

LORI WICK

White Chocolate  
*Moments*



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## **WHITE CHOCOLATE MOMENTS**

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*For Joyce Graves  
and the memory of  
Pastor Robert Graves.  
Your lives have touched mine  
in immeasurable ways.  
I thank God for you.*

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# Prologue

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**APRIL 1992**

“Will Quinn and Austin be at Grandpa’s?” eleven-year-old Arcineh Bryant asked about her cousins from the backseat of the car.

“Not today,” her mother answered. “Quinn has a competition.”

“With her horse?”

“Yes.”

The silence in the backseat was telling. Trevor and Isabella Bryant exchanged a swift look. They had forced their daughter to give up a dance performance for this event at her grandfather’s. Dance was very important to Arcineh, but she loved her grandfather, and it *was* his sixtieth birthday. That was what had motivated Arcineh to come peacefully, only to learn that the standard had not been so high with every member of the family.

“Will they be there at all?” Arcineh asked after a moment more.

“Not tonight. They might come late tomorrow night so they can visit with Dad on Sunday.”

“Might?” Arcineh’s voice dripped with disapproval.

“Well,” her father began, “it’s quite a distance away, and Quinn doesn’t compete until morning.”

Low muttering could be heard from the backseat, but neither parent commented. They had shared a similar conversation on this very topic. Both agreed with their daughter’s disapproval but knew better than to admit that to her.

“What are you studying right now in dance?” Trevor asked, his eyes on his daughter’s face in the rearview mirror.

“Ballroom,” Arcineh told him, her eyes meeting his.

“I’ve done some ballroom dancing myself,” Trevor told her, his eyes lighting with a smile.

“That sounds a bit scary,” Arcineh teased.

“Not at all,” Isabella put in. “Your father is very good.”

Arcineh laughed a little.

“I’ll tell you what,” Trevor said. “We’ll go dancing next weekend—big band and all that.”

“Where?” Arcineh was instantly taken, her eyes studying her father in the mirror.

“Suite 19 has big band sound.”

Trevor’s gaze flicked to Arcineh’s. Catching his smile in the mirror, Arcineh couldn’t resist saying, “I don’t know if I can be seen dancing with a man your age. It might ruin my reputation.”

Her parents found this hugely amusing and were still chuckling about it when they pulled into the circular driveway at Samuel Bryant’s large home. This was not just Trevor’s father but his boss. However, Trevor knew that the evening would be all fun. If Sam Bryant was good at anything—and he was actually good at many things—it was separating the office from the home. He worked very long hours but was very good at leaving the office behind.

“There you are!” Sam said the moment he set eyes on his youngest grandchild. Arcineh’s smile matched his own. They exchanged a hug before Sam kissed Isabella’s cheek and smiled at his son’s birthday greetings. Arcineh was the one to hand him his gift.

“Open it now,” she ordered, excitement filling her dark brown eyes.

“Very well,” Sam agreed, grabbing a seat because the present was large and a bit awkward. He knew before tearing back the paper that it must be a picture frame, but he was not prepared for the photo itself.

Trevor, Isabella, and Arcineh smiled out at him from a formal studio setting, each looking wonderful. Sam felt his throat close a little and took a moment to look up and smile at them.

“For the man who has everything, Sam,” Isabella teased him. “Family pictures always do the trick.”

“This is beautiful,” Sam said, standing to kiss her again. “And you,” he continued, looking down at Arcineh, “look fabulous.”

“It almost didn’t come in on time to get framed,” Arcineh said, not having heard the compliment, “but Mom talked them into hurrying it.”

“She’s good at that,” Sam said with a wink for his daughter-in-law. Moments later, more guests arrived and the four were separated.

Without her cousins there, Arcineh mingled for only a short time before making her way to the kitchen. As she expected, Violet, who cooked and managed the house for her grandfather, was there. They were fast friends.

“Look at you in that dress,” Violet said, laying out more hors d’oeuvres for the guests.

