

You Carried Me: Chapter One

A thick manila envelope arrived at my home in Sioux City with the afternoon mail one sunny day in May 2007. I knew without even looking at the return address that it came from the University of Iowa Hospitals in Iowa City and contained the medical records that would answer some of the questions I had been agonizing over most of my life.

Who am I? Where did I come from? Whose blood runs through my veins? And why was I given away? These are questions that most people who, like me, were adopted as infants want answered. But what I needed to know was more fundamental, and less innocent: Why did you try to kill me? And how is it possible that I survived?

I felt a clutch of panic in the pit of my stomach. Now that I had the information I had sought for so many years, my body, and spirit, rebelled. But as the Irish poet James Stephens – another adoptee – once wrote, “Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will.” So with trembling fingers, I peeled back the sealed flap of the envelope and faced the facts of my improbable life.

As I read through my tears the blandly rendered details of my narrow escape from death – “On August 24, saline infusion for abortion was done but was unsuccessful” – I discovered something I hadn’t expected: the full names of my biological parents.

Their names were clearly written in the record of my birth, but I was left unnamed.

As I fought for my life in St. Luke’s neonatal intensive care unit, it became clear to the doctors and nurses on hand that my birth mother had been pregnant for far longer than the eighteen to twenty weeks reported at the time of the abortion. The pediatrician who examined me a couple of days after I was delivered estimated that my gestational age at birth was about thirty-one weeks – well into the third trimester. The discrepancy hinted at something still unknown: How could any abortionist, much less one affiliated with one of the most prestigious hospitals in the region, have made such a mistake? What doctor or nurse would believe that a woman more than seven months pregnant was less than five months along?

Like other babies born prematurely, I had a host of serious medical problems including low birth weight (I weighed 2 pounds 14.5 ounces), jaundice, and respiratory distress. But my troubles were complicated by the aftereffects of the poisonous saline solution I had endured in my mother’s womb. No one knew the long-term consequences of surviving an abortion. Developmental delays are routine for preterm babies, but I also had seizures; and the list of potential complications grew to include mental retardation, blindness, and chronic poor health.

Three weeks after my birth I was transferred three hundred miles east, to the university hospital in Iowa City. The nurses who cared for me, a nameless baby, made me tiny clothes and colorful booties. One nurse, Mary, decided I needed a name and dubbed me Katie Rose. For years after I

left the NICU, my adoptive parents and Mary kept in touch, exchanging Christmas cards and letters with pictures of me and updates on my progress. When I got older, I wrote the letters myself; Mary and I began a friendship that would endure for decades. It made me feel so special that this nurse who had cared for me when no one else did still cared about me.

Meanwhile, the social services agency that had taken custody of me searched for a family willing to adopt a fragile newborn. This was no easy task because of my grim medical prognosis. The search led to a small town, Curlew, Iowa, just one hundred miles from where I had been born. There a young couple who had adopted one child waited for another.

They were told that the baby would have needs that went far beyond food and shelter. Love they had in abundance; money for specialized medical care and services they did not. They drove five hours east to meet the tiny baby who needed a home. Unintimidated by the IV lines and the monitors attached to the skull of the baby whose head had been shaved from temple to temple, they made their choice. That's the day I first experienced a mother's love, in the arms of the woman who looked into my eyes and said, "You are mine."

As a small child I knew a few things for sure: My name was Missy Cross; I lived on a farm in Curlew, Iowa; I belonged to a family that included a mom, a dad, a big sister, and dozens of aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. And at some point before I can even remember I learned that I was doubly loved – by the parents who had chosen me as their own, and by a mother who had given birth to me and entrusted me to their care. That I was adopted was something I don't remember being told; it just was – a fact of life as ordinary as the sunshine in the morning, the starlight in the evenings, and the cozy walls around me.

But the terrible truth about my origins could not be kept secret forever.