

for Shawn



*You've been gone for so many years
It makes me wonder what I did with
all my fears.
I still can feel you here.*

*Everything that I push away is me
asking you to stay 'cause
I can still feel you
running next to me.*

*I can still feel you running next to me
watching the clouds
breathe.*

~ Peter English, Brother

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PART ONE



Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope.

~ Maya Angelou

You collapse against the closed door of your home, gasping for breath. Laughter escapes from deep in your throat as you wipe away your tears.

You just hired a bounty hunter.

You. A freaking bounty hunter!

An energizing sense of power and determination surges through you.

Your sixteen-year-old daughter is missing.

Laura.

Gone.

Where is she? What is she doing? Will you ever see her again...alive?

You are beside yourself. You have been that way for the ten days she's been gone. It isn't the first time Laura has disappeared from your sight, but this time is different. An autumn night with temperatures falling, clothes on her back befitting a hot summer day, medications left behind in her bathroom cabinet, and her cell phone left behind on the kitchen table all intensify your panic.

You are inflamed by the lack of results from the local police to find your daughter.

But it is the memories of the past two years that bore into your heart and infuse you with fear. Memories of watching her transition from happy, social, school-loving, and overachieving to isolative, sulky, unpredictable, and unmotivated; of retrieving her from the State Highway Patrol after they stopped her for driving eighty-five miles per hour after a three-day absence from home; of sitting next to her on the adolescent psychiatric unit while meeting with hospital staff, discussing her treatment, her depression palpable; of enduring the sleepless nights this past

summer during the twenty-one days she was missing before finally being found by police, alone on the dark streets of East Cleveland.

The horror of those memories pushes you to do everything you can to find her.

So, you cash out your 401(k) and hire Stewart Wackman as your personal bounty hunter.

You sat at your kitchen table with Stewart as he sorted through photos of Laura.

You felt a glimmer of hope. Hope that this muscular, six-foot-five African-American male could track down your diminutive, four-foot-ten Korean-American daughter. She might finally be found. Brought home to you again.

You refused to let the gripping fear of never seeing your daughter again take hold. You closed your eyes and breathed deeply. Then opening your eyes, you told Stewart about the last time you saw Laura.

Your last glimpse: Laura, happily running up the family room stairs, heading to bed, her black hair swaying across her back, her bare feet skimming the carpet, the muscles of her short calves flexing with each step.

CHAPTER ONE

Beginnings, February 27, 1985

Anyone who ever wondered how much they could love a child who did not spring from their own loins, know this: it is the same. The feeling of love is so profound, it's incredible and surprising.

~ Nia Vardalos, *Instant Mom*

It was fifteen years earlier when I had waited for my first glimpse of Laura.

I stood next to Helen, my assigned airport guide, and peered into the snowy February sky, scanning the runway at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. My heart pounded in my chest. It was like being in labor without the contractions and the pushing and the panting. Helen was my labor nurse. I started taking deep breaths, in through my nose, out through my mouth, attempting to keep my breathing even. I glued my eyes to a snow cloud in the sky, using it as a focal point. I had given birth to three babies via natural childbirth, *sans* drugs. Yet as I waited at the airport, I thought how helpful it would be to have something to quiet my pounding heart. Anything to tame the butterflies causing my gut to cramp. I silently prayed, "Please bring her safely to me." Then, remembering there were other expectant parents around me—ten or twelve of us waiting for our Korean-born children—and not wanting to be selfish, I added, "Keep all those children safe and bring them to their forever homes."

"One parent per adoptee," is what Helen had told Will, Ryan, and me when we met shortly after arriving at O'Hare.

She was referring to the area of the airport where one of us would wait for the plane. Will and I agreed it should be me, the mom, rather than him, the dad, to first meet our daughter. I had been relieved when our adoption agency told us there would be someone assigned to help us navigate the airport. Helen, light-haired and appearing to be in her late thirties, close to my age, was competent and organized. I don't know what her job description entailed, but the sparkle in her eyes and the smile on her face led me to think she was just as thrilled as I was to be meeting our daughter.

