

*the*  
**PINK  
BONNET**

**LIZ TOLSMA**

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## *Dedication*

*To my children, Brian, Alyssa, and Jonalyn. You each have your unique adoption stories, but you each demonstrate the beauty that can come from brokenness. I love you more than you'll ever know. You are God's greatest blessings in my life.*



# Chapter One

Summer 1933

**M**omma, Momma, watch me.” Cecile Dowd turned from the old blackened cookstove where the chicken broth simmered and peeked into the bedroom at her brown-haired three-year-old daughter who jumped on the thin mattress.

“Millie Mae, be careful. You’ll fall.”

“No, Momma.” But at the next landing, her foot missed the edge of the bed, and she tumbled off.

Fat tears rolled down her cheeks, and wails cut the peace of the early afternoon. Cecile rushed to her and cradled Millie in her arms. “That’s why you must obey Momma. Then you won’t get hurt. Do you understand?”

Millie sniffled. “I be good.”

“Why don’t you play with your dolly so I can finish lunch?” Cecile kissed the top of her daughter’s head.

“Okay.” Millie picked up her secondhand, soft-bodied baby. She smoothed down the yellow dress Cecile had sewn for the doll. “My baby pretty.”

Cecile smiled. “Yes, she is. But she’s not as pretty as you are.”

“Momma’s pretty.”

Could a heart fill and burst with love? Millie followed Cecile into the kitchen and plopped on the floor with the toy, pretending to pour tea for her.

*Good. Maybe a few uninterrupted minutes.* While the stock bubbled, Cecile cut and buttered bread to eat with it. She wiped her hands on her apron. What was she feeling on it? Oatmeal. From breakfast. Great. She dashed to the bedroom to grab a clean apron.

From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Millie as she

toddled toward the hot oven.

“Millie.” She raced to the kitchen, caught the girl with her hand outstretched, and plopped the child into her too-small-for-her crib. Millie tugged on the already-peeling rose-peppered wallpaper. Maybe that would keep her occupied for a few minutes.

Before Cecile could tie her apron, Millie climbed over the crib’s rails and headed toward the kitchen. “Millie, no.”

The girl stopped for just a second then continued in the direction of danger. Even with only two rooms in the apartment, keeping track of her was impossible.

She scooped up Millie and balanced the little one on her hip. Millie squirmed and hung upside down in an attempt to break free from Cecile’s hold.

“Stop it this instant, Millie Mae. Do you hear me?” The child deserved a harsher punishment, but Cecile had no energy to mete it out. Her arms ached from the effort required to maintain her grip. When Millie continued to wriggle, Cecile swatted her little bottom.

The child let loose with an earsplitting howl.

Tears burned the back of Cecile’s throat. “Hush, hush, Momma’s sorry. But you must behave.” Oh, how could Nathaniel have left her alone to deal with all of this?

A year after his death from an infection, they were low on money. Just a few months’ worth of rent were left in the bank account. Her part-time job at the nursery school helped, but the savings continued to dwindle.

She glanced at the letter lying on the corner of the worn kitchen table. One she’d sent to her parents in Massachusetts, begging for help. Another one returned unopened.

With Nathaniel’s parents deceased, she had no one else to turn to.

She sat the girl on one of two rough chairs at the scarred table and gave her a pencil and an envelope containing a doctor’s bill she couldn’t pay. “You draw Momma a pretty picture.”

“Okay.” As she got down to work, Millie stuck out her lower lip.

She resembled Nathaniel so much when she did that. "I draw me and Momma."

"That sounds wonderful. I can't wait to see it." Cecile relaxed her shoulders. How long this would last was anyone's guess.

From outside came shouts, a couple having a fight, an infant screaming at the top of his lungs, dogs barking. What she wouldn't give for the peace and quiet of the New England farm where she'd grown up. But Nathaniel was a dreamer, and he'd envisioned making his fortune in Memphis by selling automobiles in the booming market and saving enough money to buy his own dealership.

The summer heat pressed on her, and she wiped the sweat that trickled across her brow and down her temple. Memphis proved not to be a land flowing with milk and honey but a wasteland. What he'd earned, they'd lost in the stock market crash just after Millie's birth.

She picked up a pair of Millie's frilly white socks and went to return them to the bedroom. An acrid odor, something burning, reached her. She hustled to the kitchen. Millie had pulled her chair to the stove and stood stirring the broth, sloshing much of it onto the hot burner.

Cecile grabbed the child. "You aren't supposed to be by the stove."

"I help, Momma."

Someday, the girl would be helpful, but today wasn't that day. "I know you want to help, but you are too little." Cecile stood her in the tiny room's far corner. "You stay there."

In no time, Millie joined Cecile in front of the hot oven. "No, you don't go near the stove. Have a drink of water." She reached into the cupboard for a glass. As Cecile's fingers brushed it, Millie tugged on her. The cup slipped from the cabinet and shattered on the floor.

"Millicent Mae Dowd, look at what you made me do." With each word, Cecile's voice rose in pitch.

Millie opened her mouth and released a wail to rival that of any injured cat.

The apartment door swung open. *No, please, no.* A visit from Mrs. Ward was the last thing Cecile needed.

“Cecile, dear, is everything okay?” Stooped, gray-haired Mrs. Ward from downstairs popped in. Not what Cecile needed, an annoyed neighbor snooping on the disaster area they called home. She pulled her lace-trimmed handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her nose.

“I’m sorry. We broke a glass. I’ll keep Millie quiet.” She lifted the child into her arms and straightened her ruffled dress.

Mrs. Ward surveyed the room in a single sweep. “I’m far too old to do much good, but maybe I can help you in some way.” Her honey-smooth Southern accent washed over Cecile.

*No. God told you to work with your own hands.* “We’re fine.”

