

## Prologue

She couldn't breathe.

Ringing filled her ears.

Michelle Wilson forced her eyelids open, one at a time. Dust floated in the air, leftover from the airbag deploying only moments earlier. Her car no longer moved, but somewhere a horn blared on and on.

Drawing a tentative breath, she squinted at her surroundings. Her head spun even though the vehicle was still. She fumbled for her purse. Where had it landed? She undid her seatbelt and pushed the deflated airbag out of the way. With fumbling fingers, she grabbed the bag from the floorboard and pulled her cellphone out.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"I've been in a wreck."

"Okay, ma'am. Are you injured? Can you tell me your location?"

Michelle looked around until she spotted the street sign. Her car must have spun around during the wreck. "Windom and Lancaster, Little Rock."

"Was anyone else hurt?"

"There was another car. I'm not really sure what happened."

"Can you see the other car?"

"Umm ..." Michelle glanced around but didn't see it. As she pulled on the door handle, a sharp pain shot up her arm. Blood pounded in her ears. She slowly released a breath through clenched teeth, eased the door open, then stood on shaky legs.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" The 911 operator's voice sounded in her ear, bringing her focus back to the task at hand.

“I’m hurt, but I need to find the other vehicle.” There it was. A pickup truck lay on its side about twenty feet away, one of the rear wheels still spinning. “It looks like it’s flipped over a couple of times. I can’t see any movement from inside.”

“The police are just a few blocks away. Stay still, and they’ll be there in just a couple of minutes, okay?”

Michelle nodded, then realized the girl couldn’t see her. “Okay.”

Lowering herself slowly to the ground, she put her head on her knees to stop the dizziness. Even with her eyes closed, the world spun out of control. The warm April evening had started so well, but now seemed as cold as the late-season snow they’d had back in March.

Flashing lights and a siren blast soon filled the area.

Before she could protest, someone lifted her from where she’d slumped against the side of her car and placed her on a stretcher.

“The other car—”

“We’re helping them, too, miss. Please be still so we can make sure you’re okay.”

Michelle turned her head to see the other vehicle. Were they all right? Across the intersection, emergency workers pulled a male driver from the pickup truck. His features were hard to make out through all the blood. Several other EMS workers rushed over to a woman lying in the street in front of the vehicle. Michelle frowned. How did the woman get there?

A commotion drew her attention back to the man. He’d regained consciousness and thrashed against the restraints of his stretcher.

“My wife. Leah!” He screamed as they pushed him toward the other ambulance. “You’ve got to help my wife. Our baby!”

“Sir, are you saying there’s a baby still in the truck?”

“No.” The man shook his head. “She’s pregnant. In labor. We were about to have a baby!”

An icy wave rolled down Michelle’s spine. The woman still hadn’t moved. *Please, God, no.* If the woman was dead, the baby might also be dead. Could this previously perfect night possibly get worse?

They faced each other as EMS loaded them into the ambulances. The man’s eyes locked with Michelle’s, and it was as if a force connected them despite the distance.

“Please, save my baby.” Still pleading with the ambulance driver, his gaze held hers.

Had his plea been meant for Michelle? Could he see her through all the blood dripping from his forehead? Surely not. He didn’t even know Michelle. And yet—it was like a command had been given to her. She wouldn’t rest until she knew that baby was safe.

The ambulance doors closed, and they moved her left wrist. Pain cut through her like a knife, straight to her head. Everything went dark.

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The next day, Michelle stood at the window of the hospital’s nursery. She looked through the glass at the little girl wrapped in a pink blanket. The name on the placard said *Grace*. The nurses told her it was the last word the baby’s father said after they told him he had a little girl. Before he died. Michelle pressed her hand against the pane and leaned her head against its coolness.

Grace’s eyes fluttered open and looked directly at Michelle. Michelle straightened, her breath caught somewhere deep in her lungs. The gaze was almost an exact replica of the child’s father when he’d pleaded for someone to save his baby.

Well, here they were now, the only two survivors of the disastrous wreck that had stolen the lives of both Grace's parents. Even though newborns supposedly couldn't see far away, Grace's gaze never wavered for a full five minutes. It was as if God were sending Michelle a sign. A reinforcement of the message she'd received the night before.

She and that child were now bonded for life. Soul sisters, forged through the pain of loss with matching battle scars across their hearts. A plan formed in her mind that would maintain that link for a long time to come. Michelle had only slept a few hours, but she was energized enough to know the right thing to do. This little girl needed her. It wasn't fair to the baby to have to start her life with no one to love her.

"Which one is yours?" a man interrupted.

"That one." Michelle didn't hesitate.

