Finding Zoe

A Deaf Woman’s Story of Identity, Love, and Adoption

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BenBella Books

Dallas, TX
Chapter Ten
Waiting All Our Lives

It didn’t take long for Jess to decide. The following evening I received an email from Marlys, saying that she had chosen us to be Celine’s parents.

I was ecstatic. Finally, after years of waiting, only a few hours and a tank of gas kept my daughter and me apart. I just couldn’t wait to meet her; I had no idea what she even looked like.

It turned out that Jess had loved our portfolio, and after meeting us, just knew in her heart that we were the right parents for Celine. At first, she was a little afraid to trust herself, since she had been sure that Sandy and Stephane were “the ones.” But finding her courage—as she’d done so many times before—she picked us without any input from her parents, feeling that this time, she just had to decide for herself.

Marlys had emailed me Lois and Chuck’s phone number, so I called and we arranged for Tim and me to drive up to Blue Earth, Minnesota, the following Tuesday to meet Celine. I could barely contain myself until then.

Bright and early Tuesday morning, after dropping the boys off at daycare, we were on our way. I thought of that ride as my “going into labor,” because when we arrived, my daughter would be born to me. After two-and-a-half hours—which felt like an eternity—we pulled into the driveway of a quaint, white farmhouse that must have had close to a dozen cats roaming around outside.

It’s uncanny. I’ve always thought that foster homes should be on farms—perhaps because farms have such a wholesome appearance. They’re so all-American, with the flowers and the
white picket fence—the kind of home that you’d want to grow up in, where it’s safe and warm and the love is real.

Lois and Chuck’s foster home seemed exactly like that.

When I got out of the car, I saw Lois inside the house, standing right by the open front door and holding Celine. I felt a sudden, urgent need to run up and take her in my arms and kiss her. I got out of the car and sped up the front steps into the house, holding out my arms, and Lois said to me, “Would you like to wash your hands before you hold her?”

I quickly went into the kitchen and washed them and then she gave me Celine.

My God, she was so unbelievably beautiful—blonde hair like Blake’s and mine and blue eyes like all my boys, as if she were our biological daughter. And she looked so happy.

I was in such a daze and so focused on Celine that I didn’t even realize that Lois had started signing to me. While we were there, I voiced and signed, and Lois signed SEE. She didn’t use ASL and couldn’t understand Tim, so I interpreted for her.

I liked Lois from the minute I met her. She was very warm and good-natured and so easy to talk with. She was like a cuddly grandma, and the ultimate caretaker—someone who feeds you milk and chocolate chip cookies, yet is extremely professional.

She invited us into the living room, and for the next two hours we chatted and played with Celine. Tim and I were right down on the floor with her—in heaven. He was with her the entire time, but I also spent time talking with Lois. My mission that day, in addition to meeting my daughter, was finding out as much information about her from Lois as I possibly could—not just medical and physical, but also personal.
I just dove right in, asking her point blank, “What happened to Celine? What was Jess’s story? BJ’s? Sandy and Stephane’s?” I just had to understand my daughter’s past, knowing that one day she would ask me about it.

Lois would give me bits and pieces of information and then just clam up. She said that it had been very hard on Sandy and Stephane—and I could feel her deep compassion for them—and then, in mid-sentence, she just stopped. She clearly was walking a very fine line between what she would and wouldn’t share. She didn’t want to betray their confidence. Yet, she also respected my need to know.

Meanwhile, Tim was holding his little girl like his life depended on it.

All those weeks I had thought that he was removed from the adoption process and only began to get involved the day we met Jess. I didn’t think it had registered with him that there was a baby out there, one who might actually be our daughter—that all along he was thinking, “Yeah, Brandi, whatever. I already have three kids, and now I’m going to have four.”

I thought he was oblivious to how much time and energy I’d spent developing our adoption portfolio and communicating back and forth with Marlys. I thought that, even though he knew that the baby was deaf and had agreed to move forward, he was doing it for me.

I was so wrong.

Tim had desperately wanted to adopt Celine, but knowing that we were just one of several applicants, he didn’t want to get his hopes up. He couldn’t see how Jess could turn us down, but you never know. He also knew how deeply disappointed I would be if things didn’t work out. All those weeks, I had misinterpreted his walking on eggshells to mean that he didn’t care.
Yet, the moment he laid eyes on Celine he thought, “My little girl—in so many different homes. She doesn’t deserve that.”

He felt nothing personal against Lois and later saw how deeply she had loved Celine; it was just the principle of the thing. He didn’t want his little girl in a foster home—he wanted her home with us.

He was lying on the floor next to her—he looking at her, and she looking at him so innocently and helplessly. He was thinking that all she ever wanted was a good home and a good family, and parents who could give her what she needed, when all of a sudden, she just reached up and grabbed his finger.

His heart melted. At that moment, she became his daughter, too.

It was as if she were saying to him, “You’re my dad,” and she was his little girl. Instantly, the overwhelming issue of having too many children disintegrated into thin air, all his worries and anxiety gone, replaced by a full and vibrant picture of us as a larger family.

When it was time to leave, all I wanted was to pick my daughter up and bring her home. However, the child protective laws required that we visit her in foster care two more times before the paperwork could be completed and we could bring her home. It was the longest two weeks of our lives.

Knowing how much I still thirsted for information, Lois suggested that, before beginning our long drive home, we stop by New Horizons’ main office, only ten minutes away, to pick up Celine’s medical file, which we did.