The old woman shuffled toward Cecile, her cane tapping the way. She touched Cecile’s shoulder, and Cecile fought the urge to weep like Millie. If only Momma were here. If only Momma still loved her and accepted her.

“You can’t do this by yourself, but I have a solution. Miss Georgia Tann is doing wonderful things at the Tennessee Children’s Home Society. She’ll take this little darlin’ in and watch her for you until you can manage. And it won’t cost you a thing. Just temporary, you know. Soon you’ll have Millie home and everything back to rights.”

Cecile squeezed her daughter. “I could never give her up. Not in a million years.” Even if it meant Cecile didn’t eat or sleep, she’d do what she had to do to keep Millie.

Didn’t Mrs. Ward understand? Millie was all Cecile had left of Nathaniel. The little piece of him she adored and cherished. Millie was everything to her. The very breath in her lungs.

“Bless your heart. At least let me get a broom and sweep up this mess.”

“No!” The word burst from Cecile’s lips with more force than she intended. She struggled to lower her voice. “Thank you. I have everything under control.”

Mrs. Ward patted Cecile’s arm, her hand gnarled with arthritis



and rough from years of hard work. "Of course you do, but think about what I said." She shuffled away and out the door.

"I hungry, Momma."

Cecile brushed Millie's cheek with the back of her fingers. "Lunch isn't quite ready. As soon as it is, we'll eat."

They could do this. They would weather this storm. Hardship was part of life. Once more, she went to the bedroom and sat Millie on the floor. Cecile stopped to straighten the bed's quilt. In seconds, Millie was gone, and great sobbing cries came from the other room.

Cecile rushed to her daughter, who stood in the middle of the shattered glass, blood dripping from her hand.

No, she couldn't do this. She couldn't do it at all.



Cecile's shoes might as well have been filled with lumps of iron for how heavy they were and how her legs burned as she climbed the three stories' worth of creaky, uneven stairs. A sandwich and her mattress called to her.

What a long day. And a fruitless one. No full-time employment. The depression held the country in its grip. Not a single company wanted to hire a woman with no job experience. Not even the cotton company where Nathaniel had found a job after they lost their automobile business. The factory was where he was working when he was injured and got a blood infection, the one that killed him.

She shook away the thoughts before she burst into tears. Right now, she had more pressing problems.

After pausing on the landing for a moment to catch her breath and wipe the sweat from the back of her neck, she turned to the right, to Mrs. Ward's apartment. The elderly woman had agreed to watch Millie for a few hours. If they had both survived the encounter, it would be a miracle.

All was silent. Mrs. Ward must have gotten Millie to take a nap. Cecile would have to ask what her secret was. She knocked at the door.

Mrs. Ward ushered Cecile inside, the bun in her gray hair so

tight it kept her wrinkled skin from sagging. “Did you have any success, my dear?”

Cecile shook her head. “All I want now is to snuggle with Millie, although, with this nap she’s having, she’s not going to want to sleep tonight. You’re amazing. She won’t lay down for me.”

“Have a seat. I’ll pour you some tea.”

“That’s very sweet of you, but I would just like to go home. I’m exhausted.”

“Have a seat.” Mrs. Ward hardened her gray eyes the same way Momma used to when she was upset with Cecile.

She thumped into the well-worn chair, and Mrs. Ward settled beside her.

“I’ve seen how hard it’s been on you, darlin’, since your husband died. Bless your heart, Millie is a handful, and you need more work to support yourself.”

“We’re managing.” They were for now, but how much longer could she go on this way?

“Remember I mentioned the Tennessee Children’s Home Society a few days ago?”

“Yes.” What was this about?

“It was for the best, dear.”

“What was?” Her middle cramped. Where was Millie?

“I couldn’t bear to see you struggling. And with you having to work, the child needs to be cared for.”

“I’ll figure it out.” She swallowed hard.

“I called Miss Tann.”

Cecile jumped from her seat, her heart doing the Charleston in her chest. “You did what?”

“She’ll take care of Millie. Find her a good family, one who can give her the things you can’t.”

A buzz filled Cecile’s head, drowning out the rest of what Mrs. Ward said. “Millie is . . .”

“With Georgia Tann. She does such wonderful work for children.”

Cecile again lost track of Mrs. Ward's words. *Millie gone? That couldn't be.* She was Cecile's daughter not Mrs. Ward's. "You had no right. How could you give away my child?"

Now the old lady had the decency to study her short fingernails. "Well, I . . . It was quite easy. And Miss Tann told me it was fine. That we had to do what was in Millie's best interest."

Cecile's chest was about to explode. "Her best interest? What about being with her mother? A mother who loves her more than the sun and the moon? What did you do, forge my signature?"

Mrs. Ward picked at a hangnail.

Cecile grabbed Mrs. Ward by the shoulders and almost shook the stuffing from her. "My baby! My baby! Where is she? I have to get her back."

"I don't know." Mrs. Ward leaned back in her chair.

Cecile released her grip. "How could you? That woman kidnapped my baby."

"Don't get yourself in a fuss. Think of Millie. She's the most important person in this horrible mess."

"She's mine. No one else can have her."

"You're hysterical. Let me get you a drink of water."

"Water isn't going to solve my problems. I need my daughter back. Millie! Millie!" She ran from the apartment, down the stairs, and to the street.

"Millie! Millie!"

No sweet chatter. No big hugs. No snuggles in the night. Nothing.

Cecile fell to her knees in the middle of the walk. "Millie, oh Millie!" She sobbed for a long while. When she'd exhausted her store of tears, she wiped her eyes and raised her focus to the heavens. "I promise, Millicent Mae, I swear to you, I will find you and get you back. I will never give up on you."

She had to act. Fast. Before Miss Tann snatched Millie away forever.