

FOREWORD BY MARLEE MATLIN

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

FINDING
Love

BRANDI RARUS
AND GAIL HARRIS





Chapter Five

OUR FAMILY HEARS

WE WAITED TO have kids for three years, and then I didn't conceive for another three. By then, we were both more than ready. I was hoping for a girl. Throughout my life, I had just always assumed that I'd have a daughter. When I was young, I never dreamt about my wedding day, but I did dream about my daughter.

Tim also wanted to have a daughter; he'd longed to have children. Because of his parents divorcing when he was young, Tim has always wanted to be the kind of hands-on father he had never had. We were both overjoyed when Blake finally entered the world. And we felt the same when Chase followed.

When I became pregnant the third time, I just felt inside that it was another boy. Tim, wanting to be positive, sent me a card that said, "Congratulations, babe, on the

birth of our daughter.” I knew that the card was an expression of his love, and I really appreciated it, but I just knew that it was wrong. Still, I never prayed for a girl—I didn’t believe in messing with fate—I just prayed that I would be happy either way.

When I delivered Austin in August of 2002, I felt joy as I held my little darling tight. I wanted no baby other than him. But I will never forget the look on Tim’s face when he saw that brown-haired little boy. I think that for a moment he was afraid that I would be disappointed. But he quickly realized that I was more than just okay. Nevertheless, later that day he said to me, “Let’s go to China.”

We had talked about adopting a baby girl from China when we first married back in 1991, and I loved that he wanted to continue to expand our family.

Early on in our marriage, Tim would tell me the story of our future deaf daughter, saying that she would look and act exactly like me. “She’ll be blonde with two pig-tails, wear a red dress and black shoes, and carry a black purse,” he’d say, grinning. “And she’ll have a strong personality. She’ll think that she runs the house! She’ll be classy, smart, and stylish.” He also said that she’d look just like the Coppertone baby from the television commercial—the little girl who looks back while a cute puppy pulls at her bathing suit, revealing her adorable, little white butt.

I laughed and I believed him, not only because he was describing my reason for being, but also because I was always so blown away by Tim’s ability to tell stories—they were always so graphic, visual, and funny. I’ve always been

fascinated by ASL and, in particular, Tim's ASL, how he just paints a picture. It's similar to when a hearing person reads a story to a child and the tone of their voice just captures them. Tim made our future daughter seem so real, so alive, that I could practically reach out and touch her.

When Blake was born in 1997, Tim was beside himself with joy. I was sitting in the hospital bed still exhausted from giving birth, and Tim was sitting in the chair next to me. The nurse did the BAER hearing test to check Blake's hearing right in the room when he was born, and he passed instantly. She jumped for joy, while Tim, my mother, and I just stared at her. Looking back, I think that she had never been in that situation before and realized that she might have made us feel a little uncomfortable because when she left the room, she never came back.

Having a *hearing* child, now that was news. I was thrilled for Blake. I wanted him to have the world at his fingertips. But had he been born deaf, I would have been just fine with it. But I thought that Tim was going to faint—not because he was upset that Blake was hearing but from the shock of it.

For Tim, finding out that his child was hearing was probably just as shocking as when hearing parents find out that their child is deaf. Perhaps it shouldn't have been such a surprise. The genetic counselor we saw when we first started dating told us that we had a 50 percent chance of having hearing children, so Tim knew that there was a definite possibility. Even though he had many hearing friends by then, including some of his best friends, I think that

growing up in a family that was so steeped in Deaf Culture and in the Deaf community made the situation impossible for him to even imagine. It just did not compute. And there was little Blake all wrapped up in his hospital blanket, the first hearing child born into his family in well over a century.

For a split second, he wondered how on earth he'd raise a hearing child who would go to public school. He worried how he would communicate with Blake's hearing friends because he wouldn't be able to talk with them. What would happen at Blake's birthday parties since Blake's friends and their parents wouldn't know how to sign? These were all just passing thoughts—gone in a few seconds. After he was over the initial shock, the adjustment felt on par with having to buy blue clothes and trucks instead of pink clothes and dolls. Blake would just have to learn how to sign.

Tim had to make some changes, however, now that we had a hearing child. For example, he had to learn the correct volume for electronics. I remember once before when a few of his hearing friends had come over to watch a baseball game, they told him that he'd turned the volume on the television up so high that it made the entire house shake. Living with deaf people his whole life, he had no reason to be aware of the intricacies of sound. He would turn on the car radio and sort of dance to the beat, only to find out from a hearing friend that he was dancing to a talk show.