Well, I suppose that everyone is tested, at times, and this was one of mine.

The file was three inches thick!
I’d never seen so much medical information in one pile, with terms like “hypotonia” and “mucosal thickening.” It really scared me. The whole way home I just sat there flipping through pages of information I didn’t understand. One CAT scan of the baby’s brain said that she was losing her hearing and another said that there was a white mass—scarring on her brain—which scared me the most.

I became concerned about the kind of care she would require, and if I was taking on more than I could handle. Looking back, I can really appreciate what Sandy and Stephane must have gone through. I just stared and stared at her pictures, which were also in the file. By the time we pulled into our driveway, I had worked myself up into such a frenzy.

To calm my nerves, I called my sister-in-law on the videophone and showed her the pictures. After that, I went to the kitchen and told Tim my concerns.

“She’s our daughter,” he said. “She’s going to be fine.”

That was it. End of discussion.

From the moment she grabbed his finger, he was tied to her. There was no way he’d ever let her fly away or leave her stranded. But for just a split second, the thought flitted through his mind, and he imagined if he did abandon her and met her in twenty or thirty years—perhaps her life was great, and perhaps it wasn’t.

But he sure wasn’t going to take that chance.

I remember feeling so grateful that he felt that way, and years later I marveled at how we had really held each other up; when one of us had doubts, the other remained strong.

Wanting to better understand what was in the file, I had emailed my good friend Sheila as soon as we arrived home. Sheila was a nurse and the director of a large regional health care facility in Watertown, South Dakota. I asked her if she’d look through the file and give me her
opinion. Sheila and her husband lived about an hour and a half north of us, near the lake house that Tim and I owned with Ann Marie and Jon.

The following day, she left work in the middle of the afternoon and drove down to our house. I’d left the door open for her.

“Oh, Sheila,” I said, handing her the file as she came in.

She gave me a big hug and said that she would read over the file and give me her initial thoughts and then take it home to read it more thoroughly, and would also give it to one of the doctors at work to read.

“What does all of this mean? Is she going to be okay?” I asked, needing to prepare myself in case my little girl was going to be mentally challenged or disabled in any way.

Sheila just said to me, “What is disabled, Brandi? Aren’t we all disabled in some way?”

Then we stood around my kitchen island reading the file together, me asking questions and Sheila, ever so calmly, answering them ever so simply.

Sheila explained that “hypotonia” meant low muscle mass and that Celine’s hypotonia was not attached to a brain injury but to “failure to thrive,” and with physical therapy, she’d probably be just fine. She also said that Celine definitely had had “an incident”—meaning that she had been affected by a virus or some other malady—but that it didn’t look like it was ongoing.

“What about the scarring on her brain?” I then asked, terrified.

“Let me put it this way, Brandi,” she said. “Didn’t you have meningitis?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then I bet that you have the same thing on your brain. It’s from the virus. It’s what happens when you get a fever like that,” she explained.
“My God, she’s just like me,” I said, all my worries flying right out the window.

I knew then that Celine was going to be all right. It was as if Sheila had said to me, “She’s your daughter, Brandi. She belongs with you.”

Just then, what my mother had said to the doctors, when I was so sick as a child, came flooding into my head, “She will not die, doctor. She will not die.”

My mother’s knowing had become mine; her strength became my strength.

I didn’t care what the doctors said, or what I read in the medical records. The voice that was claiming that she would be all right was much louder than the voice that had concerns.

Just as with all my children, my expectations for her were high, and I knew that whatever the future brought, I would rise to the occasion and deal with it. I understood this was a giant leap of faith, but I wasn’t looking back. The pull toward my daughter was just much too great for me to do otherwise.

Sheila went on to say that nothing ominous had been written in the report at all. She explained that at seven months old, Celine was what she was, and even though she would eventually become completely deaf, the report didn’t conclude that there would be any further complications.

After Sheila and I finished our discussion, we had a glass of wine and then hugged, talked, laughed, and cried.

It’s strange, but at the time, it didn’t even seem like I had made a choice. Yet, I had just made one of the biggest choices of my entire life. I understood that there was a chance that my daughter might have a learning disability, but any child could. My boys could have had learning disabilities. You just teach the child differently.
The following day, I splurged on a shopping spree for girls’ clothing. No more looking the other way! I just shopped till I dropped—I bought a pink velvet dress and red velvet jacket from Baby Gap and brown spotted pants with a burgundy hoodie from Gymboree. And lots more. It was absolutely a dream come true. I must have charged over five hundred dollars on my credit card that day.

Clothes and fashion have always been my indulgence. My grandmother was a seamstress in New York City, back in the 1940s, a time when women weren’t in the work world the way that they are today. I got my fashion sense from her—through her genes and by her example. She was a very classy woman—always done up beautifully and looking great. And so strong. I think that I’m in touch with my female strength and femininity because of her, too. She instilled that yearning in me for a daughter, someone to whom to pass along that sense of what it means to be a powerful deaf woman and everything I had ever learned. A daughter to buy clothes for and go shopping with and with whom to do all that girly stuff. Four years later, when my daughter was in preschool, she would win the award for being “most fashionable,” and the first word she finger spelled would be “mall.” That’s my girl.

She was wearing her brown pants and burgundy hoodie outfit the day we brought her home. It was Friday, November 19, when we picked her up at the adoption agency.

