

Something



In

Common



Anita
Lynn



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This book, my first sale,
is dedicated to my mom, Pearl,
and my late daddy, Sam,
whose surname would have been Orlofsky if
not for Ellis Island.

They taught me persistence
and how wonderful it is to be a
child of a happy 50 year marriage.



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Prologue



“I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Beth didn’t realize she’d spoken the words out loud until Sam answered her, his voice a hollow murmur, “My feelings exactly.”

In the back of the black limousine, driving slowly away from her sister’s grave, Beth dabbed at her eyes with an already soaked hankie and forced herself to look away from the place where they’d just buried Hollie. Although the service was completed and only a few mourners lingered on the grass, she felt no sense of closure, only a gnawing ache. She turned to Sam, Hollie’s husband. “Rationally, I know she’s gone, but,” she pointed to her heart, “not here.”

“It’s real,” he said, his voice raspy, as if any speech were an effort right now. “She’s gone.”

“Tell me what happened, Sam,” Beth pleaded. “Help me understand.”

“How can I help you when I don’t understand myself?” he answered, his voice breaking.

As the limo made a turn from the tree-lined path into sunlight, Beth saw the telltale glisten in Sam's brown eyes. The sign of his grief, as deep as her own, helped somewhat.

Even though she was a nurse, Beth could barely comprehend the specifics of why Hollie, only thirty-four, had died. The official cause of death was an aneurysm that burst in her brain. But how had it happened? Hollie had known about the aneurysm for six months, ever since frequent headaches had driven her to the doctor. Other than precautions regarding what symptoms to watch for, medicines that might make her bleed, and watching her blood pressure closely, he'd wanted her to live a normal life. The only strong admonition had been not to get pregnant. Hadn't he known how desperately Hollie wanted a baby?

Fresh tears came to Beth's eyes, and she shook her head, remembering Hollie's sobs when she told her the news. "It's just so unfair," Beth cried aloud.

Sam didn't answer. He turned away, and the sun shone blue on his black hair. Ostensibly, he gazed out the window of the limousine, but Beth knew he saw nothing but memories of his wife.

She wanted to offer Sam words of comfort, but the words wouldn't come when she hurt so badly herself. She held her arms tightly to her chest as if pressing from the outside would ease the ache. Hollie had been Beth's only family. After their parents died fifteen years ago in an auto

accident, Hollie reared Beth. Seven years difference in age and nine years of living a continent apart had not diminished their close relationship.

In Beth's eyes, Hollie had been perfect, not just in looks, but deep inside where it really counted. But all that perfection hid one small flaw—the aneurysm that killed her.

Beth turned back to Sam, noting how different he seemed from the strong, virile man who'd married her sister six years ago. Though she rarely saw him in the intervening years, Beth guessed Hollie's death to be the cause of the stoop to his shoulders and the lines in his face.

The limo pulled onto the street where Hollie and Sam had lived together, and Beth's stomach lurched. She knew she couldn't stand to go into that house one more time. Taking a deep breath to push back the awful feeling, Beth said, "I'm going to catch the first flight back."

Sam looked at her and blinked, as if her words suddenly reminded him of her presence. "You don't have to leave so soon," he said, but to Beth's ears the words sounded no more than polite.

"Yes, I do. Being here on Hollie's turf is too painful for me. I can't stay here. Maybe someday, but not yet." When he said nothing, she added. "I'll be in touch. I promise."

He nodded, but his expression showed no comprehension of what she meant.

Surely, he hadn't forgotten the pact the three of

them had made. As the limo pulled alongside the curb, Beth turned to the man beside her once more. “Sam, about the baby....”

He frowned. “The baby?”

Beth closed her eyes as another wave of pain lanced through her chest. How could he have forgotten? Three weeks ago, she, Hollie, and Sam had all participated in a test tube fertilization in order to give Hollie and Sam their own baby, a child Beth might now be carrying. She opened her eyes to stare at him in disbelief, thinking if it meant that little to him, what could she say?

“Of course,” Sam said, as if finally remembering. “The plan to have you carry our baby.”

Beth nodded, relieved of the need to explain.

“Don’t worry about it. I won’t hold you to it.”

“Won’t hold me to it?” Her voice rose in agitation. “I don’t think you understand, Sam. I might already be pregnant.”

“Might be pregnant?” he parroted, as if stunned by what she’d said.

A horrible fear washed over her, and her voice trembled. “Yes. I don’t know if it took or not. I—I’ve been having some spotting. I’m going to see my doctor as soon as I get home.”