When each of the kids was born, we turned on the television for audio stimulation and also played mood music on a boom box to help them fall asleep. My family gave us Beethoven, Mozart, and country music CDs, and told us to

turn the volume on the boom box up to five. I, too, needed to be reminded about when I made noise—whether it was turning on the television, closing the cabinets, or with my voice, even—and to be quieter. I had forgotten.

* * *



TIM HAD CHARMED me with our deaf daughter story for years. After Blake was born, he stopped telling it. We were just so busy with our lives, and even though each pregnancy brought another opportunity to have a daughter, it wasn't until I was pregnant with Austin, that Tim, being so sure that I was carrying a girl, brought her up again.

Two months after Austin's birth, we registered with Great Wall China Adoption, an international adoption agency in Austin, Texas, where we'd lived for eight years prior to moving to Sioux Falls. Adopting a deaf infant girl seemed impossible, as there aren't any adoption agencies that help you find one. Most deaf babies available for adoption are toddlers, and with three children aged five, three, and one, we thought that an infant would most easily blend in.

We had the perfect plan—we'd go to China when Austin was two, giving us plenty of time to prepare for our fourth child. We would take the trip with my close friend Ann Marie and her husband, Jon. She and I had met back in 1988 at the Miss Deaf America pageant. She was Miss Deaf Minnesota and the first runner-up at the pageant.

The first time I met Ann Marie, I was sitting in a restaurant with Angie and our two chaperones. Ann Marie

and her chaperone were sitting in the booth right behind us. We all ended up sitting together and having a great time. Ann Marie was beautiful, tall, and slender with brown, wavy hair. She was oral but signed fluently like me. Years later, after becoming one of my best friends, she was always giving me guff about winning the crown, saying that I'd won because I'd slept with the judges. "Yeah, you're right," I shot back. "I *was* smart enough to do that!"

Ann Marie was very hard of hearing but not profoundly deaf like me, so she was able to hear with hearing aids. Her parents were both hearing like mine, but neither of them had learned how to sign. Her father had quit school early, and her mother had only graduated high school. They sent Ann Marie to hearing schools and didn't expose her to other deaf people. Having no exposure to deafness themselves, they believed that if Ann Marie learned to speak she'd learn to hear. She was very lonely growing up compared to me.

After the Miss Deaf America Pageant, we reconnected the following summer at the YLC, where she was working as a counselor. Then we were in and out of touch for about ten years, connecting mostly through business. In 2003, she moved to Sioux Falls to work at Communication Service for the Deaf (CSD), a nonprofit organization where Tim and I were working that provided communication access to deaf people.

When the ADA was passed in 1990, Title IV of the Act, the part that Tim had worked on while he was working for John McCain, mandated that Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) (enabling us to use the TTY to

communicate with hearing people through the public telephone network) be provided for us. This was a real breakthrough because, as a result, the telephone was finally no longer a barrier for us. TRS put the Deaf community on a much more equal playing field with our hearing counterparts. I had been working for Sprint for eleven years when the company entered the market to establish TRS. At that point, we were able to communicate with hearing people but only by using TTY machines and text.

When video technology came along, it opened up amazing new possibilities for deaf people whose primary language was ASL. CSD, along with other organizations and community leaders, argued that although Title IV of the ADA mandated TTY and its relay services, video technology was a truer representation of the spirit of the law. (The ADA called it “functionally equivalent.”) What could be more functionally equivalent than using our own language (ASL) in real time with an interpreter? The Federal Communications Commission agreed, and the Video Relay Services (VRS) industry was born. CSD was the first company to take the risk and invest in developing videophones and the telecommunications services needed for it.

Ann Marie was the company’s chief operating officer, and I headed up their marketing department, so we worked closely together. That’s when our friendship really blossomed. Serendipitously, she also wanted to adopt a baby girl from China, so we went through the process together.

Our first step was to find a local adoption agency to do our home studies—a process whereby a social worker

evaluates you in your home, making sure that you will be fit parents. Both the local and the international adoption agencies would work together so that all things would be in place when it was time to go to China.