He nodded. "That one's mine." He pointed to a little bundle in blue with a full head of dark hair.

"He's beautiful." Michelle glanced over at his child for a second before turning back to Grace.

"Do you get to take her home today?" He tipped up on his toes as if to get a better angle.

"I hope so." Michelle swallowed her worry. "I hope so."

## Chapter One

“I can do this.” Michelle released a tension-filled breath. “It’s just a car.”

A glance down at the baby sleeping peacefully in the carrier looped over her arm alleviated some of the nervousness. She’d been driving for over ten years now. Michelle refused to let one little wreck—okay, big wreck—the week before keep her from driving again. Nor would this stupid cast covering her left wrist and part of her forearm. She could still wiggle her fingers.

After several deep lungfuls to steady her nerves, she loaded Grace into the back seat. She ran a hand over the straps to make sure they were secure. If for no other reason than this child, she’d be the most careful driver in the world.

“Can’t have you losing me too.”

Michelle shook her head to clear it of the darkness threatening her vision. She could do this, despite what happened the last time she drove. This would be a happy day. She was headed to see her best friend again for the first time since Christmas. And he didn’t even expect her to be anywhere near Cedar Springs, Arkansas. She grinned at the baby.

“Let’s go introduce you to one of my favorite people in the world.”

Hands on the steering wheel, she squeezed her eyes closed against the panic trying to edge into her joy and close up her throat. Driving was like riding a bicycle, right? It wasn’t like maniac motorcyclists ran red lights at every intersection. She forced her eyelids open and started the ignition. Only a few blocks. Straightening her shoulders, she inched out of the driveway.

Ten uneventful minutes later, she pulled into the familiar parking lot and wrangled Grace’s car seat out. The church building hadn’t changed at all. It even smelled the same as when Michelle attended services here as a child—of books and lemon-scented cleaner.

She walked down the linoleum-floored hallway toward the kitchen. The secretary said he was back here getting things ready for a lock-in this weekend. His singing carried through the air as she neared the doorway. She tiptoed to the corner and peeked around.

Gregory Marshall pulled several folding chairs off the rack and placed them in neat rows facing one another. Probably to play fun games or for the devotional parts of Friday night. He'd always been so organized, unlike Michelle. As he lifted another stack of seats down, his muscles bulged more than she remembered in high school, though otherwise, he was much the same. And his chestnut curls were cut shorter than the mop he'd worn as a teen.

A smile stretched across her face as he continued belting out the song.

"I'll fly away, O glory. I'll fly away."

"When I die, hallelujah, by and by." She joined him at the last of the verse. "I'll fly away."

He turned, a huge grin on his face, his blue eyes twinkling. "Mickey?"

Other than her daddy, he was the only person in the world she let use her childhood nickname.

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Greg's heart tripped over itself when his favorite person stepped around the corner. Michelle's brown hair hung just past her shoulders, like it had since she grew out what she always referred to as 'the bowl cut' her mom got her in second grade. Her glasses didn't hide the bruising around her blue eyes, and his heart squeezed at how much it must have hurt.

Two giant steps toward a long overdue hug, he froze. A cast covered one of her arms, and a baby carrier swung from the other. His head cocked to the side as he studied the contraption and the child in it.

“Your parents get a new foster?”

“Sort of.” Michelle cast a glance at the sleeping infant. “Officially, yes. But unofficially, no.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She’s ... well, hopefully, mine.”

“Yours?” All sorts of scenarios ran through his mind, most of them breaking his heart. How long had it been since he’d seen her last?

“For now.” Michelle set Grace down and opened her arms for the hug he’d started a moment before.

After a short pause, he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. She leaned into him, her head nestling perfectly under his chin. As many times as he’d dreamed of this reunion, it was even better in reality.

“You’re here.” Greg let her go and headed back to get more chairs. “How long?”

“Always.”

Michelle bumped into his back when he stopped right in front of her.

Greg turned and cocked an eyebrow at her.

“I’ve been offered my dream job. I start at the *Sun* on Monday.” While some people wanted to work at nationally recognized papers, have their names in bylines all over the country and world, Michelle had always dreamed of being a photojournalist for the local paper. For years she’d talked about how she’d rather be recognized among those who loved her.

“You’re back for good?”

“For good.”

They sat in folding chairs and just grinned at each other for a moment.

“Your mom told me you were in a wreck, and they were headed your way. I need details.” Greg leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. He’d been praying and fretting for days, wondering how she was.

She breathed in and out a couple of times, obviously working up the nerve to relive her memories. “Several of my friends threw me a party the night before I was supposed to move back.” She picked at a loose piece of cotton sticking out from her cast. “We stayed up late, giggling and not wanting the night to end because it was the last time we’d probably be together.