Just after meeting us, Helen led us to an observation area. She leaned in slightly toward Ryan, touching his arm and pointing to Customs below, saying, "You and your dad can watch your mom as she comes through those doors with your new sister." As Helen and I walked away, I turned my head and waved at Ryan. Chubby-cheeked and fair, he suddenly appeared younger to me than his ten years. He smiled and waved back.

As I waited, I engaged in small talk with those around me. Adoption small talk: "Are you getting a son or a daughter?" and "Where do you live?" and "Do you have other children?" We exchanged nervous smiles with one another, like graduates standing in line waiting for their diplomas and the turn of their tassels. We expectant parents had all earned this moment and we knew our lives were about to change.

My prayers were intermittently interrupted with intrusive doubts. *Would I know her?* Certainly she would have grown. The pictures sent to us had been taken when she was nine months old. Big eyes, skinny legs, and just enough hair to stick straight up on her head. Now she would be fourteen months old, already having celebrated her first birthday. *Would she like*

me? Babies usually did like me. I had been known to soothe even the most fretful child. *What if she cries? What if she becomes inconsolable in my arms?*

I stood as close to the window as possible, sometimes on tiptoes to stretch my not-quite-five-foot-two frame. Then I saw the outline of a silver bullet. First the nose, then the wings, turning and slowly navigating its way along the runway through the gray mist toward the gate.

“There’s our plane,” Helen said smiling. “She’s here.” The butterflies in my stomach became little sparks traveling up my body, giving me goose bumps and stinging my eyes. This was really happening. We stood and waited as travelers filed out from plane, dragging luggage and belongings and sometimes children of their own. Most passengers had dark hair and East Asian eyes and spoke Korean words I did not understand. Finally, Helen turned to me and smiled. “It’s okay now. Only the babies and escorts are left on the plane. Let’s go find your daughter.”

I followed Helen past the gate, through the tunnel, and onto the plane. A few feet down on the left side of the aisle, my eyes came to rest on a child dwarfed by the high back of the airplane seat. In my memory, she is the only one I saw. This little child—*my* child—dressed in bright red from head to toe, sitting all alone as though she had flown here all by herself in that big plane. Her face was round, much rounder than in the photos—now stuck with magnets on my refrigerator door—sent to me from the adoption agency. But the eyes. Those unforgettable eyes. Her solemn, eyes-straight-ahead gaze. I knew it was her. The pinkness of her face was accentuated by her red clothing. Her cheeks were flushed. Her black hair, grown longer than in the photographs, was dark and silky against her face.

I picked her up and hugged her. I could feel the hard, rapid pulsing of her heart through her heavy clothing. I already knew she had a heart defect, yet I was shocked that I could feel it. It took my breath away. Each beat was a pulsating reminder that Laura came with a risk, a high probability of heart surgery in her future.

She was quiet and calm. As she stared at me, I wished she could tell me what she was thinking, what she was feeling. There were fourteen months of life's happenings stored in her mind and heart that I knew nothing about. An uncontrollable smile spread across my face. I kissed her soft, round cheek.

"Hi, Sweetie," I whispered.

We kept our eyes on each other as we exited the plane. I carried her directly to the bathroom for a diaper change. Everything she brought with her from her homeland was on her body. She wore a thick, red, hooded jacket that snapped up the front and matching fleece pants with elastic at the feet and waist. Animal ears decorated the hood of her jacket with smaller versions attached to her red cloth shoes, which she wore over thick, brown socks. Under her jacket and pants, she wore pale gold, footed pajamas. Small Olympic figures performing their summer sports covered the pajama arms and legs, back and front, a reminder that Seoul was preparing for the 1988 Summer Olympic Games.