He stared at her, and she watched his face lose its color as the realization sank in. He closed his eyes and shook his head. “The baby was to be for both of us. What would I do with a baby now?”

A strong surge of protectiveness filled Beth,

and she placed her hand over the place where the baby might already be growing. She'd fight for this child. He had to grasp its importance. "I know you've lost Hollie. We both have. But a small part of her might live inside of me. Don't you want it?"

Tears filled his eyes, rolling unchecked down his cheeks. He looked completely, totally lost as he shook his head. "I don't know. I just... don't... know."

Watching Sam's naked pain tortured Beth beyond endurance. She had to get away from him. Now. Not waiting for the driver, she opened the door to the limo herself. "I guess this isn't a good time," she forced herself to say, backing out. "We'll talk about it later."

Before he could answer, she slammed the door and ran to the rental car she'd left parked in front of the house. With shaking hands, she fumbled in her purse for the keys, opened the door, then slipped into the seat and started the car.

Driving away without looking back, she went over their terrible conversation and blinked back the tears that threatened to obscure her vision. How could she have been so wrong? Her sister's death devastated Beth as much as Sam, but the thought of the baby she possibly carried comforted her in her grief. She thought Sam would feel the same way. She had never intended to increase his pain by reminding him of the pact.

What was she going to do?

Chapter One



“Beth! What’s the matter? You look pale as a ghost!”

Beth leaned against the pastel blue wall of the nursery, breathing rapidly. “I—I think I’m having a contraction.”

“Oh, my God. I knew you should have quit weeks ago,” Julie said. Before the contraction, Beth and Julie were feeding the preemies able to take milk from a bottle—the lucky ones born closer to term or graduates from feeding tubes to self-feeding. “Here, give me baby boy Gelson before you drop him.” She took the infant from Beth, lay him back in his isolette, then returned to her friend’s side. “How long has this been going on?”

“It just started,” Beth took a deep breath to still her rapid pulse and wiped her cold, clammy hands on her hospital greens.

“Has the water broken?”

Beth shook her head and bit her lip.

“Relax, kid. It was probably just a bad cramp,” Julie reassured her, patting her shoulder. “I’m surprised you haven’t had more of them by now.”

Beth shook her head. “I’ve had cramps, Julie. This felt different. More intense. I’m scared,” she admitted, her voice hoarse.

“What are you afraid of? You work in the best hospital in Boston. You’ll get the finest care here money can buy.”

“That’s not what frightens me. I don’t want to go into labor early.” She swallowed to clear the lump in her throat, then said, “You work with them, too.” Beth waved a trembling hand to encompass the many isolettes. “It’s such a struggle for them. Some can hardly breathe without help.” Her voice dropped to a barely discernable whisper as the lump threatened to choke her. “They lie there so helpless with all those tubes stuck into them. Ever since I started working here, I knew I never wanted my baby to go through this.”

“Yours won’t. You’ll be fine.”

“Will I?” She sucked in a quick breath as another pain shot across her distended abdomen. Grabbing her belly, she reflexively closed her eyes and sagged against her friend. Julie wound an arm around Beth, easily supporting her five-three frame.

As soon as the contraction ended and Beth took a cleansing breath, Julie supported Beth’s arm and helped her over to the nearby rocking

chair used by the nurses during the frequent feedings. “Hang on while I get a wheelchair and call your doctor.”

Beth nodded, suddenly feeling uncomfortably warm. She longed to rip off the cotton greens she wore.

In minutes Julie returned, accompanied by a nurse from the regular nursery next door. “Peg said she’d cover for us while I take you over to Dr. Morgan’s. You’re in luck. Even though it’s five o’clock, when I said the magic name, Beth Jones, they said he’d wait for you.” She set the brakes on the wheelchair, then went over to Beth.

Even with Julie’s help, Beth struggled to get out of the rocker. Leaning on Julie, she took a step, then sank into the wheelchair, her shaky arms supporting her until her bottom settled in. She sighed. “I’ve always wondered what it felt like to be at the other end of this,” she murmured.

“Hang on. You’re in for the ride of your life,” Julie said, pushing off. Despite her words of warning, Julie negotiated the hospital corridors in a speedy, though careful manner.

Beth felt her belly tighten and checked her watch. No more than five minutes since the last one. A short while later they reached the physician offices at the far end of the building.

The staff ushered them into an exam room as soon as they arrived. Julie helped Beth out of the chair and squeezed her hand. “You’re in good

hands now, kid. I wish I could stay, but one of us has to relieve Peg. You know how antsy she gets around our little ones.”

