

Chapter 1

Born with a Beard

I was born with a beard. This was not something I had planned on. I didn't know how or why it was. It was just there. It was the first thing they noticed about me.

The doctor, although a professional, almost dropped me. The nurses stared and, behind their face masks, their jaws dropped open. I looked around and instead of the pleasant and welcoming looks I had been expecting, I saw shock, dismay, bewilderment, and fear. Even on my parents' faces. I cried.

This broke the spell that my entrance had caused. My parents, though puzzled, instinctively comforted me as they looked at each other for support. Later,

they drove me home from the hospital and, when they thought I was sleeping, I heard my father say, “Nobody in my family was born with a beard. Heck, I didn’t even shave until I was nineteen.

As he finished saying this he took his eyes off the road and looked pointedly at my mother. She responded, “Well, no one in my family was like that. We were all girls.”

My father was a businessman and he wasn’t about to accept that. He said, “What about your mother’s mustache?”

My mother drew her breath in sharply and told him to keep his eyes on the road.

My father had a sense of humor, but sometimes he didn’t get far with it.

When we got home, they propped me up in a chair and took a good look at me. I was looking at them, too. Dad had a serious expression on his face like he had just eaten something he regretted. He was what I took to be tall, with just a hint of trouble around the middle. This he hid fairly well with

a cardigan sweater. His hair was dark with streaks of white and, unlike his son, he was clean-shaven. His hands were folded as if in prayer, in front of his face. For all I knew, he was praying. I liked him.

I liked the way Mom looked, too. She had a wonderful kind of glow to her. Her hair was the color of my beard but with tiny, elegant streaks of gray through it. She looked sophisticated in her cotton suit but, as she looked at me, she couldn't keep herself from giggling and making little hiccuping noises. I responded with noises of my own, which she found charming.

She said to my father, "You see, he's just like a real baby."

To me, she said, "Goo, goo, goo."

I could have done without the goo, goo, goo, but that's how she was. Her eyes were bright and they shone at me, her baby boy. She looked good



for just having had a baby with a beard, and I loved her. I was confident that we would make a happy family.

Just as this soothing thought settled on me, a small child walked into the room. This was my sister and, as she came closer, I reached out my arms to her. I was grateful to have a playmate and I mumbled a message of welcome to her.

She shrieked, "Mom, he's got a beard!" and hid behind my father.

My mother said, "Of course he's got a beard. He's your father's son."

Dad wasn't laughing.

My sister would not stop. She said, "But he's an animal. He's like a dog."

At the time, I wasn't vain, but I knew I was not an animal and tried to say so. I growled something at my sister and she hid her face.

My father decided that it was time he took control. He did so in an odd way. He began by clearing his throat quite loudly. Not just a preparatory

“Ahem,” but a long drawn-out clearing of his throat and perhaps his mind. It was, in its own way, commanding. He sounded like a bear.

Finally, he said, “This is not an animal. This is your baby brother.”

My sister, who had, by this time, regained her usual unchildlike composure said, “But Dad, look at his face. That is not the face of a baby. What are we going to call him? Mr. Baby? Grandpa Baby?”

My mother, who was always understanding and who also had a firm grip on reality said, “This is the only brother you have,” and here she looked at my father, “and most likely the only brother you will have. He has a beard. I admit that is unusual, but it must be for a reason.”

“Yeah,” my sister said, “to save on bibs.”

My mother, without acknowledging my sister’s contribution, continued, “We don’t know what that reason is, but I’m sure, over time, it will become clear. He’s too young to shave, so we’re just going to have to get used to it.”

My father was nodding his head.

“Your mother is right. We don’t know why he’s like this, but you have to admit it’s a pretty good beard. Not quite Santa Claus, but respectable. Dashing in its own way. Revolutionary.”

My mother stiffened, “It’s not funny.”

Dad looked at my sister, who only raised her eyebrows, knowing any comment from her would be unwelcome.

I looked at the three of them and wished that I had the words to tell them that it didn’t matter if I had a beard; I was one of them. They were looking intently at me and I could see they were doubtful, but I felt happy. I was home and with my family and somehow it would all work out. At least, they had no intention of returning me to the hospital.

Just then my sister suggested, “Maybe we could take him back?”

Mom looked over at my sister and turned the parental spotlight on her, saying, “This is your brother. He’s small now but someday he will be

bigger than you. You might find it wise to be nice to him.” She added, “Plus, behind that beard is probably a great little baby.”

I nodded vigorously and almost fell off the chair.