“I just got it.” Arcineh hopped onto the counter, smoothed the skirt of the black velvet dress, and reached for some cheese. “It’s all adults out there.”

“No Quinn today?”

Arcineh made a face. “She’s got a horse thing.”

“Well, you know you’re always welcome in here,” Violet said, smiling at her. “I might even put you to work.”

“In this dress? My mom would faint.”

“And speaking of Mom,” Isabella said from the doorway. “Hello, Violet.”

“Hello, Isabella. You look beautiful.”

“Thank you. And since we’re exchanging compliments, I’ll tell you the food is wonderful. Arcie,” her mother continued, shifting her attention. “I have some people I want you to meet.”

“I’m eating,” Arcineh said, stuffing food in her mouth just to make it true.

Violet turned so as not to be caught laughing, and Isabella gave her daughter a pointed look, one that had her moving out the door just moments later. She met some work associates of her father, but just as soon as she was able, she escaped back to the kitchen. Not until music was put on and the dancing began did Arcineh make another appearance. And because she loved music and dancing, the evening suddenly grew very short. Long before she was ready, her father was telling her it was time to go.

“Great party, Dad,” Trevor complimented, thanking his father as they took their coats from the waiting maid. As a rule Sam’s only staff was Violet, but for his sixtieth birthday, he’d gone all out.

“It was a great time, wasn’t it?” Sam agreed, feeling content that his family had stayed until the end, well past midnight. “Why don’t you stay over?” Sam suggested when the front door was finally opened and they all saw the rain that had begun to pour.

“Thanks, Dad,” Trevor wasted no time in saying, “but I think we want our own beds tonight.”

“All right. I’ll see you Monday” were Sam’s last words before he hugged his daughter-in-law and Arcineh again.

The Bryant family moved to get into the car that had been driven under the canopy by the hired valet, everyone wearing a smile.

“That was fun,” Arcineh said, settling in the backseat. “Quinn really missed out.”

Trevor and Isabella, who loved their daughter to distraction, were kind enough to agree, and also to remain quiet about the fact that Arcie hadn’t wanted to go in the first place.



CHAPTER  
*One*

Sam knew the moment Arcineh awoke because he'd been watching her face intently. Her eyes shifted around the hospital room before finding him.

"How are you?" Sam asked.

"ICU?" Arcineh whispered.

"No," Sam answered quietly, wondering if he should be worried that she hadn't remembered. "They moved you yesterday."

Arcineh nodded a little before staring into her grandfather's eyes, questions filling her gaze—not questions about the accident that only she survived, but about what would happen next. Sam, not always astute, read her thoughts this time.

"I don't want you to worry about the future. We'll be together," he said, his voice breaking a little. "We'll get through this."

"I can stay with you?"

"Forever."

She cried then for the first time, her face crumpling as the tears came. Sam got as close as he was able, whispering words of encouragement and comfort through his own tears.

Arcineh had had lots of visitors, most of whom she didn't even know were there, but for the moment, they were on their own sharing in this grief.



The funeral and graveside services for Trevor and Isabella Bryant were over. Arcineh, growing more proficient on her crutches, made her way through Sam's front door and into the spacious foyer, her older cousin, Quinn, close by.

"Where are you going to sit?" Quinn asked. "I'll bring you something to drink."

"The family room," Arcineh answered, only because she was already facing in that direction. She made her way there and carefully lowered herself onto one of the sofas. She felt cold and was crossing her arms when her Aunt Tiffany, her father's only sibling, entered the room. She saw Arcineh shiver and covered her with a blanket.

Neither one spoke, but Tiffany sat close. They were joined by the others at a slow pace. Quinn came with Arcineh's drink, and then Sam, and eventually Tiffany's husband, Jeremy, and their son and Quinn's older brother, Austin.

"Violet is making something to eat," Sam said to Arcineh. "Are you hungry?"

"A little," she said, having learned in the hospital that if a caregiver got you to eat, he felt he'd done his job.

"Are you up to the dining room, or do you want to eat in here?"