“I was tired, but I didn’t live far from there, so I didn’t think anything of it. Unfortunately, a few blocks from my apartment, a motorcycle blew through the intersection’s red light in front of me.”

He hunched forward, his elbows on his knees, soaking in every word. The urge to go hunt down the idiot who’d caused so much stress in her life had him forcing his hands not to fist. No need to upset her more.

“I swerved to make sure I didn’t clip the back of his bike, but I didn’t see the pickup truck headed my way. I guess they did the same thing because they swerved toward me. The truck ended up spinning and flipping. I did a one-eighty before I finally stopped. I think I may have passed out after I called 911. When they got there, I was slumped next to my car door. And I fainted again when they touched my wrist.”

He leaned forward and touched her knee. “And the people in the truck?”

“Grace’s parents.” She glanced down at the still-sleeping infant, a tear winding its way down her cheek. “They were actually on their way to the hospital to have her.”

“Mickey.” Her name came out as almost a sigh.



“Leah, Grace’s mom, was unbuckled for some reason. When the truck flipped ... she flew through the window.” Michelle swiped at the moisture on her face. “John, her husband—he wouldn’t let the EMTs do anything to him until they’d done all they could for Leah. And because he refused treatment for so long, the internal bleeding—”

Greg wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. How many times had he dreamed of holding Michelle like this? But not with the reason behind it. He wouldn’t wish that on anyone, especially not his best friend, who tended to be empathetic almost to a fault.

Finally, she leaned away and grabbed an old napkin from a nearby table to dab her cheeks. “It was definitely the scariest thing I’ve ever been through.” She sniffled. “And the saddest. I mean, they were alive when we got in the ambulances but gone the next morning.”

He gave her fingers a squeeze. It wasn’t enough, but what else could he do?

“So much changed in such a short time.” She lifted her broken arm as she spoke, never able to talk without moving her hands.

“Does your wrist hurt?” He gently touched her cast.

“Not really. It’s more of a nuisance than anything. Although it may have me typing ‘hunt and peck’ for a while. And I haven’t figured out how I’m going to use my camera yet.” She drew in a deep breath.

“But nothing hurts as much as the thought that Grace will never really know her parents. I mean, I know the state is sorting things out and figuring out what all needs to stay tucked away so she can know a bit about her family in the future. But she’ll never know everything about them. It’s so unfair.”

“And who told you life is fair?” Greg quoted the saying her dad had always teased them with when they were growing up.

“Thanks, Dad.” Michelle rolled her eyes.

“So, how did you end up in charge of Grace? I mean, doesn’t she have grandparents or someone who can take her?”

“No known close relatives. This poor kid was about to end up in the system. The caseworker actually said she’d have to call around to try and find a foster home on such short notice. We couldn’t let that happen. Not with Mom and Dad still active through the children’s home in Paragould. My parents are officially fostering her right now while the state works things out. But, I’m hoping I can adopt her.”

Greg leaned back, stunned into partial breathlessness. In all the years of wishing and hoping for a reunion with Michelle, and even a closer relationship than what they’d enjoyed in the past, he’d never considered this. If she adopted the baby, would that change everything? She’d always been a go-getter, one to conquer goals and reach for dreams, no matter how far away. But if she could make this happen, would she even want a man in her life?

Grace stirred a moment in her sleep and stilled again. Michelle leaned down and brushed the side of her finger against the baby’s soft skin, causing his heart to skip. Would a baby born to the two of them look like Grace?

He waged war with himself, not wanting to crush this plan, but also wary. After all, Michelle hadn’t always been the responsible one of the two of them. Could she take care of a child by herself? How did he offer counsel without giving the support she expected?

“You don’t think it’s a good idea.” She sat back up.

“I don’t know. I mean, you’re temporarily living with your parents. You’re not sure how to work your camera with your hand in a cast. You don’t even know if Grace will be available

for adoption. Mickey, there's a lot to consider. You can't just make a snap decision about this like you did with so many things in high school."

"I know that. This isn't whether or not to run for class president or who I'm going to prom with. This is serious." Michelle fisted her hands in her lap. "I know we haven't talked as much as we wanted the last few years, but I have grown up some, Greg. I can make hard decisions now."

"Have you prayed about it?"

"I'm not part of your youth group. Don't beat me over the head with how to talk to God, okay? That's not why I came here today. I thought my move back would be a good surprise for you, that you'd be happy to see me again."

"I am happy you moved back. You know that." He dashed his hands through his hair.

"But?"

"But I'm worried about you. It's like you're trying to make your life harder than it has to be."

"You don't understand. I have to adopt Grace."