Tim and I went alone, just as we had always gone alone to the hospital when each of the boys was born. We felt it was “our” time with the new baby.

When we arrived at New Horizons, Jess and her parents were already there visiting with Celine. We said hello briefly and then went into Marlys’ office to sign the adoption papers—where we agreed to send updates about Celine to Jess and BJ, through New Horizons, every year on her birthday.
After we were finished, Tim and I joined Jess, her parents, and Celine in the other room. I think it had finally sunk in for Jess’s parents that Tim and I were deaf, because Jess’s father asked us how we would know when Celine cried. We hadn’t brought an interpreter with us, so communication wasn’t the best. However, I reminded them that we had already taken care of three babies, that we had a baby-cry signaler that would flash whenever she cries. We had previously told them that our entire house was equipped with everything we needed—lights for the phone when it rang, a videophone, captioning for the TV. I now added that some deaf people even have a flashing light for the doorbell and fire alarm but with three hearing kids and a dog, we didn’t need them.

Then I gave Jess the letter I’d written her, which said the following:

Jess,

I have nothing but admiration for you. What you have been through these past several months makes me shudder. What a great amount of courage and strength you’ve shown to find the best home for your daughter. I know how angry and disappointed you must be with Sandy and Stephane, but their choice not to adopt Celine has led her to us.

I promise you that Celine will have the best of everything. I thank you for trusting us with her—for giving me the chance to be her mother. You will always be her birth mother, and I will tell her that she is lucky to have you, too. You will always be a part of her and she a part of you.

The best thing that you can do for her now is to go after your dreams. Finish your education—there is so much power in that. Be true to yourself. I will
teach her to do the same. If you have the opportunity, take sign language classes.

If you decide to pursue your masters in social work, check out Gallaudet University.

I want nothing but the very best for you, Jess. You are a beautiful girl with a million dollar smile that lights up the room—that’s priceless. Use everything you’ve got to make your mark on the world. Celine and I will be rooting for you.

Brandi.

Jess didn’t read the letter but put it in her purse. Then we all talked a bit more, and finally she gave me a look that said, “It’s time,” and stood up and placed Celine in my arms. I immediately started crying.

“Don’t cry,” Jess said.

But I just couldn’t stop.

Through my tears, I saw her and her parents walk out the door.

I immediately turned to Marlys, asking her how Jess could leave without even shedding a tear and she replied, “It’s her third time doing this, Brandi. Each time she has gotten stronger.”

As I wiped away my tears, I started thinking about the gifts I’d given to Tim and the boys over the years—for birthdays, Christmas, or no reason at all—and the thought I’d put into making them meaningful. Here was a young woman, I realized, who didn’t even know me and who had had such painful experiences, yet she found it within herself to choose me—to place her daughter in my care—which was one of the greatest gifts of my entire life. To this day, I well up just thinking about it.

That’s when I vowed to legally keep our daughter’s name, Celine Grace.
Originally, I had wanted to change her name to *Destiny Zoe*—Destiny, for obvious reasons, and I liked the ring of Destiny Zoe. However, Jess didn’t want us to change her name, and in Minnesota, the birth mother has that right. I had figured that in six months, when the adoption became finalized, I might legally change it then.

But watching Jess leave, I realized that honoring her wishes was a lot more important than changing our daughter’s name. Jess allowed us to legally add the name Zoe, which we did, making her name Celine Zoe Grace.

But we just call her Zoe.

After we left New Horizons, I placed Zoe in her new tan car seat and sat next to her for the three-hour ride home. When we arrived, a friend of mine was waiting for us with the three boys—video camera in hand—and taped us as we came through the front door. It was around 8:00 PM. The boys were so excited; Blake and Chase had already met Zoe at Lois and Chuck’s farm, but Austin hadn’t come along. The moment he saw her he reached out for her and just kept saying, “She’s my Zoe.”

By the time I finally put Zoe to bed that first night, it was already ten o’clock. She slept in the same room each of the boys had slept in as infants, only with pink crib sheets instead blue or green. At 2:00 AM she awoke, so I went into her bedroom and took her out of her crib, and we sat on the floor playing and doing her physical therapy exercises. Better get to work, I figured. Then, I gently put her to sleep and went back to bed. After that, she always slept straight through the night.

The following morning, Tim and I were sitting at the kitchen table, and I was holding Zoe. We were just chatting, and at one point he said, “I feel like you just gave birth to her,” and I thought, *I told you so!*
I remembered his comment a few weeks later when taking Zoe to the audiologist for a follow-up appointment. At one point, the woman just looked at me and said, “Not many people would want to adopt a child like her.”

I was in complete shock. I just couldn’t understand how she could say such a thing—or think it. I’d wanted Zoe so badly; no one wanted her more than me. I thought that what she said was rude, insensitive, and inappropriate, and I must have been feeling pretty spent from all the changes because if anyone ever said that to me today, I would let them have it.

But later that day, I realized that there was truth to what she had said because suddenly her comment became yet another confirmation that everything was meant to be. She had only reinforced for me that Zoe and I belonged together. I think that I was then able to see what she had said, not as a judgment but as a statement of fact.

Judging is so easy. After Sandy and Stephane had let the baby go, some of their friends had felt that what they had done was very wrong. Still others wondered what had taken them so long. I think they all missed the point because in the divine order of things, there are no rights or wrongs. Judgments aren’t necessary. What was wrong for them was perfect for Tim and me. Their acting on their truths allowed for the unfolding of true harmony.