We found the New Horizons Adoption Agency, with an office right in Sioux Falls, and signed up with them in April. I filled out enough paperwork to pave a road to China, which made life even more hectic, but all in all, we were doing just fine for a family of five. It was only a matter of time before I would be flying to China to finally bring home my daughter.

A year later in June, when Tim and I were well into the adoption paperwork and processing, we were in Austin one weekend visiting Tim's sister and her kids. I had just come back from a meeting with the folks at Great Wall China Adoption and was telling Tim about it in the parking lot of his sister's apartment complex. Out of the blue, he just looked at me and said, "Brandi, I can't do it. Four kids are too many. I'm sorry."

"What?" I said, trying to breathe.

"We have three wonderful, healthy children," he continued.

"I know. But I want a girl. You said that we could—"

"We hardly see them enough as it is," he replied, cutting me off and becoming more and more upset. "Always dropping them off at day care, being away on business trips all the time. . . . What kind of parents would we be?"

"You're right, I know," I said, "But—"

"No, Brandi. I just can't do it. I'm sorry."

There was no room for discussion. He was adamant, and I knew better than to try to reason with him. I backed off and didn't say anything else. The kids were sitting in the car, and I didn't want to make a scene.

So the summer began with me trying to fix Tim's perception of the situation, believing that if he didn't feel so overwhelmed by having three children, he might be more open to having a fourth. I became supermom, the consummate wife and mother, trying to make life perfect for him by taking on extra responsibilities and lessening his. I got up with the kids, fed and drove them to school and day care, went to work, and then picked them up, drove home, and had dinner waiting on the table for Tim when he came home from work. All he had to do was enjoy the kids before they went to bed. I cleaned the house, did the laundry and food shopping, picked up the dry cleaning, and brought the kids to and from play dates. I did the same thing on weekends. Before that, I'd always asked Tim for help (and he always did his share and never complained). Now, I didn't even ask him.

Doing all of that wasn't even what stressed me out. What stressed me out was the fact that Tim had said no and that my paperwork for China was going to expire in a few months if I didn't complete it. What stressed me out was thinking about how I was going to let go of my longing for a daughter if he didn't change his mind. What really hurt was standing next to someone who had a baby girl—in the store, the doctor's office, at school. I just crumbled inside. I actually felt physical pain. When I went clothes

shopping for the boys, I'd trained myself not to look at the girls' section and only pay attention to the boys' clothes.

I was in a desperate state. I even thought about signing Tim's name on the China documents and sending them in without telling him. I'd go to China alone, get the baby, and bring her home. What would he do? Close the door on me? *He wouldn't do that*, I thought. I realized that even if I could pull that off, I didn't want to. I wanted Tim's support and was struggling because I didn't have it.

What made things even more difficult was that I completely identified with Tim's position. I knew how he'd hated telling me no and had struggled to do it. The fact that he was so adamant—even harsh—only showed how his heart was truly aching. When he married me, he knew how much I wanted a daughter. He was in a real predicament with his deep need conflicting so much with mine. He also knew how determined I was, and I think that scared him. I got it. I knew that he was questioning what it meant to be a good parent, knowing that young children like ours needed so much attention.

At one point, before our family moved to Sioux Falls, he lived there without us for three months, traveling back and forth to Austin, where I had remained with the three boys. He did not like that; he had regrets when we were apart. He had always strived to keep his life in balance, going to work, taking care of himself, and also being there for the kids—a senior vice president trying to be a good career man, husband, and father. He was a realist and a family man 100 percent—the most involved father I had



ever seen—and he had been from day one. And not because he felt he *had* to but because he *wanted* to be there for his children. He didn't want them to think that he was only thinking of himself. He wanted quality time with them and believed in his gut that it wouldn't be fair to them to add another child to our family.

I loved him more because I understood his reasons. When I told people of my longing for a girl, they looked at me like I was crazy, pointing out that I already had three beautiful and healthy children. I knew that three children were plenty, that Tim and I were incredibly lucky, and that having a fourth child would be insane. But my yearning overrode all of it.

Despite the enormous conflict, it didn't really seem to impact our relationship. Between the kids, work, and traveling, we were both just so busy, there was no time to dwell on it or let resentment fester. Although I was upset, I also truly understood his position and did my best to not let my emotions come between us.