"Why? Make me understand." He stood and paced in front of her.

"I just have to."

A myriad of expressions floated across her face, but none stayed long enough for him to interpret. What was going on in that mind of hers?

"It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do?"

"I just ..." Michelle flopped her hands in her lap. "I want to make it up to her."

"Mick." He knelt in front of her. "You know it's not your fault her parents died, right?"

Michelle looked across the room, blinking back a tear. “But it’s at least partly my fault.”

“No.” He tugged at her fingers to get her attention. “No. You didn’t make Leah unbuckle her seatbelt. You didn’t even know they’d be on the road. As far as I know, you didn’t even know them. And I’m sure you didn’t make that motorcycle fly through that red light. You only had control over you. And you did what you could to save them all. You don’t have to make it up to her.”

She pulled her quivering bottom lip between her teeth. “But I want to. And it just feels like this is the direction God wants me to go.”

“You know I’m always here for you.” He shook his head and let out a breath. “I’ll never understand you, but I’m always here.”

“I know.” She grinned at him.

“I’ll do anything I can to help.” He wanted to say more, but Grace started fussing.

Her cries echoed off the empty walls of the fellowship room. Michelle quickly unbuckled the baby and lifted her carefully from the car seat. Greg had to admit he was impressed with how well she maneuvered despite the cast. She leaned down and looked through the side pocket of the diaper bag, pulling out a bottle.

“Hang on, sweetie.” She crooned to Grace.

“How can I help?”

She looked up as he hovered nearby and raised an eyebrow. “Want to hold her while I fix her bottle?”

Teenagers he could handle, but a newborn? He swallowed, then nodded. How hard could it be? She gently transferred Grace into his arms and positioned his hands under the baby’s head

and back. Before he felt comfortable, she headed toward the kitchen with the sustenance the child obviously wanted.

“What do I do now?” Greg asked, hoping the panic trying to escape didn’t show in his voice.

“Rock her a bit. I’ll have this fixed in a minute.”

She made it sound so simple. He cast back through memories, searching for what he’d seen others do with a crying child. Sing. He could do that—anything to get this pitiful wailing to stop.

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When Michelle returned from the kitchen, Greg cradled Grace in the crook of his arm and swayed in rhythm to the tune of the hymn he softly sang. The little girl looked up at him with her big eyes, her face splotchy from crying, still whimpering, but not all-out fussing anymore.

Michelle’s heart skipped a beat, and she stared for a moment at the picture they made together. He was a natural. She shook her head, not sure why it affected her so much to see him holding the baby she already considered hers.

“Looks like you have it under control.” Michelle somehow got the words out around the lump in her throat.

He looked up and shrugged a bit.

She handed him the bottle. He fumbled at first as he situated it and the baby at the same time. Michelle reached over and positioned his hand at a better angle for fewer bubbles.

“Thanks.” His breath whispered across her cheek.

Only inches separated their faces. Her heart skipped another beat, and she stepped back, pulling her fingers away from where they'd lingered on his. What was wrong with her today?

This was *Greg*.

Grace sucked noisily, and both adults smiled down at her.

"Do women just automatically know what to do when a baby cries?"

"It's fairly easy to figure out when they're this age." Michelle took a step back. "They're either tired, gassy, hungry, or have a dirty diaper."

"I'm glad it wasn't the last one." Greg wrinkled his nose.

"She's not finished with the bottle yet."

His head jerked up, and she laughed. They sat side-by-side in the chairs again, each lost in their own thoughts, wrapped in comfortable silence.

"The memorial service for her parents is in Little Rock on Saturday. I think I should take her." Michelle picked at another spot on her cast that hadn't glued down smoothly.

"By yourself?" Greg shot her a sideways glance.

"Know of a better way?"

"I'll go with you."

"It's not like I haven't driven back and forth to Little Rock a hundred times over the last few years. I think I can handle it. Cedar Springs is less than two hours from there."

"But you weren't all bruised up and wearing a cast, not to mention having a baby to worry about. What if she starts crying while you're on the highway?"

"Then, I'll find a place to pull over so I can fix whatever's wrong." Michelle shrugged.

"And the bruises and cast won't slow me down that much."

He studied her face.

“How bad does it really look? I’ve been avoiding looking at myself in detail in the mirror. Just enough of a glance to do a ponytail and make sure my teeth are brushed.”

“It’s pretty gruesome.” He tenderly reached over and traced her right eye. “It’s a shame it’s not Halloween. A lot of the kids would love to have that kind of face for their costume.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Bet they wouldn’t want the achiness that came with it. Who knew a seatbelt and airbag could hurt so much?”

“Better to have bruises and aches than not to have worn the seatbelt.”