I took the small bottle of Johnson's baby lotion from my purse and rubbed the lotion on her legs, arms, face, and neck. I inhaled the familiar scent, which carried memories of my three little boys. It took me back to the early months of each child's life, when I would bathe them, rub lotion on their skin, and feel their softness against me, claiming them as my own. I picked her

up and held her close. Laura clasped my sweater with one small hand and made a tight fist around my fingers with the other.

We journeyed through Customs, me with a smile I could not erase, and Laura with her solemn gaze focused on me. After Laura's passport had been stamped by Customs, I glanced up and saw Will and Ryan waving at us from the observation area. Will took a picture from above, Laura's round cheeks pressing against mine, strands of her black hair resting against my longer, dark brown hair. Then, with Ryan in tow, Will headed toward us. Laura's face showed no emotion as she was passed to Will and then to Ryan, turning her gaze from them to me. She sat still as a doll while Helen snapped more photos.

Our drive to Chicago began the day before. Snow had fallen in big, fat flakes, piling up quickly on the roads and lengthening a drive that would have taken six hours in good weather. We had stayed the night in a hotel close to the airport in order to meet Laura's early-morning flight. I had fretted about the snow as it piled up, fearing it would prevent us from reaching the airport. I had imagined her plane, unable to land in a blizzard, turning and flying back to South Korea, my arms reaching out—but never far enough to touch my waiting child.

With Laura now safely in my arms, we were ready to go home. We were on the road back to Ohio by early afternoon. Laura didn't cry the entire way. She tilted her head and stared motionlessly at Ryan, as one might stare at a blue goose if it waddled over and sat beside you on a park bench. She rarely took her eyes off him. Ryan was fair-skinned with blue eyes and light hair that turned almost white in the summer. We soon realized she had probably never seen anyone in Korea who looked quite like Ryan.

Her new brother made silly faces and noises to entertain her. It was four hours into the trip before we heard her first sounds made on American soil. She started to giggle, revealing deep dimples high on her cheeks.

Our fifteen-year-old son, Pete, who didn't like crowds and airports, was not with us, having opted to not miss school or soccer practice. He waited at home with my mother, a widow since my college years. She had made the two-hour drive from her home to ours the day before. My Mom and Pete would be our welcome-home party of two.

CHAPTER TWO

Shawn, March 19, 1983

I will never forget the moment your heart stopped and mine kept beating.

~ Angela Miller

Shawn, our middle son, had been the catalyst for the adoption of Laura. Shawn and the events that had taken place the day he left for his first Boy Scout camp-out.

It was a Saturday. Everyone in our family had plans for the day. We were a happy family of five—Will, our three boys (thirteen-year-old Pete, eleven-year-old Shawn, eight-year-old Ryan), and I. Will and I had married young, finished college, worked hard, and played by the rules. We knew life had been good to us and assumed it would stay that way.

Our home was always full of boys. Shawn was the magnet that drew most of them in: Jay, Matt, Steve, Mark, Danny, Chad. But Jay was the friend who was with Shawn the most, having earned the label *best friend* in the second grade. Eating and chatting, arms punctuating words, bodies fidgeting—common scenes at our kitchen table. Their friendship had been further defined in a school assignment in which students were asked to think about their family and friends.

Who can you think of that is most like you?

Shawn's answer: "My friend, Jay Miller, because we are the same height, the same weight, and both like the same sports. We also like the same video games." Shawn focused on what they shared and saw only how they were similar.

They also shared the same enthusiasm for the upcoming weekend Boy Scout camping trip. I watched and listened as they ate breakfast in the pre-dawn hours of that crisp March morning, tousled blond hair next to a thick, dark Afro; Shawn's fair, freckled skin contrasting with Jay's dark, smooth arms; bright, sky-blue eyes meeting warm, earthy brown ones.

Shawn opened his mouth and took a breath to talk, his arm suspended midway between his lips and his oversized spoonful of Cheerios. "Awesome! Today's going to be just awesome, that's what I think."