"In here," Arcineh answered without thinking. The hip that had been broken in the accident had begun to ache. The doctor said the surgery had gone very well, but feeling normal again would take time. Right now Arcineh was just glad to be out of the hospital. For a moment her mind went to home, her own home, and she felt the shivering again.

“Here you go,” Violet said as she appeared with a tray in her hands.

“This smells good,” Arcineh replied, taking in the soup, bread, and her favorite pudding, and at the same time trying not to let anyone see her shake. She didn’t know if it worked or not, but soon each person had his own plate and they sat around the room to eat. Their visiting was quiet and somewhat on the practical side, so Arcineh didn’t fully attend. Violet’s supper was very good, the best Arcineh had tasted in days, but given a choice, she would have chosen to sleep at the moment.



“Are you a light sleeper, Grandpa?” Arcineh asked at bedtime, her voice husky with fatigue. Her uncle, aunt, and cousins were all still there, but Sam had gone to Arcineh’s room to see her settled. It was the first night in the house for her since leaving the hospital.

“I am,” Sam said, not admitting how little sleep he was getting these days. “I’m planning to sleep with my door open. Should I open yours when I go to bed?”

“Maybe you should,” Arcineh agreed. “Will things be noisy for a while?”

“Probably not. I could just leave it open now.”

Arcineh nodded against the pillow and studied her grandfather’s face. The fine lines around his eyes seemed more pronounced in the light from the nightstand, and he looked as weary as she felt.

“What will you do with my dad’s office?”

“The one in our building?”

Again she nodded against the pillow.

“For a while, nothing. Beyond that I don’t know.”

Arcineh didn’t reply.

“Was there something you wanted?” Sam asked her.

"I don't know." She sounded a little lost and confused. "I guess I just want to visit and see it like it was."

"I'll remember that. Before I make any changes, I'll make sure you get there."

The eyes that had been watching everything so carefully now began to droop. Sam sat very still, and in spite of someone calling his name from the hallway, Arcineh dropped off to sleep. Sam sat with her for a few minutes, the light on, his heart numb. Not until his daughter came to the door looking for him did he rise, switch off the light, and exit. However, he remembered his word and left Arcineh's door open.



"Are you sure Arcineh can't live with us?" Tiffany asked her father again.

"Yes. Arcineh stays here."

"Quinn cried herself to sleep just now, sure you would say no."

"She's right," Sam said without remorse. "I am saying no. Arcie can visit you this summer for as long as she likes, but I want her back in school as soon as she's able, and I want life to return to as close to normal as I can manage it. I can't do that if she moves 350 miles out of Chicago."

"Oh, Dad." Tiffany was distressed but not crying, and Sam was relieved. The grieving grandfather had spent days at the side of Arcineh's hospital bed with nothing to do but work out a plan to make life less painful for his youngest grandchild. Sending her away from him was not part of the plan.

Sam Bryant's marriage had broken up when his own children were 9 and 12. Not only did his wife walk away from him, but she also deserted their children. Trevor, the younger one, had drawn close to him and fared well. Tiffany's life had gone in the opposite direction. It had taken years for her world to look somewhat normal,

and even at that, she did not have a perfect marriage or the greatest relationship with her two children.

Now Arcineh had lost not only her mother but also her father, and she had been equally close to both. Sam was not trying to maintain control for control's sake. He truly believed that sending Arcineh away from him and her familiar surroundings would be the worst thing he could do.

"You may not agree with me, Tiff, but I want your support on this."

"But you could ask her."

"She's not in a position right now to be making decisions, and if we did ask her and she didn't want to go, she'd feel bad about hurting Quinn. I don't wish to do that to either girl. I'll happily be the bad guy this time."

Tiffany had not seen it that way, but she was not quite done.

"How about this summer? We could ask her once she's finished her school year here, and then she could move in with us in the fall."

"Not even then, Tiffany. It's not time for such plans, and may never be."

Jeremy chose that moment to join them in Sam's home office and asked what they were talking about.

"Quinn and I want Arcie to move in with us," his wife explained briefly.