She sighed. “Like Leah.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t even thinking about that.”

“No.” Michelle shook her head. “I just can’t get it off my mind. It’s definitely made me more careful about everyone buckling up.”

Grace finished her bottle. Michelle showed Greg how to prop her up and pat her back until the burp came—just like her mother had shown her only days before. They loaded Grace back into the carrier and stood.

“So, what time do I need to pick you up on Saturday?”

“Seriously, you don’t have to do this. You’ll be dead on your feet after being at the lock-in all night.”

“Then, I’ll let you drive if I get sleepy. I really don’t want you to go alone, Mickey. Please.”

Michelle huffed. “Fine.”

“You’re just afraid of how much I’ll find out since we’ll have all that time in the car to catch up.”

“Ha.” Michelle laughed. “Or not. Probably you have more to tell than I do.”

“You know things here don’t ever change.”

“I’ve missed small-town life.”

“It’s good to have you back.” He pulled her into another hug.

“It’s good to be back.” She leaned into his solid frame for an extra moment. Even though she’d been back in Cedar Springs for a couple of days, this was the first time she really felt like she was home.

“I’m preaching Sunday.” Greg helped her loop the diaper bag over her shoulder. “Les and Patty are headed to Oklahoma to see their granddaughter perform in a play at her college.”

“Wow. Was that a warning?” Michelle poked him in the arm.

“Ouch. You used to think it was cool when I preached.”

“I still do. You’re a good speaker. Even if you do sermonize a bit too much out of the pulpit sometimes.”

“Got to practice, ya know?”

“You’ll have a full weekend.” She shook her head.

“I’ll just sleep all day Monday. It’ll be fine.” He took the carrier from her. “I’ve got this.”

She followed him down the hallway, not quite sure what to make of the visit. Greg was still the same, but things hadn’t seemed the same between them. Maybe she was imagining things. Probably, it was just lack of sleep.

“I’ll see you Saturday.” Greg pulled her into one more hug after she situated everything in the back of the car.

“See you then.” As much as she’d been looking forward to having him back in her life, she was almost nervous about him joining her.



## Chapter Two

Friday morning, Michelle opened the front door to a woman in a neat pantsuit.

“Michelle?” The woman thrust her hand out in a brisk, business-like manner. “I’m Diane, Grace’s caseworker.”

“Yes. We’re expecting you.” Michelle squeezed Diane’s fingers. This was the woman who could make or break Michelle’s plans. “Come on in.”

Hopefully, the classic style of the living room would meet with approval. The furniture hadn’t been updated in a while, but it was clean and comfortable. Besides, if Michelle had her way, she and Grace wouldn’t be living here too long before they could get settled in their own place.

Mom and Dad sat on the couch in the living room, Grace between them. Dad had taken off the rest of the week to help get everything worked out. Good thing, too. When she’d decided to move back a week before her new job started at the newspaper office, she hadn’t counted on the days flying by in the madness that ensued after her wreck. Michelle perched on the edge of a rocking chair across from Diane, who’d chosen the loveseat.

“First and foremost, let me just say that it’s very honorable, what you are proposing to do.” Diane smiled at everyone in turn.

Michelle released a breath she hadn’t even realized she was holding. That had to be a good start, right?

“We’ve been madly scrambling the last few days to learn more about this situation. As far as we can tell, John and Leah didn’t have any other living family. We’re still looking into it to make sure, but their parents had all passed on, and they were only children themselves.” She flipped through a manilla file in her lap.

“We’ve been able to find their wills, and discovered they hadn’t set up specific guardians. They did leave guidelines they want the trustee of their wills to uphold. Right now, we’re still trying to track this guy down. From what we can tell, they had moved to Little Rock within the last month, and this man lives in their old hometown. Until we can locate him and work out the details of their estate plan, Grace will have to remain under the care of the state.”

Michelle grimaced. She hated the thought of the baby being passed around until the legal system could get their act together. Evidently, her father did too.

“She’s okay to remain with us as a foster, right?”

Diane nodded. “Yes. You have no idea what a relief it was to have you already in the system and able to take her in so quickly this week. Normally, when we get a baby like this, we have to hustle to find a family with room.”

“God obviously put us where we were needed the other night.” Mom smiled. “It’s been a while since we fostered, but we always keep everything up-to-date just in case.”

Diane gave a short nod. “Once we find the trustee of John’s and Leah’s wills, we’ll know more about where we’ll go from there. We’ll still be researching, trying to find out if there are any other living family members or close friends who’d want to take the child in. We try to stick as closely as we can to what the parents would have wanted.”

Dad placed a hand on the baby’s foot. “We’re more than happy to keep her until something else can be arranged.”