Will had thought Shawn was too busy to add scouting to his schedule. Shawn was undeniably a very busy boy: a member of two indoor soccer teams, president of his class, a drum student, and an after-school newspaper carrier. Although I did not share Will's concern, it did prompt me to question Shawn.

"Don't you think you need to slow down?" I asked him one evening after he fell asleep while doing his homework. "You have the rest of your life to do all this new stuff."

"Good, Mom, I'm good." His response, infused with a smile partially swallowed by a yawn, assured me he had it all under control. I lacked immunity from Shawn's contagious enthusiasm. It infected me. I was the parent who supported his interest in joining the Scouts.

Shawn and I said our *love yous* at the front door that Saturday morning. As I was growing up, my family hadn't expressed much verbal affection. After my father died suddenly when I was in college, I felt compelled to change. I verbalized *love* whenever I could. It became a ritual, having a rhythm of its own, as necessary as the dependable beating of a heart.

"Love you, Shawn," I said as he headed out the door, backpack on his back.

“Love you too, Mom.” Shawn’s words came packaged with a grin and a wraparound two-armed hug, something he had recently added as his own signature goodbye.



Eight hours later, I was summoned from the home of my friend, with whom I’d spent the day shopping and chatting.

“Just come home! Now!” Will insisted on the phone.

I heard the news of Shawn’s accident as I stood in our entryway, door wide open. I could feel the breeze at my back. Felt like spring.

“Shawn fell,” Will said. “Hit his head.”

His voice strained, his words sputtering out from his dry, tight throat as he told me our fearless, nature-loving son had fallen.

“Rescuers rappelled down,” he explained while I stared at my family standing like statues around me. *What happened to their faces? Why was everyone wearing masks? Pale masks with glazed eyes and wet cheeks. Will. Pete. Ryan. Wearing masks.*

“They tried...”

“They couldn’t...”

Slowly I began to understand Will’s words.

Shawn had plummeted—seventy feet—into a ravine. He and Jay were sitting on the edge of a cliff, kicking stones over the edge. Shawn stood up. His foot slipped and caught a tree root, flipping him upside down.

And seconds later, Shawn’s head smashed into a slate-bottomed ravine. His right eye was destroyed. His beautiful, perfect blue eye. Shawn landed so deep into the ravine, it took rescuers an hour to reach him.

Will’s words faded away.

All I could hear was a piercing, animal-like cry...a wail, coming from somewhere dark and deep.

My chest hurt. I was cold. So cold.

Why was it so hard to breathe?

That sound. What was that sound?

Oh...no.

That sound.

It was coming from me.



That night, lying in bed, I could see my son's life in review. Not only the eleven-year-old boy he was that morning, but the fat-cheeked infant he had once been as he slept in my arms. The toddler in nursery school, grabbing the thick curls of a little boy whose teeth were embedded in his arm, Shawn's firm grip pulling those curls in quiet determination. And the adventurous preschooler, pedaling hard on his mini-wheel, trying to keep up with Pete on his big-wheel.

My eyes opened; my eyes closed. I saw his wide-faced grin. Lips pressed together, cheeks squeezed upward into the crinkles of his eyes. That grin, plastered on his three-year-old face as he posed proudly for a photo while sitting in an over-sized yellow rocker, arms wrapped securely around the wiggly baby brother, Ryan, on his lap. His grin showing pure joy when he made his first soccer goal...and rolling in the grass, laughing and laughing with his friends...and giving our golden retriever, Bridgette, a wrap-around hug, draping his body against her back, Shawn's face pressed against her soft muzzle, his sun-streaked hair blending with her golden fur.

My face. Hot and wet. Nose stuffy. Too tired to move. I

curled up into the fetal position near the edge of my bed.

Shawn grinned at me, swinging his backpack to his shoulder as he headed out the door.

“Love you, Mom.”

I licked the salty wetness from my lips.