The surprise on his son-in-law's face told Sam he'd known nothing about this.

"You weren't in on these plans, Jeremy?" Sam asked, knowing his daughter had not meant to exclude him but wondering why it never occurred to her that Jeremy might want some say over what went on in the home they shared.

"No, but it would be fine, I guess."

"He said no," Tiffany said, her voice quivering a little, bringing her father's stern eyes to her.

"Don't start, Tiffany," Sam said.

Tiffany knew he meant it. She wasn't happy with her father right now, but she knew this was not the time and place to push the point. She hated telling her children no, and even though her father was the one who had denied Quinn's request, Tiffany knew the 12-year-old would take it out on her.

"She is welcome," Jeremy offered, "but I wonder if moving her out of Chicago is a good idea."

"It's a terrible idea," Sam said bluntly, emotions and exhaustion playing a part in his mood. "As much as I don't want you to have to deal with this fire, Jeremy, I'm not going to let Tiffany and Quinn keep this on the table. I don't care how much they complain to you, my answer is no, and that's that."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," Tiffany interjected, sounding petulant. "She's my brother's only child," she continued, lobbying for some sympathy and gaining none. Both men looked at her in a way that made her shut her mouth.

"I'm going to bed," Sam said quietly, knowing he was close to losing his temper. "I'll see you in the morning."

Husband and wife said goodnight but didn't move. Jeremy stared at his wife, still amazed that this had happened to all of them but also knowing that, grief or not, the idea of moving Arcineh had to be dealt with swiftly. He was not in the habit of getting into any of the battles Austin and Quinn had with their mother, but this time he was willing.

"Was this Quinn's idea?"

"Yes."

"That was sweet of her, but I agree with Sam that we're not going to pursue it."

"Do you know what she'll be like?" Tiffany let her head fall back against the chair, her weary eyes on the ceiling.

"No, she won't."

Tiffany's head came up. This was a voice she didn't often hear from her spouse.

"I'll talk to her," Jeremy said shortly. Tiffany opened her mouth to question him, but Jeremy shook his head. "Not now, Tiff. We need to go to bed."

Like her children Tiffany Rowan did not like to be told no, but this time she did not argue. When Jeremy stood and headed for the door, she was right behind him. They put out the lights on their way to the stairs and retired in an effort to find some sleep.



"Are you glad she's gone?" Sam asked Arcineh when her cousin had left with her family.

"Not glad, but maybe relieved."

"Was it the tears?"

Arcineh shook her head in confusion. "She can't stop, and I don't know how to help her."

"She asked for you to come and live with them. Did she mention it?"

Arcineh looked as shocked as she felt.

"What did you say?" she whispered.

"No."

Arcineh's relief was visible. She sagged on her crutches, and Sam's heart clenched at the sight.

"I can't leave you and Chicago, Grandpa. You understand, don't you?"

"Absolutely. I would never send you away."

Arcineh stared at the floor for a long time, still trying to take it in but not succeeding. Her parents had come back to mind, and all she felt was loss. "I'm going to watch television," she finally said, turning to the family room.

"I'll be in my office if you need me."

"All right."

They went their separate ways, but not for long. Sam couldn't concentrate on a thing and soon went to check on Arcineh. He found her sound asleep, which turned out to be a good thing. Visitors began arriving the next day, and there seemed to be no end of them.



"I've got a bit of work for you," Arcineh's teacher, Mr. Sutter, said kindly. "There's no hurry, but when I spoke with your grandfather, he said you'd talked about it."

Arcineh nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Sutter. I'll get it done as fast as I can."

"There's no hurry, Arcie. You're so far ahead in almost every subject that you could miss the rest of the year, but we're still working on that World Lit project, and I want you to get going on it again."

Arcineh nodded, but she didn't feel as calm as she looked. All the work she'd done on it was at her old home.

"Is there something I can get you? Library books or anything else?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to try to get back to class next week. Grandpa wants the doctor to approve."

