

Chapter 11

I sat up and turned the radio off. The music suddenly felt too loud, too intrusive. The car was warming up and I unzipped the top of my jacket. Thinking back, I guess I'd hoped we'd eventually just fit in. That given enough time we'd find our niche and snap into place – like those board puzzles Miles used to play with as a baby. The puzzle pieces always seemed oddly shaped and bulky at first, but with enough turning and pushing, they eventually found where they were supposed to go.

But instead, the feelings of alienation and apartness in our new neighborhood only seemed to grow. Outwardly it was a beautiful place – the streets were wide and well paved, there were medians with tall oaks and colorful tulips in the spring time, and the sidewalks were always clean and clear of debris. On any given Sunday morning I could look out our kitchen window while drinking coffee and see multiple well-dressed families, girls in patent leather shoes and pink skirts, fathers in crisp blue suits and swinging ties, walking down the neat sidewalks to the stone church on the corner.

When I'd first adopted Miles, religion hadn't been much on my mind. Nate and I had married in a civil ceremony and, except for the stomping of the glass at the end of our vows – a Jewish tradition Nate had always wanted to do for some reason,

even though he wasn't in the least Jewish – our wedding had been devoid of religious significance. I hadn't considered a religious upbringing for Miles much beyond the lullabies I sang to him, until he got older and we moved to our new neighborhood and it became obvious every Sunday morning that we weren't walking to the church on the corner like so many of our neighbors.

“Where are all the people going?” Miles asked one day, joining me at the window.

“To church,” I said, kissing the top of his head. “Do you want to go?”

But Miles shook his head, and I didn't really want to go myself, so I didn't push it.

We continued to watch the people outside together. I saw Jodi, the mom of a boy in Miles' third-grade class, and someone I thought I'd become friends with. We sat next to each other at PTO meetings, and once held a lemonade stand together on the corner with our two sons. We'd had a conversation about religion not that long ago, at the start of the fall season when red and orange leaves were newly littering the ground. I'd been bringing groceries in from my parked car when Jodi approached, her two-pound shih tzu leading the way.

“Rachel!” she called, waving with the hand that wasn't holding the leash.

I shifted a bag of groceries onto my hip and waved back.

We chatted for a few minutes about the weather, our leftover Halloween candy, and the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. She told me how her son Hunter had already made up his Christmas wish list. I laughed, mentioning that Hanukkah was around the corner and that I needed to prepare for that holiday too.

“You're raising Miles Jewish?” Jodi asked, horror flitting briefly across her features. I felt the inner ramparts of my defenses rise; since Miles was born they'd become well-greased and smooth.

“Well, no,” I replied, “I'm not really raising him anything, I'm just doing what we did when I was a kid. My mom was Jewish, actually, though my dad was Catholic, so we never did much of anything, or, sometimes, a bit of everything I guess.” I

laughed as if the grocery bag in my arms wasn't gaining in weight.

Jodi frowned and I felt some inexplicable need to make it go away.

"We did tend to celebrate more of the holidays with my dad's side of the family, Christmas and stuff, but Hanukkah was the one Jewish holiday we did because, well, come on, there are *eight* nights. *Eight* nights of presents." I laughed again, but Jodi still wasn't laughing with me.

"Was Miles' mother Jewish?"

"Miles' mother? I—"

"You know what I mean," Jodi interrupted. "It's just that, if she wasn't Jewish, if she was a Christian, then you have to raise Miles as a Christian too."

I nearly lost the grip on my groceries. I stood for a minute readjusting while the shih tzu pulled on his leash. Jodi and I stood there in silence until the only thing I could think to do was pick up another bag, turn, and head into the apartment building.

Later, I tried to wrap my head around what Jodi had said, but it was so illogical, in so many ways, I didn't know where to start. Religion wasn't genetic, like heart disease. Besides, *I* was Miles's mother. Did Jodi not understand that? Did Jodi think *I* didn't understand that? Was I really supposed to raise my son Christian while I was nothing of the sort? How was that supposed to work?

But what really bothered me, at heart, was that her question was proof she didn't see Miles and I in a traditional mother-son relationship at all. I had always seen adoption as something that happened, kind of like birth, that once it was done, there was no going back. You moved forward as a united family, like any other natural-born family, into the future together. I knew with certainty that I was Miles's mother, that he was my son, and that I would raise him and love him and teach him and reprimand him as if he were my very own flesh and blood. If it seemed inconceivable that I would raise a child of my womb in a religion I myself did not follow, then it should seem inconceivable

that I would raise Miles that way. But it was becoming apparent to me more and more every day, that other people did not see us that way. Other people, even apparent friends, seemed unable to leap the barrier that was forever forefront in their minds, that I was not, and would never be, Miles's *actual* mother. The realization made me angry, but it also hurt my heart.

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The following Sunday after breakfast I sat with Miles on the couch and handed him a small book with gilt lettering on the cover.

"What's this?" he asked, turning the book over curiously in his hands.

"A bible. Sharelle left it with you in the hospital."

Miles' eyes opened wide and he leafed through the thin pages. "Is this her handwriting?" he asked.

I looked over his shoulder at the inside back cover where the date of Miles' birth was written in a shaky black ink. "I imagine so."

There was silence for a long moment and then Miles asked, "Do you think I was meant to be your son?"

I shook my head, as if I didn't understand.

"I mean, do you think God meant for us to be together? Do you think I was destined to be your son?"

I knew the answer my son wanted to hear. He wanted to hear that God had chosen for us to be together as a family, that it was inevitable, that it was ordained by a higher power and irrefutably meant to be. He wanted there to be a reason that the woman who'd written his birth date in a thin black scrawl on the inside cover of a small blue book hadn't had to give him up for no good reason. Miles definitely didn't want to hear that we'd waited for years to have a baby, any baby, that by the end Nate and I would have taken anything that was breathing.

"Of course," I said. "It couldn't have been any other way."

Miles nodded and closed the bible and handed it back to me.

“You don’t want to look through it some more?”

“No. Just keep it for me, ok?”

“Of course,” I said, promising to keep it safe. “Do you want to go to church sometime?” I asked. “The one on the corner, where Hunter and Josh and everyone else goes?”

Miles paused, and then asked, “Is that where my birth mom went?”

“Well, no, I don’t know where she went. If she went.”

“No,” Miles said with certainty. “We wouldn’t fit in there.”

“No,” I agreed, “we probably wouldn’t.”