It didn’t stop unfolding. The following March, after Zoe had been with us for four months and was just about a year old, Sandy wrote us a letter in response to a letter that I had written to them several months prior, thanking them for taking such good care of Zoe. They had given Tim and me permission to contact them via the adoption agency, and I so wanted them to know how grateful we were for all they had done for her. Her letter said the following:
Brandi,

I have wanted to write to you since we received your letter, but didn’t get it done, obviously. I want you to know that we are so pleased that you were able to adopt Zoe. We loved her with all our heart, but knew that in her best interest, we just couldn’t keep her. We knew nothing of the Deaf World, and knew that that was where she was headed. We truly couldn’t be more pleased with what Lois and Chuck have told us about your family.

I can tell you that it was the hardest decision we’ve ever made, and the worst day of my life was the day when we took her back to Marlys. But we saw God start to work immediately after our decision was made.

I have to say that it was a little shocking to find out that she’s here in Sioux Falls. But then that is where the best family for her is. After getting over the initial shock, I realized that your family could do more for her than we could. We have all the love in the world for her, but not the ability to sign or knowing much about being deaf. You can give her everything in that domain.

We have no regrets with our decision. We know it was of God. Sometimes I wonder why we had to go through all the pain, but there was a reason.

Someday, I hope that you will let us see her again. We would never want to impose on your life with her, but I really love her, and miss her. Antoine and I still talk about her occasionally. He will say, “This is a toy that Celine would have loved.” He knows that her name is now Zoe, and asks where she is. I think he thinks about her but is over the missing part.
I am not yet ready to see her. I know that our decision was right, but my heart still hurts a little. It is easier, knowing that she has a family like yours. Thank you for who you are, and for loving our Celine Grace, and now your Zoe. Sandy, Stephane, and Antoine, too.

The following May, Sandy was ready to see Zoe and came to visit us with Stephane, Chuck, and Lois. Tim and the boys were at the lake house that day, so it was just me and Zoe. When I found out that they lived just a couple miles from us, I was absolutely amazed. For so long, I had thought that we’d be traveling to the other side of the world to find our daughter; yet, there she was, right in our own backyard.

I was so curious to meet them, as they me. Lois, God bless her, was our stand-in interpreter. Although Stephane had been at peace from the moment he had found out about our family, and that we were deaf, I think that Sandy needed to actually see how well Zoe was doing—how she was running around and playing and signing to me, to really be at peace. The most telling moment was when I took her upstairs to Zoe’s room and she saw the beautiful butterfly on the wall, just above Zoe’s crib. It was one of those 3-D ones, made out of fabric, that was yellow and purple, with a touch of pink. Just like the butterfly mobile she’d once purchased to hang above Zoe’s crib.

Talk about a confirmation. Sandy took it as a sign that they really had made the right decision—that Zoe had flown to where she truly belonged.

It’s ironic, but it wasn’t until years later, when I began writing this book, that I discovered that butterflies are deaf.
“. . . Zoe, the Greek word for life as God has it.” —Max Lucado, 3:16: The Numbers of Hope.
Epilogue

Initially, this book was supposed to be about Jess, BJ, and Sandy and Stephane, who had all so lovingly cared for Zoe before she came to Tim and me, and the struggles they went through in making their agonizing decisions to let her go. Although I didn’t yet know the details of their stories, part of me knew that each of them had made their difficult choice out of love for Zoe—for whom they believed she was then and would eventually become—and that it was what she deserved.

Delving into their stories, I came to see how each of them had made their choice out of their desire to follow their own truths, and that by doing so, what they did also had to be right for Zoe. I believed all of that in my very soul. When I understood how innocently Zoe had rippled through each of their lives, shaping and defining their lives and each of them as individuals, to better know who they really were—I was in awe of them, of her, of myself, and of the awesome mystery that brought her and me together. I could better see how she has rippled through my own life and still does, changing me, inspiring me to grow, always making me be a better person, as children often do.

As I honored their decision-making processes—each completely different from the others—I saw the perfection in each of their individual stories as they unfolded, as well as in the bigger story of Zoe’s adoption unfolding: how everything had to happen exactly as it did, in divine time, for Zoe and I to be united.

And such perfection! Could the trajectory of such events be anything else but proof that everything that happened was part of some larger divine plan, and that our lives were all interconnected? I believed that what transpired was the highest triumph of the human spirit; it
was like a tapestry whose splendor couldn’t exist without all those ugly little knots and loose ends hidden on the underside.

I saw that love can take on many guises, I learned about the fruitlessness of assigning blame, and I realized that what may seem horrible up close can be seen as beautiful from a distance. I was reminded, once again, that life isn’t about being perfect or not making mistakes; it is, I think, partly about doing what you believe is right, no matter how difficult.

From the very moment I learned that Zoe existed, I knew that she and I were destined to be together. But after examining everyone’s stories and digging into my own, I finally understood why—and why I had yearned for a daughter for all those years. It was as if the effect had come before the cause: I needed a daughter to better show me who I was, while showing me why I had needed her all along. I realized that I didn’t need just a daughter—but a deaf daughter. I needed Zoe. The gifts I’d received from Zoe being deaf truly began to dawn on me.

