

A Strange Birthday

Caleb pulled up to the house he'd been kicked out of. The kids were all but vibrating with sugar and excitement over meeting their newborn sister. A mischievous smile spread across Caleb's face as he retrieved his children's things from the back of his truck. Nick and Isaac hugged their dad and grabbed their backpacks, then ran into the house. Addie grabbed Caleb's hand and pulled him toward the front door.

Caleb dragged his feet suddenly uncertain how he would feel. Addie raced into the house ahead of him impatient with his slow pace. Each of his other children had been in his arms moments after their births. He'd actually delivered Isaac on the side of the road when they didn't quite make it to the hospital. The new baby, Grace, was more than a day old now and he hadn't even glimpsed so much as a picture of her yet. Resolutely, Caleb took consolation in knowing he would see her in a moment and that would have to be enough for now.

Joe loomed in the doorway and moved to block Caleb's way as he tried to follow the kids inside. "Let me get that for you," Joe said and grabbed Addison's bag from Caleb.

"No problem. I don't mind," Caleb replied lightly.

"Look, now's not a good time—" Joe began hesitantly.

"I just want to see her. I swear I'll only stay a minute and then I'm gone," Caleb reasoned.

"Son, I don't think this is a good idea. There will be a better time later," Susan, Joe and Caleb's mom said.

"Hey, where's dad?" Addie's question carried out from the living room.

"I think it would be best if you go now," Susan counseled gently. The look on her face begged him to listen while simultaneously apologizing for her role in this scene.

Go? How could he go? He hadn't seen the baby yet. Caleb's mind reeled. Joe moved to block the door more effectively. They weren't going to let him see the baby, his baby. He wasn't going to ask to hold her. He just wanted to see the child he knew was his. There was no way she could be Joe's. His mind screamed, but must have lost connection with his mouth. He was trying to yell there would never be a better time to meet his own daughter than on his own birthday. What more precious gift could he receive than a new child? Instead, Caleb's mouth just kind of hung open in disbelief. His mind raged on impotently disengaged from its sound system.

For reasons he didn't understand, Caleb turned and left. Later, he could only guess that he was used to doing what his mom said without hesitation. She'd always been right in the past

no matter how much it hurt to leave. Joe followed Caleb out to the car.

"Thanks for being reasonable and giving everyone some time to sort out this whole situation," Joe said.

Without warning, Caleb punched his older brother. The hit landed right on Joe's prehistoric jaw and knocked him back a pace. He's the big brother. He's supposed to look out for Caleb. He stole Caleb's baby; his whole family! How could Caleb ever forgive Joe? Caleb hoped Joe's jaw was broken.

Caleb jumped in his truck, he couldn't go home. Numbly, he drove to the store and bought an inexpensive paring knife. After he got back in the car, he headed out of town toward Lake View Trail. The drive only took about twenty minutes. Caleb had been hiking, camping and fishing in the area his whole life. It seemed as good a place as any to do what he had in mind.

He parked the car, grabbed the knife and hiked up the trail a ways. Looking up the hill, he decided to go off the marked track and stopped under a beautiful spreading oak in a secluded clearing. Caleb rolled his sleeve back, exposing his one and only tattoo: Alyssa, Addison, Nicholas, Isaac. His family listed in the order he got them. He wanted to remove Alyssa's name from his body, but hadn't done anything about it yet. Not much for body art, Caleb and some of the guys went in to get tattoos after a big fire where they got burned over and barely survived. He opted to list the most important thing to him permanently on his skin.

Turning the outside of his arm with the tattoo toward the ground, Caleb pulled out the knife. On his thirty-sixth birthday, he was ready to kill himself. As he held that big knife to his forearm, he felt the cold steel start to cut his skin, but all I could hear was Addie's voice asking for him. He couldn't do it. Though, he did manage a shallow half-inch cut before he stopped. It wasn't bleeding very much, but Caleb knew he'd need to bandage it up soon so he put the knife back in the bag and retraced the steps to his car.

Once a firefighter, always a firefighter, Caleb had a more than adequate first aid kit in his truck. What firefighter doesn't? The strangest thing happened in that very parking lot. As he finished fixing up his arm and cleaning off the knife, a car narrowly missed crashing into him. A man jumped out frantically screaming something about the baby. Caleb's first thought was something was wrong with Gracie and this guy was coming to get him. He immediately recognized there was no way this complete stranger could have any idea who he was or what had happened to him today.

"My wife, the baby, its coming! Help us, we're not going to make the hospital!" the man said frantically.

As soon as Caleb looked in the man's car, the situation became obvious. The woman in the passenger seat was clearly in the final stages of labor.

"Let's get you down on the ground," he said switching into medical mode. Caleb spread out his gym towel as the husband called for an ambulance. Then, the men eased the woman to the ground.

"Breathe, Kayla," her husband coached.

"Let me take a look and see how you are progressing," Caleb narrated calmly all the while wonder what were the chances of this couple stumbling onto him on today of all days in the middle of nowhere and having that specific emergency. He should've bought lotto tickets the luck he was having.

"Mark! We shouldn't have waited at home so long! I can't do this out here in the middle of nowhere!" she screamed.

"You can do this. I'm a firefighter and this isn't my first roadside delivery. The head is coming, get ready for a hard push with the next contraction," Caleb instructed calmly though his hands were shaking.

"See, we'll be okay, honey. God's watching over us today," Mark reassured her.

Caleb didn't feel like God was watching over him that day. As he caught the screaming baby boy, he pondered the ludicrous situation he found himself in. He went there to die, but ended up bringing a new life into the world.

On top of it all, they had to sterilize the knife Caleb slit his arm with and use it to cut the umbilical cord. Oh the irony of the whole situation. As the ambulance pulled up, the couple said they want to name their son after him. Caleb didn't even name his own sons after himself. Caleb Scott Cameron was born today in the parking lot at the base of Lake View Trail because Caleb hadn't killed himself. What a strange birthday.