Beth smiled at the private joke. All of the nursery staff knew Peg didn't relate well to the tiny babies in the preemie nursery.

“Call me as soon as you know something, okay?”

“I will,” Beth answered, reaching up to pull off the requisite hairnet freeing her honey-blond hair to fall loosely to her shoulders.

A nurse came in to take her blood pressure, then asked her to undress from the waist down. When the door clicked shut, Beth undid the knot around her swollen middle, allowing her pants to puddle around her slipper-covered shoes. A fourth contraction forced her to lean her hip against the table. As soon as she felt able, she stepped up, sat on the paper, and covered her lap with the paper sheet the nurse left.

A second later, cool air brushed her back when the door opened. Relief washed over her as she greeted Timothy Morgan, a dear friend and the best OB in town. Whatever happened, he'd see her through. “Hi, Tim. I'm sorry to make you stay late,” she said.

“Don't apologize. I was just doing paperwork. And besides, you're special to me. You know that.”

Beth felt her face flush. “I'll bet you say that to

all the patients,” she said, trying to make light of his interest. She knew a nurse had entered the room with him and stood unobtrusively by the door.

“Only the beautiful ones,” he teased, his gray eyes twinkling. The smile left his face. “What’s this, I hear?” he asked. “Julie said you were having contractions. How many have you had?”

“Four,” Beth answered.

“How long did they last?”

“About thirty seconds and five minutes apart.”

He nodded. “Let me examine you and see how much change there is, if any.”

During the exam, he murmured, “Soft. Fifty percent. Fingertip. Minus one.”

She sat up and asked, “Well? What do you think?”

“Not as bad as it could be, but I’m afraid you’re in preterm labor.” A part of Beth’s mind registered the nurse quietly slipping out the door.

“Can we stop it? What do we do now, Tim?”

“I’d like to do another ultrasound, then I’ll have you take a Non-Stress Test. That will tell me more about what’s going on.” She lay flat, and he flicked off the overhead light.

She felt disoriented. She’d entered a nightmare—split into two people. As a nurse, she understood his words, but as a patient, she felt wholly unprepared for this complication.

Tim put his reading glasses on and adjusted

some dials on his ultrasound machine. Unlike some doctors who had technicians run these, he kept his own machine in one of his exam rooms and did his own, for which Beth was grateful. At this moment, she didn't want some stranger relaying more bad news.

"Here comes the cold," Tim said, painting Beth's distended abdomen with clear ultrasound gel. After dropping the brush into its pail, he picked up the transducer and placed the flat side over her belly. Flickering images in black and white and shades of gray danced across the screen.

Although not formally trained in this aspect of nursing, repeated ultrasounds during her pregnancy had taught her what to look for. The head of a baby came into focus, one hand in front of its face. "Look! He's sucking his thumb," she exclaimed. "That's Boy, isn't it?"

"Sure is," Tim answered, moving the transducer around. She saw tiny male sexual organs. Next, Beth saw another face, the profile clearly outlined an actual nose and mouth. "Here's Dawn," he said.

"How do they look?"

"Fine. They're growing nicely."

As he took his standard measurements of the babies, Beth watched, unable to say anything through the lump in her throat. The screen blurred as tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. She'd grown so attached to these two.

She remembered the first ultrasound, four weeks after the original implantation of five fertilized eggs. The two distinct heartbeats had been a surprise to Tim and a shock to her. She'd never bargained for carrying more than one baby. With serial ultrasounds, she'd watched them grow into recognizable fetuses and formed a strong bond to them. As soon as she'd known their sexes, she'd named them—Dawn, the girl's name picked by Hollie, and Boy, to be named later.

“Boy appears to weigh around two and a half pounds,” Tim said, bringing Beth's thoughts back to the present, “and Dawn weighs around two.”

“They're not big enough,” Beth wailed.

“For twins at thirty weeks, they're doing great,” Tim countered.

She shook her head sharply. “But not if they're born now. They need to be bigger.”

“They will be. Don't panic, Beth. I'll do everything in my power to help you carry them longer.” He patted her arm and handed her a tissue. “Get dressed so we can do the NST. We'll discuss this more later.”

She sniffed. “Thanks, Tim.”

He started to walk out then stopped, the door half open. “You do you know what an NST is, don't you?” he smiled.

She answered weakly. “It's where I sit with a couple of belts on. One is for the babies' heartbeats, and the other is to see if I'm having contractions.”

He nodded. “We’ll check one baby at a time, so you’ll be here for awhile longer.”