At first, this revelation presented a huge problem. I had no desire to put myself or my life out there, or make my journey and deep inner struggle to accept myself as a deaf person an open book for the entire world to read. I’d spent the first third of my life denying that struggle and finally accepted the fact that I’d struggled and made peace with it. But sharing it in a book was something entirely different.

Feeling very raw and naked, I labored to write these pages. I didn’t want to expose myself or my vulnerabilities (to the Deaf community, in particular)—afraid that many people would read it and not like some of the things I had to say. I was afraid of upsetting or offending members of my community whom I may not even know—and, even more, people about whom I cared: friends and colleagues. And it would tear me up inside to upset my mother. However, as I trusted my process, I felt myself opening up to and claiming myself as a deaf person even more
deeply and powerfully than I knew was possible. With it came a new level of self-acceptance, so I took a leap of faith that those who loved me would understand.

In the end, I believe that healing happened not only for me but also for everyone else in our story—before a single word was even put down on the page. For example, after not seeing each other for five years, Jess and BJ, after being interviewed, met and reconciled their differences. Jess asked BJ why he had taken her to court, and he explained that he wanted to parent Celine, and that it was the only way he felt that his voice would finally be heard, which Jess completely understood.

Jess felt awful about how she had treated BJ all throughout her pregnancy and after Celine was born, and for not better understanding his point of view. Yet, she also realized how young she had been and how desperately she needed her parent’s help. She was so grateful to her father, and said that if it hadn’t been for his undying support, she’d probably be taking care of Celine today, and not have graduated college, married, and made such a fulfilling life for herself. Looking back, she treasured the tough times most of all.

“Zoe taught me so much,” she said. “Everything was for her. If I had a decision to make, I stepped back and said, ‘OK, what’s the best scenario?’ Before, I just did what I wanted. She made me grow up and realize that life isn’t just about yourself, and that you need to make sacrifices when you really love somebody.”

BJ discovered that he was a lot stronger having had something to fight for—his child—and also that he had the willpower to stick with something that he truly believed in. Before his experiences with Zoe, BJ had a hard time dedicating himself to one thing and just sticking with it. But after fighting for Zoe and loving her enough to let her go, he discovered just how much he
loved working in the construction field and found the willpower to stick with it. “Zoe helped me to find out who I really am,” he said. “Wherever I go, people will know her story.”

Sandy and Stephane had been so upset when they discovered that Jess hadn’t told them the whole truth about Celine’s hearing, and who could blame them? But during an interview for this book Stephane acknowledged, “A seventeen-year-old-girl got scared and brushed it under the rug. We’ve all done that—broken something and then replaced it before anybody knows. I’m not judging. You never know what somebody might do in the same situation.”

Sandy, too, had her own realizations. “God had chosen us to take care of Celine because I had the connections,” she said. That was our purpose. We were her steppingstone.” Becoming all choked up she continued, “Celine was my butterfly—bound in a chrysalis and forming inside me. I protected her and gave her what she needed to grow. But I just couldn’t protect her any longer. I had to open my arms and let her go.”

Thank goodness Sandy passed Zoe’s baby calendar on to Lois. That gem was ultimately passed down to me and was an important resource used in writing this book. Lois, while never once doubting her decision to adopt Mark, realized even more clearly how being with Celine had reaffirmed that decision, revealing a wondrous flow and order to everything that had happened in their lives.

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Ironically, it wasn’t until a few weeks after we had brought Zoe home—when a good friend of mine said how wonderful it was that she was deaf—that it actually hit me that I had a deaf daughter. Oh, I knew that Zoe was deaf, but for so long I’d been so obsessed with getting her and so afraid of losing her that her being deaf hadn’t really registered. Those first few weeks, I felt as if she had come to me with the world stacked against her. Ours was the fifth home in which she
had lived in only eight short months—*the fifth home*—and even though it had all worked out perfectly, part of me felt hurt and angry that she had been rejected so many times. A fierce determination welled up inside me to prove to them—to prove to the world—that my daughter was going to be a lot more than just okay; she was going to take the world by storm.

But the biggest shock was back when Zoe turned two and then three years old, she was the *spitting image* of the girl Tim had described in his story—blonde and sassy, a little princess who carried herself and signed with such amazing confidence. It was as if he had seen into the future.

The ending of the adoption story was really just the beginning for Zoe and me, our family, and the others. At the time of this writing, with Zoe at ten years old, the lives of our cast of characters have twisted, turned, and evolved further.

Where are we all now and how did we get there?

*BJ*

On February 1, 2005, a thick brown envelope came in the mail for BJ from New Horizons. Zoe had been home with us for almost three months and was content as could be and making great progress with her physical therapy. I had taken an eight-week leave from work to be with her, and we were together all the time. Christmas had come and gone, and we were all settling in.

BJ knew the envelope was coming, because a couple days earlier New Horizons had sent a letter saying that they would be forwarding something. A whole stack of mail lay on the kitchen counter, and BJ went over to open it. His parents came over and stood by him as he pulled several letters out of the envelope, along with some photographs that fell to the floor. The three of them picked up the photos and started looking at them.
“Who are these people?” BJ said, seeming confused.

“Yeah, there are three boys here,” his mother added. “I thought that she had only one brother.”

“Well, maybe they’re cousins,” his father chimed in.

BJ quickly took one of the letters and started reading it, and his parents each took a letter to read as well.

Then his mother cried out, “Brandi? That’s not the mother’s name! Who’s Brandi?”