“Perfect.” Diane handed him a tablet. “If you could fill out this form, I think that’s all we need today. It’s just a few things we didn’t get to in the whirlwind of the hospital the other day.”

“No problem.” Mom stood.

“And I’ll keep you updated as we find things out.” Diane stuck a few papers back in her bag. “She looks like she’s in great hands, though.”

Grace fussed, and Michelle quickly scooped her up to change her diaper. “Can you mention my thoughts while I do this?” She sent her mom a pointed look.

Mom pursed her lips but then nodded.

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That afternoon, Mom sat at the kitchen counter across from her, lemonades condensating in front of them. The side of the island still bore a mark from where Michelle and her brother had each lost scooter races—as well as a tooth or two—as kids. Michelle ran her tongue over the space now grown in slightly crooked.

Mom exchanged a glance with Dad. “So, they can’t let you officially be the foster parent.”

“What?” Michelle jerked her hand through the air. “Why not?”

“Because you’ve never been one.” Dad leaned forward from his stance near the stove. “You have to pass the background checks, the home studies, et cetera. They can’t just let anyone foster who wants to.”

“But I would pass all those checks. You’ve been foster parents since I was four. I probably know as much about it as you do.”

“Michelle, there are other things that stand in your way if you really want to pursue this.” Mom’s fingers drummed a rhythm on the marble.

Michelle waited for the bomb to drop.

“You’re not in a stable situation, yet.”

“I’m not unstable.” Michelle frowned.

“They want children in the foster system to be in a steady environment, usually preferring the foster parent, well, to be married. To have their own residence. One person working full-time, and both having enough time to do home visits or whatever else needs to happen.”

“I’ll get married eventually. I just haven’t found the right guy yet.”

“Yes, honey. We’re not saying we want you to rush and get married. We just want you aware. It’s one of the normal requirements of fostering.” Her mom scooted a package of cookies nearer the center of the bar.

“What if I decided never to get married, but that I do want kids? Would I not be able to adopt, either, just because I decided I don’t need a husband?”

“Not through some agencies.” Dad patted her shoulder. “And you know I never wanted you to grow up and get married, Mickey. But I agree you should be married before you have kids. Children function better in a home with a mom and a dad, not just one or the other.”

Michelle spun her stool around. One step forward and two steps back. How could she convince these people she wasn’t just saying she wanted this—that she really did?

“The state has agreed to let your father and me be the legal foster parents while everything gets worked out. It’s easier on the children’s home if they don’t have to deal with infants, so they pulled some strings to let us pick up where we left off several years ago with fostering for them. We’ll keep Grace with us for now, and we’ll figure it out as we go.” Mom squeezed her shoulder as Michelle walked by to put her glass in the sink.

“Want to start looking at cars this evening?”

Dad had somehow found time to talk to the insurance company about Michelle’s vehicle. She’d hear from them in the next few days, but he was pretty sure they’d total it.

“Not really.” Michelle scuffed her toe against the corner of the rug that always curled up. “Thanks for all your help with it and the loan of your cars in the meantime. I know this isn’t an ideal situation, but I can’t handle the thought of dealing with salesmen right now.”

“I understand.” He chuckled her under the chin. “Maybe next week.”

She nodded. “It’s not a bad thing to want to do this, right? To want to take care of a baby who doesn’t have anyone else in the world?”

“Of course, it’s not a bad thing.” Mom stopped flipping through the mail. “But that doesn’t make it an easy thing either.”

“I know it won’t be easy.” Michelle flattened her good hand against the countertop. “But I am serious about it. I really feel like God is leading me to do this. That He put me here to take care of Grace.”

Her parents exchanged a look.

“Okay. Maybe start by showing us how it’ll work. We know you’ve said it several times now. But let’s see how it works as we go through all of this, assuming it’s even an option when the state finally finds out everything they can about Leah and John and their executor.”

“What do you mean, ‘show you’?” Michelle frowned.

“We’re officially the foster parents.” Mom pointed between herself and Dad. “But we’re expecting you to step up and act like the parent. You say you want to do this, so we’ll let you. We’ll work our hardest to try and help you through all the legal stuff, but since this is your idea, it’s your responsibility.”

Michelle looked down at the sleeping infant in the bassinet next to her. “How hard could it be?”

### Chapter Three

It took Greg and Michelle almost half an hour to get the base of Grace's car seat moved from Michelle's parents' vehicle to his SUV. Somehow, he had a feeling they were over-complicating it. Once they were all strapped in, Greg aimed the Jeep toward Little Rock. Michelle leaned her head back against the leather headrest. Greg had driven a Jeep since he got his license, but this one didn't rattle and shake like the one he'd driven in high school.