“That’s all right,” she muttered. “I’m only missing work.”

He stared pointedly at her work garb. “That’s something else we’re going to talk about,” he said and closed the door.

As she dressed, another contraction robbed her of the calm she’d managed to obtain in Tim’s presence. Fear constricted her chest, and she stuffed her fist into her mouth to stifle her sob. Despite his earlier words of reassurance, she couldn’t control her feelings.

As soon as Beth opened the door, Tim’s nurse showed her to a room across the hall where a recliner and a gray box sat. The nurse positioned the leads and walked away, returning a short while later with a small white pill. “It’s called Brethine, and it stops contractions,” she explained.

Beth dutifully swallowed the pill. The nurse then left Beth alone with her thoughts and the sound of a baby’s heartbeat. No matter how hard she tried to remain calm, Beth’s heart rate sped up every time she felt a contraction, however weak. She wondered how her emotional state affected her two precious charges. Were they feeling her fear and tension? Fresh tears filled her eyes.

Minutes ticked by, punctuated by her contractions. By the time Tim returned, they felt

considerably weaker. He read the “strip,” the wiggly lines on the graph paper produced by the machine, then sat in a chair next to Beth’s recliner.

“Are you feeling better?”

She nodded.

“Good. We’ll keep you on the Brethine until the twins are large enough, somewhere between thirty–six and thirty–eight weeks.”

“That will work?”

“The chances are good.”

“Thank God,” she whispered, dropping her head to her chest.

He lifted her chin with his finger, forced her to look him in the eye, and said firmly, “But you’ll have to stop working and stay on strict bed rest from now on. If I’d known you were still working, I’d have stopped you weeks ago.”

“You didn’t ask,” she answered, embarrassed to be chastised. “And I couldn’t afford to stop. I still can’t.”

“I’m sorry, Beth, but your blood pressure is also a little high. That’s two strikes against you.”

“How high is it?”

“One–thirty over ninety.”

Beth groaned. Another complication.

“If you don’t want the twins born prematurely, and you want them to continue growing adequately, you’ll have to stay off your feet.”

Her earlier relief in learning Tim could stop her labor left in one breath. “But I didn’t plan on this.”

“That’s normal. Nobody ever plans for complications.”

Beth shook her head, the familiar panicky feeling returning. “You don’t understand. Originally, after Hollie died, I intended to only take off the last couple of weeks and get back to work as soon as I could. Then, when I found I was carrying twins, I changed my plans, figuring I could work until thirty–four weeks and fall into only a small financial hole. But I’m only thirty weeks now. It’s impossible. I don’t have enough paid time off to do it.”

Tim shook his head. “Your goals were unrealistic, Beth. I wish you had spoken to me about this sooner.”

“Why? What could you have done except make me stop working?”

“Don’t you have any savings?”

“Not much. I just finished paying off my student loans last year. I don’t have near enough to live on for over three months. Hollie would have sent me the money, but....”

“What about the babies’ father? Can’t you ask him?”

Beth shook her head, mumbling, “I don’t know.” She sighed, then explained, “I haven’t heard from Sam in almost five months.”

“What did he say at that time?”

“Nothing much. The letter said he was glad to hear everything was all right. He sent me a check

for \$1000 and told me to contact him if I needed more.”

“Then the answer’s obvious. Call him.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Beth stared at Tim, searching for the words to explain. “Don’t you see? If he’s really interested, I would have heard from him again. He only said that because he felt obligated.”

“He is obligated.”

Beth closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead, where a dull ache grew sharper by the second. “No, he isn’t. He may have wanted this pregnancy at first, but he made it clear at the funeral he lost interest in it when Hollie died. I can’t force him to help me now.”

Tim reached over to Beth, laying his warm hand over her cold one. “I didn’t suggest you force him, Beth, only that you let him know you need help. After all, they are his babies.”

Her mind refused to accept Tim’s simple suggestion. As the pregnancy progressed, she thought of the babies more and more as her own. Contacting Sam would be like opening “Pandora’s Box.” She didn’t know what might come out. What if she was wrong, and he wanted the babies? She couldn’t give them up. Not now. They were Hollie’s—the last part of her sister she had left. She lifted her eyes to Tim’s, pleading. “I don’t know what to do.”

He nodded, his expression full of compassion. “Remember our conversation when your sister died?”

Beth thought back. “You played devil’s advocate, helping me decide what to do. I could have aborted the pregnancy, and no one but you would have known. I’d told Sam about the spotting, and, if anything, I thought he’d be relieved.”