I didn't bring the subject up again until our anniversary, when I thought, *Tonight, I'm going to convince him.* That morning I went out early and bought Tim a newspaper and his favorite coffee from Starbucks. That evening, at Foley's Steak House, I brought the subject up at dinner. He was as firm as ever. I sat there and cried.

The following day, Ann Marie, who knew Tim very well, said to me while I was sitting on her living room couch and still crying, "Brandi, you need to prepare yourself. Tim may never change his mind." Her words made

me want to gasp, the way that hearing the truth often does when you're not expecting it. Yet, even though hearing what she said was so difficult, I loved her for saying it, knowing that she was only trying to help and didn't want to see me hurt. Not many people have the ability to sit down with a friend and tell it to them straight with such compassion and understanding. I knew in my heart that I might eventually have to face that truth, but I wasn't there yet. I just thought, *Nope, I'm not going to think about that until the time comes.*

When the last weekend in September rolled around, the pressure was really on because my paperwork for China was going to expire on November 1st. I hadn't mentioned anything to Tim since our anniversary dinner. As a last-ditch attempt, I decided to write him a letter explaining my yearning for a daughter. He was planning on visiting his grandfather in New Jersey, so right before he left for the airport I gave him the letter, asking him to read it on the plane. The Sioux Falls newspaper had written an article on China adoptions a couple weeks before that had a picture of a little Chinese girl with huge, chubby cheeks. I had cut it out and put it on my desk at work. I put the picture in with the letter.

Dear Tim,

I write this letter because all of my recent attempts to convey my desire to have a daughter to you have failed. I only ask that you read it with an open heart and mind. I want you to understand that I love our sons with my entire

being. Every day, after waking up in the morning and before going to sleep at night, I have prayed for acceptance that I was meant to only have sons.

I understand how blessed we are to have three healthy, incredible boys. I understand, better than you think, that four children would be too many. We both work full time and want to be there for our children. To add a fourth—ouch—how would we juggle our time and responsibilities? I tell myself to be grateful for what we have—there are so many childless couples out there who desire children, and we have three!

But my need for a daughter is so great that I don't know what else to do other than to continue pursuing that dream. It's like a calling that I must answer. The fact that we did not have a biological daughter only convinces me more that she is out there somewhere—waiting for us to bring her home.

Yet, I cannot pursue this dream without you. I love you, and you are an incredible father. Years ago, you spoke to me of a little girl in a red dress with a black purse and two pigtails. I've seen her in my dreams throughout the years. I ask you to find it in your heart to help me find her and bring her home.

As soon as Tim's plane landed in Newark, he texted me. "Hey, good letter," he said. "Let's discuss when I get home." Sunday evening after he returned home and the boys were in bed, we sat down on the couch and talked. Years later, he said that at the time, he realized he had been

too closed-minded about the situation and wanted to be more open. However, looking back, I think that something so much grander had also taken place. I think that Tim's openness was like a signal to the universe. That night in the living room, he told me that even though he still felt that having four children would be too many, we could go ahead and pursue the China adoption. "I cannot deny you your daughter," he said.

The following day, I completed the paperwork for China.

Exactly one week later, on October 4, while pulling out of a friend's driveway, I received an email that changed everything. It was from the New Horizons Adoption Agency.

Hi Brandi!

We have a question for you and Tim. We have a six-month-old baby girl in foster care who has been diagnosed with a severe hearing loss. The birth mother was exposed to someone with chicken pox when she was pregnant and then got a virus called CMV. The baby's brain scan shows that everything is okay there, and there is no syndrome attached to her condition. Would you and Tim like to show a profile to this birth mother for her to consider you for adopting her baby? Please let me know after you and Tim have had a chance to talk about it. We plan to show the birth mother various profiles from prospective adoptive parents and let her choose the adoptive couple. Thanks! Marlys

It was as if the world had stopped turning. As sure as the sun rose and set, I knew that that baby was the daughter I'd been waiting for my whole life. She belonged with me, and I belonged with her. Joy welled up from within, as the knowledge of a divine order more elegant than I'd ever imagined permeated my entire being. Just one week before, Tim had said that he couldn't deny me my daughter. *And there she was.* Had he not said yes, then—or never said no—I might have missed her. It was too perfect!



Thanks for checking out this
preview of

Finding Zoe

By: Brandi Rarus and Gail Harris

Connect

BRANDIRARUS.COM



Order Today



BARNES & NOBLE



BAM!
BOOKS-A-MILLION