BJ just couldn’t believe it. “Wait a minute,” he said, now looking at one of the photographs, “this isn’t the family that she was with. She’s got another family!”

He felt sick. They all felt sick and couldn’t believe that no one had told them what had happened.

As BJ read my letter, his hands were shaking. I had sent three letters to the adoption agency a few months before for them to forward to him, but for some reason, they hadn’t forwarded them until now. In the first letter, dated December 13, I introduced myself and let him know that we had adopted Zoe. I remember writing how much we had wanted her, and how grateful we were having her as our daughter. I wanted him to know that. I had also included some photographs: in one of them, Zoe was sitting in a swing giggling while Tim pushed her, and in another, she had just finished eating and had Oreos all over her face.

In the next letter, dated January 3, I thanked him and his parents for the stuffed animal and the adorable outfit they had sent Zoe for Christmas via New Horizons, and in the following one, dated January 8, I sent our regards along with several new photographs of Zoe.

It was quite a lot to take in at one time. Not hearing from anyone for months, BJ had thought that no news was good news—that Celine was with Sandy and Stephane and doing fine.
After seeing their portfolio back when he had visited Celine at New Horizons, BJ had a vision of where she was going and was so relieved that she would be with such a good family. When he and his family found out about her hearing loss and that Sandy was a speech pathologist, they all thought, “She works in a hospital with doctors, and she’ll be so good for her.”

After BJ finished reading my first letter, he sat down at the kitchen table and read the other two, along with a letter from Marlys explaining that his daughter had gone to a new family. For ten minutes he just sat there, going back and forth between the letters and photographs and feeling really strange—though he was finding out a “bad thing,” it didn’t seem so bad. Seeing that we were deaf and how happy Zoe was and how well she was doing, he even started thinking that perhaps it was a good thing. Later that day, he was grateful that she was with us and not with a different family.

It was just such a shock. It had been so hard for him not to fight for Celine in the first place. Then he made a gut-wrenching decision to let her go, only to discover that things hadn’t worked out. Had he known, he felt he would’ve stepped in and said, “This is it. She has a dad right here in Algona who wants her so badly.”

For two years BJ was profoundly disappointed in himself and carried around a deep regret for not fighting harder for his little girl. Finally, in October of 2006, when Zoe was two and I drove with her to Algona to meet them, he let go of that feeling.

Years later, he told me how nervous he had been that day and how he had really wanted to make a good impression on us. He and Zoe spent an entire hour alone together—just running around in the back yard and playing. I can only imagine how healing it must have been for him. He and his family were all such lovely people.
Before we left, BJ’s father pulled me over to the side and said, “Brandi, I want you to know that you’ve just ended two years of heartache for BJ and our whole family. He no longer feels like he made a mistake.”

After that, BJ arranged through New Horizons for us to be able to get together on our own. It worked out perfectly because whenever we traveled from Sioux Falls to Minnesota, I let them know and we would meet up. We also began emailing each other, and I’d send him pictures of Zoe that he’d hang all over his refrigerator. To this day, it is covered with her pictures.

“Zoe helped me to realize that if you’re going to make a decision, then make it,” BJ said, “and if it comes from inside of you and you feel that it’s right, it’s going to be pretty darn close to being right. The worst that can happen is that somebody will say that you’re wrong.”

As for Marlys, we may never know why she didn’t tell BJ that Sandy and Stephane had relinquished Celine and that she had gone back to foster care. While I can certainly appreciate BJ’s anguish, in a way I believe that what Marlys did turned out to be a blessing. It prevented him from fighting for Zoe all over again, saving him and his family so much extra pain and heartache. And it allowed Zoe to find where she really belonged.

In the winter of 2012, BJ applied for a license to start his own construction company and named it Zoe Construction. At the time of this writing, BJ is 32, single, and living in Algona, Iowa, about ten miles from his parents. While his busy work schedule has prevented him from seeing Zoe over the past few years, his parents, who think of Zoe as their granddaughter, came to visit us last winter, and it was almost as if BJ were there himself. His love for Zoe fills me with such joy every single day.
Sandy and Stephane

About a month before Sandy and Stephane had visited Zoe and me in April of 2005, they received a phone call from Marlys one evening, “There is a baby boy waiting for you. His parents have terminated their rights. It’s done. There’s no waiting time. Nothing is going to take this child away from you. And, by the way, you’ve got to find a name for him by tomorrow. We open our doors at 5:00 AM.”

Shocked beyond words, they said, “We have a name for a girl but not a boy!” They spent the rest of the evening picking out a name for their new son and decided upon Jacques. The next day when they met his birth parents and told them the name they had chosen, his birthparents started crying. “All of the men’s names in our family start with the letter J,” they said. And that was that.

Thinking about it all Stephane said, “You could say that God was watching over us, but it was through Marlys. She did it that way on purpose, knowing that we couldn’t go through another adoption ordeal.”

Jacques has red hair and looks Irish, and is feisty like you won’t believe! He brings out the humor in everyone, and his teachers say that he is so funny he should be in television commercials. In 2006, their family moved from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to Toronto, Canada, and then Stephane took a new job in Boulder, Colorado, in 2011, which entails a lot less travel. Sandy was very happy about that. She still works as a speech pathologist. Antoine is eleven years old and Jacques is eight.
After we brought Zoe home, I felt compelled to call New Horizons, asking them to find out if Jess wanted to see Zoe again. I realized that I had been so obsessed with adopting Zoe that I never even stopped to think about how Jess must have felt after all that she had been through, relinquishing her not once but *three* times. I wanted her to know that Zoe was really fine. She’s growing, thriving, and communicating. I wanted her to see that while we were embracing the fact that she was Deaf, we would not let it define her.