"There's no hurry, Arcie. We miss you, but your grades are not going to suffer."

Arcineh thanked Mr. Sutter again and walked him to the door when he left. He had been with Fetterman Academy, a small private school that Arcineh had been attending since she was seven, for ten years. He had been her teacher for two years.

Fetterman Academy was run very much like a homeschool, with a low student-teacher ratio and more than one age-group in a class. All subjects were covered, and covered thoroughly, but great amounts of time were also spent in subjects of interest to each child. Arcineh learned best when subjects were taught in solid blocks, and much of her schoolwork had been tailored with that in mind. In the fall,



she had spent weeks and weeks on math and almost nothing else. Following math was science, with refresher tests for math, and after that social studies and history, again, accompanied by regular refresher tests in each subject.

But afternoons were much more open. Whatever a child wanted to study could be accommodated. Reports and papers were expected—it was not a time when a child could be idle—but the very nature of allowing the students to choose their own topic was unique. One year Arcineh had spent the entire first semester researching the life of Lewis Carroll. Another year, she had done four projects in the same amount of time.

“Is your teacher gone?” Sam asked, suddenly beside her, causing Arcineh to realize she was still standing by the front door.

“Yes. He left some work.”

Sam studied her face and knew something was wrong.

“If you’re not ready, Arcie, just say so.”

“That’s not it.” Her voice was flat. “I’ll need some papers from home.”

Sam was now just as quiet. It might have surprised his granddaughter to know that he was not looking forward to that trip any more than she was.



More visitors arrived over the next few days, including kids from both school and dance class, as well as her closest friend, Daisy Cordell. They had been in school together for the past three years and were very close. Both were children of privilege and only children.

“I brought you a flower,” Daisy said; it was a daisy. “Your grandfather’s house is far enough away from ours that I don’t know how often I’ll get here. It’s to remind you of me.”

“Thanks, Dais,” Arcineh said sincerely. She really was a very good friend, and Arcineh loved her.

“So how is it?” Daisy did not believe in mincing words.

“It’s horrible if I think about it, so I try not to.”

“Have you been home?”

“No, but I have to go soon. I need some schoolwork.”

“Can’t someone else go?”

Arcineh shrugged, and Daisy dropped that line of questioning. As a rule she would have told Arcineh exactly what to do and how to think, but things were not normal anymore. Her friend looked pale and thin. And Daisy knew better than anyone how much Arcineh loved dance, making her cringe at the sight of Arcineh’s crutches.

“How is school?” Arcineh asked.

“You won’t believe it,” Daisy replied, swiftly becoming her animated self. “Miss Moore is getting married!”

“Moore the Bore?”

“Yes! She’s floating in and out of rooms like a fairy, and all she does is look at her ring.”

Arcineh giggled. She loved Daisy’s descriptions and could so easily see the school’s librarian and secretary acting just that way. She was a mousy woman in a school full of wealthy, gifted, and highly confident students who could at times be ruthless.

“When’s the big day?” Arcineh asked.

“This summer. Rumor is she won’t be back in the fall. Good ride-dance!”

For some reason the last comment bothered both girls. Their eyes caught, and Daisy looked ashamed.

“Promise me something, Dais,” Arcineh almost whispered.

“Anything.”

“That you won’t stare at me when I get back to school.”

“Not only will I not stare,” Daisy said fiercely, “I’ll pinch anyone who does.”

Arcineh relaxed again. As long as everyone else was acting normal, she could give herself permission to do the same.



Mason Beck, Sam's assistant and right-hand man for at least 20 years, sat across from him in his home office, taking copious notes on the words his employer was firing at him. He had been doing this for years and found it routine. The only problem he ran into was Sam's habit of thinking that once he'd given an order, the job was somehow magically done.

"Is Trevor's house ready?" Sam asked.

"Yes," Mason was able to reply, although the order to make sure all was in readiness was just 24 hours old. Mason had gone himself—taking Violet and a few others with him—to Trevor and Isabella's home in anticipation of Sam and Arcineh's visit.