"Tired?" He gave her knee a squeeze, a jolt of awareness traveling through his fingers.

She blinked at him a moment before answering. Had she felt something, too?

"We got four hours of sleep last night." Michelle glanced in the back seat where Grace, at least, was getting more rest.

"That's more than I got. I snuck in a two-hour nap before showering and coming to get you."

"How do you look so alert after only two hours of sleep?"

Greg held up a travel mug and took a sip. The aroma of very strong coffee wafted through the car.

"That smells so good."

He grinned and pointed at the second cup-holder. It held a similar mug. She quickly snatched it up and took a long drink of the bitter but caffeinated beverage. He chuckled.

"After all these years, I still know exactly what you want first thing in the morning."

"Can I help it my parents started me out early on coffee? It's just like mother's milk to me now." She took another swallow. "Besides, Mom's coffee maker hadn't finished before I had to meet you."

“I remember the first time I saw you drinking it in high school. I thought you’d lost your mind.”

“I had to have something to keep me awake through first-period chemistry.” She wrinkled her nose. “That subject was seriously boring.”

“And you pulled an A anyway.”

“Of course.”

She reached for the cup again with her left hand and cringed as her cast bumped into the metal. With a huff, she blew her brown bangs up off her forehead, a motion he’d seen her do hundreds of times over the years when frustrated with her own forgetfulness. Switching to her right hand, she took another long swallow.

“How long do you have to wear a cast this time?”

“Maybe six weeks. Five, if it heals faster.” She wiggled her finger at him. “And just for the record, this time wasn’t because of something stupid I was doing. This was due to the airbag shoving my hand back at an unnatural angle.”

He nodded. “Because you were probably holding the steering wheel wrong.”

“Just because I hold a steering wheel differently than you do doesn’t mean I hold it wrong. Just like holding a pencil. There’s more than one right way to do it.”

“Remember that time you jumped out of the swing at its highest point?”

“You thought I was dead.” Michelle smiled.

“You were just lying there, and your face was white. I thought I’d have to break your Mama’s heart.”

“You almost did, anyway. You burst into the house, screaming that I wasn’t moving. She rushed out of there with soap still on her hands from washing the dishes.”

“She almost ran me over on her way to you.” He laughed.

“That cast was yellow.” She traced the edge of the pink one now on her arm.

“Everyone in class got to sign it, but you saved me the biggest spot.”

She nodded. “It made everyone think you were my boyfriend.”

Would he get to sign this one? She probably wouldn’t want signatures all over her arm now—too unprofessional. Too bad. He rather liked the idea of having his name on her arm for all to see. Like staking a claim. What would she think about that?

“How old were we? Seven?”

Her question pulled him back from those dangerous thoughts.

“Beginning of second grade.”

Michelle glanced toward the back seat again. Her parents had found a mirror to hang back there so they could see Grace’s face.

After a quick scan of his rearview, he motioned toward the dozing child. “Maybe you should join her.”

“Nah. I’m good for now.”

They were quiet for several miles. It wasn’t that far to the city from Cedar Springs. The service was at one that afternoon, but the caseworker wanted to meet with Michelle while she was in the area, so they headed down early.

“Have you talked to Mrs. Winters yet?” Greg asked.

“I’m supposed to meet with her first thing Monday morning.” Michelle picked at a spot on her black skirt. Emma Winters was the editor-in-chief of the *Cedar Springs Sun*, where Michelle would soon work. “I touched base with her when I got back to town, to let her know about the wreck and my wrist. She agreed to meet with me at the originally planned time.”



“How on earth did you even hear about the job opening up?” Not that he was complaining about her being back. Just curious.

“You know, I interviewed there several years ago, right out of college. It was between me and Hugh Winters, Emma’s nephew. She hired him but wanted to hire me as well. She’d been waiting for Richard to retire so she could offer me the position. She got my information from my parents and called me. I accepted immediately.”

“Will you make the same as you did? I thought you were pretty settled in Little Rock.”

She shook her head. “I’ve always wanted to move back. I think it’s more fun to write when the people reading your column know you. It’s more personal.”

“You’ll be a huge asset to that paper. They definitely need some new blood in there.”

“Let’s not shed too much of my blood just yet.” Michelle nudged him with her elbow. “Hey, how’s your sister?”

“Darcy’s good. Phillip, too. Can you believe they’ve been married for six years now?”

“Really? Is she that much older than we are?”

“About four years.” Greg frowned at her. Their families practically raised them all together.

“That’s right. She graduated the year before we started high school.”

“Yep.”

“No kids yet?”

Greg let out a breath. “They want kids, but it’s not working. They’ve gone through some treatments, but no luck yet.”

