak I still felt. Somewhere inside me, a little girl hadn't fully healed from the hurts of her childhood. Now, my birth story joined other missing memories in the void.

Memories of my childhood danced across my mind like footage from an old movie projector. Early images in black and white, scratchy, shaky, and blurred, gave way to a vivid, fast-moving film I could not slow down.

Whirr, clickety-clack . . .

I'm riding bareback as my father holds the reins of the pony's bridle. He's here. I cling to the feeling of being Daddy's little girl.

Whirr, click . . .

We're living in a tent at Lake Tawakoni. My sister protectively shields me as we walk to the shower. I am dirty.

Whirr, click . . .

I'm surrounded by drunkenness, cigarette smoke, and wild wo-

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men. Police burst in, making arrests. Darkness whispers. Fear as thick as tar holds me captive.

Whirr, click . . .

I'm alone again. When will Mom be home? Unwanted. Why am I not wanted?

Whirr, click . . .

Snippets of memories and scenes of my past flashed through my heart and mind, but massive gaps in the film, like black holes, threatened to suck me in. I'd been struggling most of my life to piece my memories together and make sense of the ugliness that crowded my mind whenever they came up. Maybe those gaps were for my own self-preservation—a defense mechanism designed to protect me from pain. But what I couldn't remember frightened me, because the cold, paralyzing blankness of those black holes still evoked all the emotions of being abandoned and unloved, even when I couldn't bring a specific experience to mind. Somehow, the absent memories said as much as the ones remembered. In most of my memories, my mother was missing.

I had no snapshots of my mother cooking me breakfast—or any meal. I couldn't picture her in the kitchen or donning an apron. I saw only my hungry five-year-old self standing on a chair to reach the stove, cooking dinner for myself.

I had no memories of my mother fixing my hair—no braids or cute bows. I saw only the horrible haircuts and choppy bangs she gave me.

I had no memories of bedtime baths or of my mother tucking me in at night. I could see my older sister, Mandy, doing these things, but not my mother.

I had no memories of sweet, proud gestures of any kind. No playing dress-up, no walks in the park, no chaperoned school parties or field trips. When I was very young, my mother was simply not there. An abusive father and absent mother had twisted my experience of love, and I'd struggled with self-esteem my whole life. Now, this hurricane of the soul sucked me in, but unlike Aiden, I didn't know how the story ended.