Jess said yes, so Zoe and I drove to Blue Earth, Minnesota, and visited her (and Lois, as well). I brought along some of Zoe’s books; one of them was about farm animals, her favorite. She read it to Jess, signing the names of all the animals.

I remember sitting in New Horizons that day. Zoe, who was a little over a year old, was standing in her white pants and pink shirt, holding onto the couch. When Jess came into the room and saw her, she immediately leaped toward her, as if her mother’s instincts had taken over, but then she caught herself, realizing that Zoe didn’t know her. It was such a natural reaction and my heart so went out to her. Appreciating her enthusiasm, and wanting to honor her visit with Zoe, I went to buy some milk for Zoe’s sippy cup, giving them some time alone together.

When I returned a half hour later, I watched the two of them through a two-way mirror so they couldn’t see me. Zoe was sitting on Jess’s lap and playing with her hair. When I finally walked into the room and Zoe saw me, Jess set her down and she ran straight to me, signing, “Mommy, Mommy.”

I’d always known that Jess had given me an angel, but now I could see how much she loved Zoe and decided that she would always be a part of her life. Also, I didn’t want Zoe to ever wonder about her birth mother. Jess and I began emailing, and over the following year or so,
while she was in college, we all saw each other two more times. We met for dinner and went to her dorm room, which was filled with pictures of Zoe all over the walls.

It’s funny. I remember people asking me back then if I was afraid that Jess would want to take Zoe back, and I always said no, that I knew that I was her mother. The fear in peoples’ minds came from all the negative media hype—of cases years ago where the judge gave back a baby to the birth parents. That doesn’t happen anymore.

After some time had passed, Jess emailed me, saying that now that Zoe was getting older it was becoming too difficult for her to keep seeing her. It was because she needed to take a break from all the memories and live the college life. She had to find herself again. I understood all too well. Yet, I wanted her to always know where to find us, in case she ever needed to reach out to Zoe, and continued sending her pictures and updates every now and then. In the summer of 2007, when Tim got a promotion at work and we had to relocate to Clearwater, Florida, I let Jess know, just in case she wanted to see Zoe, since it had been a year. She did; so Zoe, Blake, and I went to her father’s house (he had invited his entire family), and we spent the whole day there, having lunch and planting flowers, with her father videotaping the whole thing. Jess cried and cried when we left. We didn’t see her again until three years later in March of 2010, when she visited us in Clearwater on Zoe’s sixth birthday.

What a day.

Way before Zoe could comprehend it, I had been telling her this adoption story. I didn’t want there to be a day when I finally “told her”—I wanted her to always know. As a four- and five-year-old, she would tell me that she was in Jess’s tummy and was born and then Jess gave her to me, but now as a fully grown child, I had no idea how she would react to actually seeing
Jess and spending the entire day with her. You teach your children what you feel is important, hoping that when they’re older they’ll embrace it.

But to see it all come to fruition in one day was overwhelming! I was so proud of Zoe.

I took Jess to her classroom and as soon as Zoe saw her, she ran right over and hugged her leg. Jess knelt down and hugged her back and then started crying, of course, as did I. Later in the day she signed to Jess, “You gave birth to me.” She understood that Jess was her birth mother who gave her life, and that I was the mother who was raising her, and that we both loved her very much. At one point, she put her arms around both of us and squeezed us tight, as if to say that she understood.

It felt so great to see my influence on her, especially concerning something of this magnitude. What a deep thing for a six-year-old to understand, I thought. It just confirmed for me what I had always known—and wanted Zoe to know—that there is enough love to go around for all of us.

I realize that having an open adoption of this kind may not be right for other adoptive families, but it is right for ours. When I see Zoe embracing who she is and where she came from in such a beautiful way, I see my own self in her, and know even more that she is truly my daughter.

When it came time for Jess to leave, Zoe said, “So long. See you again sometime.

We received Jess’s wedding invitation in the summer of 2012, when Zoe was eight, and the following September she and I flew up to Blue Earth, MN where the wedding was taking place. Zoe was a Jr. bridesmaid. At the time, I didn’t even know if Jess had realized that it was Zoe who had taught her how to really love someone, but she had. Lois was invited, too.
Zoe looked darling in her waterfall blue dress that highlighted her golden hair, as she stood with all of the grown-up bridesmaids enveloped in their sea of blue. I had already explained to her that Jess had fallen in love, and that she wanted her to be part of the wedding because she loved her. Yet, as Zoe walked down the aisle all alone, her air of confidence so palpable I could practically reach out and touch it, I wondered what she was thinking.

She took her place at the altar with the others and watched quietly as Jess walked down the aisle, a vision of beauty herself draped in white, and then she waited patiently as Jess and her groom, Jerrick, turned and faced the pastor. When he began speaking, Zoe looked to Ann Marie whom we had brought along as her interpreter, so that she could understand.

“Jessica Lynn,” the interpreter signed, “do you take Jerrick Lee to be your lawful, wedded husband, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do you part?”

“I do,” Jess said.