“I’m sorry.” Michelle tucked her feet under her. “I can’t even imagine how hard that would be.”

“It’s rough on the whole family.”

Grace fussed in the back seat, and Michelle reached around to tuck the pacifier back where it belonged, contorting her body, considering the more convenient hand was in a cast. The seatbelt had to be cutting into her neck. Greg glanced at the rearview.

The baby didn’t want to take it at first but seemed to decide it was better than nothing. Grace’s eyelids drooped again as she worked the pacifier in her little bow-shaped mouth. Michelle ran a hand over the soft hair on top of Grace’s head before turning back to the front.

She met Greg’s eyes then looked away. Was she feeling guilty at all about what he’d just told her versus the situation she was in? Why should she be blessed with a sweet little girl like Grace when Darcy and Phillip wanted kids so desperately and couldn’t have them? But for some reason, she was convinced God had something in mind when he brought Grace into her life.

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Diane met them at a small café not far from where the service for Leah and John would take place. Michelle quickly introduced her to Greg and then let her hold Grace for a bit. She was rather proud that the little girl was so healthy and perfect-looking. It was almost like saying to the caseworker, *See? I can do this!*

The woman spread out several papers. “Let me give you a quick update, and I won’t take up any more of your time. We’ve located the friend who Leah and John named as the executor of their wills. His name is Kevin Long. He’s unmarried and quite happy staying that way, and he has no interest in taking in Grace. He says a bachelor pad is no place to raise a baby.”

Michelle let out a small breath she’d been holding. One step in the right direction.

“Kevin grew up with John. You’ll probably see him here today. I think several people are coming from their hometown, Greenbrier. They went to church up there for several years, but it

was an older congregation, mostly people who would be grandparent figures and not ready to start over with a new child. He said they hadn't made many new friends here in the last few weeks. And he doesn't know of any living family for either of them."

Michelle nodded. This all sounded more than promising.

"However, we were able to look at the wills more closely." Diane ran her hand over one of the sheets of paper.

Had they just changed direction? Michelle's heart skipped a beat, and she gripped the edge of her seat under the table.

"They have several stipulations in here as to what they want in the people who adopt their child. First and foremost, their friend Kevin has to approve. Evidently, he was like a brother to John, and John trusted him to make a good decision for their daughter should this situation ever occur."

Michelle made a mental note to be friendly to Kevin.

"Secondly, they want a married couple to adopt Grace. They want her to have both a mom and a dad and the kind of stability that comes from having married parents."

Was that the sound of her world crashing down around her ears? Michelle's heart might as well have stopped altogether.

"Thirdly, but most importantly, they want the adoptive parents to be Christians."

Michelle's heart was definitely still beating, but she was numb all over. She could meet two of the requirements. Could there be any way to get around the third? Surely, something like that wouldn't stand up in a court of law. There had to be a way to keep Grace with her.

"Until Kevin can approve of anyone, he is very happy with the situation we found for Grace. Your family is more than welcome to continue fostering her until something permanent

can be arranged.” Diane gathered her papers. “I just wanted to fill you in on what we found out, so you can make plans for the future. I know you’ll be happy to see Grace placed in a loving family like Leah and John wanted for her.”

Greg nudged Michelle. Diane stood, waiting for an acknowledgment. Michelle slowly rose to her feet and clasped Diane’s hand. Then, Diane was gone, and Michelle slumped back in the chair.

“What’s wrong?” Greg asked.

“Didn’t you hear her? I can’t keep Grace.”

“Mick.”

“She laid it all out. According to their will, the guardian must be married.” She waved her hand in the air as if she could summon a miracle. “I’m not ready for that. Even if I had someone in mind.”

“Okay.” Greg reached over and stilled her hand. “But you still have her for now. And you have no idea what could happen between now and when they get this all figured out. You might even change your mind.”

She glared at him, and he held his palms up as if in surrender.

“I know. I know you don’t think you will.” He leaned forward. “But I also know you want what’s best for Grace. Put yourself in Leah and John’s shoes. If it were you, wouldn’t you want the absolute best for your child, should you no longer be around? What Diane said is true. Married parents tend to have more stability.”

“But it’s not fair!” She knew she sounded petulant, but she couldn’t help it. Every time it looked as though this was what God wanted in her life, another door shut in her face.

“Michelle, pray about it. Give it to God.” Greg lowered his head a moment and then looked up again. “If it really is what He wants in your life, He’ll work it out.”

She took a breath, letting the fresh air sweep some of the anxiety away as she exhaled. “You’re right.”

“Set this aside for now.” He stood and picked up the baby carrier. “You can think more about it after we get through the funeral.”