"You saw to it yourself?"

"I did."

Sam grew quiet and thoughtful then, something Mason rarely saw.

"How did it seem?" Sam eventually asked.

"Just normal. We opened things up so the house could air out. Violet cleaned out the fridge and left everything smelling fresh. She even brought back the dirty clothing we found in the bedrooms and plans to wash and box them."

"Where are the boxes?"

"Somewhere here, I imagine. Out of sight," Mason added, wanting to be sensitive. In all the years he'd worked for Sam, he hadn't seen him like this, a bit soft-spoken and unsure. Sam Bryant was an exacting man, expecting his orders to be carried out with precision and demanding only the best from those who worked for him. He paid each person well, and they saw bonuses on a regular basis, but he didn't always remember that his employees had families and lives of their own.

The marble that Sam provided to companies all over the United States was without equal, but to accomplish that Sam was married to

his business and expected his employees to be as well. Mason got the worst of it. He was paid a small fortune for his trouble, but truth be told, had his family not become so accustomed to the life he provided for them, he would have quit on the spot.

"Why are you still here?" Sam asked Mason in a way that was all too familiar.

"I wasn't aware we were done," Mason answered with quiet dignity, never allowing his feelings to show.

"We're done," Sam said dismissively.

Mason didn't bother to say goodbye—there would be nothing in return—but simply exited. He hoped to see Arcineh so he could greet her, but she was not in sight. Instead he exited through the kitchen and confirmed with Violet that the clothing was in fact stored in an out-of-the-way place.



Sam and Arcineh sat in the car in the driveway of the place that had always been her home, neither one speaking for a time. Everything looked normal, but nothing was right and they both knew it.

"You don't have to do this," Sam said, repeating the statement he'd made when they'd left his house. "Just give me directions."

"That's just it, I don't know exactly where my papers are."

"I'll just gather everything I find and bring it out."

Arcineh still refused. She didn't want to go into the house, but something inside of her told her it would only be worse if she waited. When she'd left her grandfather's birthday party nearly four weeks ago, she had never dreamed she would not be back here in all these days.

"But then that's the way it always is, isn't it?" Arcineh spoke her thoughts out loud.

"What's that?" Sam asked.

"No one ever thinks this will happen."

Sam certainly agreed with that. He was still in shock and felt as though he always would be.

“Well,” Arcineh said with a hand on the door. “I just want to get in and get out.”

Easier said than done, Arcineh found as soon as they’d let themselves in. The feel of her parents was everywhere, and she felt as if she couldn’t breathe. Actually feeling dizzy, she sat on the bottom of the stairs, all color draining from her face. Sam felt just as bad but made himself concentrate on the child.

“Where shall I look first?” Sam asked, and Arcineh gave in.

“Try the desk in my room.”

Sam took the stairs on swift feet and was back in a very short time. Arcineh saw that he’d grabbed nearly everything and thought that might be the end of it.

“Did you see a schoolbag?”

“What color is it?”

“Blue.”

Sam was gone again in a hurry, but this time he came back empty. Arcineh had taken time to look through the papers and saw that everything was there.

“No blue bag,” he apologized.

Arcineh frowned but couldn’t remember where it might be. She also realized she didn’t care.

“Do you have something I can use?”

“I’m sure I do, and if not, we’ll stop at Marshall Fields and find something.”

Arcineh nodded, and they both headed toward the door, just needing to get out. They had been logical and controlled, but that lasted only until they gained the front porch. Arcineh’s tears burst forth without warning, and Sam’s head bowed on his own. They didn’t go to the car but sat on the heavy stone benches that Isabella had used to make the front porch a welcome place. It was a bit humid, although still cool, but neither one noticed. Too few tears had passed

between them, and now they came in a torrent. For almost an hour they cried off and on, saying little.

However, it helped. When Arcineh had no more tears, she wanted to go back inside. With her grandfather's help, she gathered some of the things she'd not been able to describe to Violet. Feeling drained, she still made herself look for the blue bag. They left as soon as she'd found it.