“Then with the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

After their kiss, the organ pronouncing their way, Jess, before retracing her steps, went over to Zoe, crouched down in front of her and gave her a big hug and then said, “I love you.”

For me, that hug contained all the love that had brought Zoe to that wonderful place and would surround her in the future. In 2014 Jess gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Adelynne Zoe. I don’t know when and where our paths will all cross again, but I know they will.

**The Rarus’s—Brandi, Tim, Zoe, Blake, Chase, and Austin**

It just amazes me how many people tell me that Zoe looks just like me. (These days, we even have our hair cut the same way.) When I explain that we adopted her, they are shocked and say,
“But she looks *so much* like you,” to which I respond, “I know. But it wasn’t my doing, it was God’s.”

Zoe wants to be like me, and I do my best every day to teach her by example. She sees the way I am in the world, that I am comfortable with both hearing and deaf people. She knows my opinions about things and how Tim and I are both proud of who we are and of our community. She knows that we embrace our Deaf Culture, yet are in no way limited by it. Already, she is so much more comfortable in her own skin than I was when I was her age.

A few years ago, when she was six, Zoe and my then-ten-year-old son, Chase, and I were in my bedroom. Chase and I were sitting on the bed, talking. Wanting to be included in our conversation, she kept signing, “What are you saying?” but I kept ignoring her because I was totally engrossed in my conversation with Chase. Finally, after about two minutes, she looked at me hard and signed, “Stop talking and sign!” as fiercely as if she were saying, “Hey, don’t ignore me!”

Initially, I felt awful, thinking that I, of all people—who knows exactly what it feels like to be excluded—had left her out of the conversation. But then I thought, *You go, girl!* I felt so proud of her, because there she was at six years old, already standing up for herself in a way I never had.

Zoe’s needs are different than her brothers. Over the years, Tim and I have dealt with issues regarding her education and her cochlear implant—which we did provide for her, and that she wears today. Tim remained opposed to her wearing one for a long time. I, however, remained strong in my belief that there’s room for both—sign and speech. Along the way, Tim’s attitude has really softened. Many of his deaf friends have asked him why Zoe wears a cochlear implant, and he always says that what is most important to him is that she also uses ASL, which she does.
In fact, on my mother’s 70th birthday a few years ago, Zoe’s uncle gave her a balloon and Tim told her to say thank you. She looked at her uncle and signed, “Thank you,” and Tim said to her, “No, voice it, voice it. Come on.”

And she did.

In the summer of 2011, our family moved from Clearwater back to Austin, Texas, so that Zoe could attend the Texas School for the Deaf. Just as Camp Mark Seven was an eye-opener for me, TSD was the same for Zoe. Even though she has deaf parents and complete communication at home, she was mainstreamed in Clearwater so her interaction with deaf adults was limited. However, at TSD she has deaf teachers and is in an environment that embraces ASL. She has really become Tim’s daughter since attending the school, as she takes great pride in being deaf and in our culture and language. She just loves it there, and Tim and I are so grateful for their program and educators who are so committed to giving deaf children a great education. Zoe plays volleyball and basketball on deaf teams. Her language is continuing to blossom and we are very proud of her. As of this writing, Zoe is in the fourth grade at TSD and is thriving, as I always knew she would.

Blake is a sophomore in high school, Chase is in eighth grade, and Austin sixth. With the city of Austin so deaf friendly and people signing out in the open in most public places, the boys are signing so much better and have a good mix of hearing and deaf friends. They are part of a large KODA (Kids of Deaf Adults) community, and the friends they meet at school, whom they bring home, have all taken an interest in learning sign language.

The boys adore their sister and really watch out for her. Zoe holds her own with them, and is right out there with them playing basketball, football, or baseball. She is incredibly
outgoing—very much our social butterfly, to use Lois’s description of her as an infant. Our lives are in balance.

Tim is thriving in his seventh year as vice president of sales at ZVRS, a company that was spun off from Communications Services for the Deaf (CSD). We were so grateful that Tim’s boss allowed Tim to relocate to Austin, so that Zoe could attend the Texas School for the Deaf.

As an account executive at CSD, I bring the newest technology for telecommunications access for the Deaf community to Fortune 500 companies. I think that Austin will be our home for a long, long time. But you never know.

I would like to note that with the closing of so many Deaf schools around the country these days, due to budget cuts, many deaf children are not as fortunate as Zoe and are unable to attend schools like the Texas School for the Deaf. The NAD is putting its efforts toward promoting the continuation and strengthening of our deaf schools, which is mandated by law.

**Milestones**

In 2008 Communications Services for the Deaf sold the video portion of their company and launched a new brand name for their products and services named after Zoe! ZVRS, where Tim works today. We are proud! It happened like this. One evening, several of Tim’s colleagues were over for dinner and I introduced them to Zoe and told them her adoption story. Well, the vice president of marketing was really touched by the story and the following day he proposed using the letter “Z,” the first letter of Zoe’s name, as the company’s logo. They use it as a symbol for deaf people all across America embracing the good life and to encourage deaf children to be whoever they want to be.
I remember thinking how awesome it was that before this book was even published, her story was being told. In fact, a video of Tim, Zoe, and me is on their company’s website, and there’s even a picture of Jess and her parents with Zoe on placement day.

At ten years old, Zoe is a shining light for deaf children growing up in America today—loving herself, her life, and the fact that she is deaf. And that she came to Tim and me through adoption and not through pregnancy makes the whole experience that much more meaningful.