

# Pumpkin's Arrival

January 2006

"Awww! She's so cute! Where's her mother?"

Hmmm...I'm not quite sure how to answer that question, coming from my husband. How do I say, "I'm her mother...and by the way, you're her father." Well, at least for the weekend. Rather than explain, I just look... and smile.

Deric's facial expression immediately changes. "No you didn't. Why would you do that? You know I'm going out of town in the morning."

"I know," I say, growing more and more aware of how much of a bad idea this could be. The last foster child I took in, (and also my first), was an absolute disaster. I was saturated with his tantrums, and tried to come to terms with the fact that this child—this beautiful boy who sucked his thumb so much he created a perfect arch in his teeth—had assuredly been raised by a pack of wolves in the Alaskan terrain. I remembered the dreaded call to the social worker, and as I hung up the phone, Bentley looking up at me, eyes completely dry, and saying, "Mommy, do you want me to stop crying?"

*Mommy?* Something maternal in me cracked, and I wondered—questioned—what in the world I was doing. I shook my head, "No, baby, if it makes you feel better, you can keep crying." And back he had went to screaming, kicking, and rolling as I gathered his few belongings. The pain was still fresh, remembering how incredibly hard it was to drop him off at that brick office building, to hear him, panicked, saying, "I'll stop crying! I'll be good!" But it was too late. I was exhausted, scared, and at my wit's end. I had never felt that way before, especially not

towards a child. But I literally feared for my safety—he was so out of control. Now, here I was again. *What was I thinking?*

I agreed that Thursday night—on the third call—to accept a foster child, making it clear I would accept this child as a respite placement, only for the long Martin Luther King weekend. I emphasized I had to work on Tuesday morning, and this child was to be picked up at precisely 8 a.m. outside the main gate to the naval base on Tuesday morning—and please, do not be late. This was going to be my test, the decision for me as to whether to retain or surrender my foster care license, depending on how things worked out with this child.

A tall, slender social worker with frizzy auburn hair rang my doorbell that evening—a toddler clutching one of her large hands, a binder in the other, and a plastic garbage bag of clothes reeking of cigarette smoke tucked under her arm. I imagined what this little girl would look like, but I was so completely unprepared for what I saw. Long, disheveled hair hid big, brown eyes. Fear had recently been etched onto her face, and she held a death grip on the social worker's index finger. She was two-and-a-half-years old, wearing clothes for an eighteen-month old, and absolutely determined she was not staying with me.



I sit on the carpeted floor, the couch supporting my back, while Addison sits at a safe distance against the love seat. The *Lion King* movie seems to appease her as she takes note of her surroundings. Anytime I try to talk to her, she lowers her head, looks up with distrustful eyes, and declares, “No!” After a few side-glances and growls, I think it best to stop trying to talk to her and let her relax after all she has been through today.

In the midst of packing for his weekend trip to Maryland, Deric tries to make brief conversations with Addison as he moves from room to room, gathering shoes, belts, and a jacket for the northern weather.

“Hey, cutie! What’s your name?” he asks.

“No!” with a grunt, a growl, and a scowl is the reply.

Deric walks into the guest room where he keeps his clothes. Walking through the living room, he gives her another wave. “Hi, cutie! Do you have a real name?” he asks again.

"No!" she hisses with passion and determination. "Unhhn! No!"

I just look at her, expressionless. Well, she isn't crying, she isn't screaming, she isn't having a tantrum, and she certainly does not make my heart race with fear and uncertainty. I can handle this toddler attitude for a weekend.

More unanswered hellos are traded, until finally, Deric gives up and says, "Well, I'll just call you Joe. Your name is Joe. Hi, Joe!"

Addison does not like that at all. She screams, I jump, and Deric walks away with complete indifference. When Deric comes back with an armful of clothes, he waves again with his free hand. "Hi, Joe! How ya doin', Joe? You okay, Joe?" and continues walking to the bedroom without waiting for a response. Addison growls and whines in exasperation, then scurries into the adjoining dining room, hiding underneath the table behind the pillared table leg. She positions herself perfectly to observe Deric's every movement while still being able to watch the Lion King on the big screen television. It becomes a test of wills, and Addison finally realizes she is outmatched. While I have given in to the fact she wants to be left alone, Deric is relentless in smiling, waving, and calling her by her new name—Joe—at every opportunity. Finally, the growls stop, and Addison makes wide-eyed contact with Deric. He stares back at her, not realizing the bond being formed.