“But you never questioned your decision, did you?”

“I had my private doubts,” she admitted. “I continued the pregnancy because they were Hollie’s, and I’d promised, but absolute certainty came when I felt movement.” Beth smiled at the memory and put her hand on her swollen belly. “That’s when all my doubts truly vanished.”

“Well, Beth, it’s time to make new plans again. If you want the twins to have the best possible chance, you have to stop working. As of today.”

Beth nodded, finally accepting the truth. “I’ll contact the hospital and arrange for leave tomorrow.”

“Are you going to call Sam?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does he know you’re carrying twins?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you tell him?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t want to say anything in that first letter, and there never seemed to be a good time to write another one.”

“Call him. Give him a chance.”

Tim’s persistence made Beth confess her greatest fear. “But what if he wants the babies, Tim? How can I give them up?”

“I know you. You’ll do what’s best. Try not to worry about it now. You have at least six weeks to go, maybe more.”

“Yeah, six weeks on my back,” she complained.

“It will go by fast.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Tim grinned, then stood. “I’ll write the prescription while you make your next appointment. Return to see me in a week.”



Beth’s hand hovered over the telephone. During the past half an hour, she’d reached toward the phone, then changed her mind several times. Two days of agonizing had only gotten her this far. Calling Sam frightened her more than going hungry. She didn’t know what she’d do financially if Sam refused her, or emotionally if he demanded the babies.

The small lives inside her wriggled and kicked, making Beth smile, despite her worries. You’ll be all right, little ones. I’ll take care of you.

With her heart pounding so hard she could hardly breathe, Beth dialed the number, almost hoping no one would answer.

After four rings, a click came over the line, followed by Sam's voice. "This is Sam Orlofsky. I'm sorry I'm not here to answer your call, but if you'll leave your name and number after the sound of the tone, I'll get back to you." Beeeeep.

For a split second Beth felt disoriented, remembering the cute dialogue in Hollie's voice at that number. Sam's deep tones, with his no nonsense message, seemed wrong somehow. She shook her head to dispel the feeling.

Relief came a second later. She didn't have to talk to Sam right now. Talking to a machine seemed infinitely safer at the moment. "Sam, uh, it's Beth. I—I need to talk to you about something. Please call me as soon as you can."

She dropped the receiver into its cradle. There. She'd done it. Now she could wait for his return call. Meanwhile, she'd figure out what she'd say to him when he did.



Sinking onto his bed, Sam listened to the message a second time, relieved no one witnessed his reaction. Tears filled his eyes. The sisters sounded so much alike, that he felt like he was hearing the ghost of his wife. Even listening to her voice for the short message wrenched his gut and brought all the feelings to the forefront.

Sam buried his head in his hands. The medical

reasons for Hollie's death meant nothing to him except he'd been left without a wife and the family they'd both wanted and planned for. Dammit, he'd wanted her and a child or two. During the years of their marriage he'd waited patiently for her to quit working as a clothing buyer—a job requiring frequent travel—and be there for him. As soon as she finally promised him to do just that, the doctor said she couldn't have children. Beth's suggestion was an answer to his prayer. He'd embraced the idea, counting the months for his dream to be fulfilled.

And just when the plan went into action, Hollie left him. He knew it wasn't fair to blame the dead for dying, but he still fumed about the loss. Nothing since her death came close to filling that empty place in his life. He kept himself busy, working long hours, but he knew he only marked time.

Six long and lonely months had passed since Hollie's death. The gray weather of winter had suited his mood, and the freshness of spring seemed like an insult—how dare life begin again without Hollie?

He ran his fingers through his short, curly black hair and frowned. Why did Beth call? And why didn't she leave her number? In order to return her call, he'd have to search for her number in Hollie's personal phone book, a task he dreaded. He glanced at the clock on his nightstand. Nine

o'clock. Midnight in Boston. Too late to call tonight. Whatever Beth wanted, it would have to wait until tomorrow.

As Sam stripped off his clothes and strode to the bathroom, he tried to dismiss Beth from his mind, but couldn't. A shadowy picture of the last time he saw her came to mind. He recalled a black dress and blonde hair pulled back, but little else. Too engrossed in himself that day, everything remained a blur. He vaguely recalled her mentioning the possibility of a baby, then leaving.

The baby! The warm water sluicing over him cleared his tired mind. The last, and only, time he remembered hearing from Beth since Hollie's death was the letter informing him she was pregnant, carrying his and Hollie's baby. He wrote back, sending a check and an offer for more. She never responded. The first few months after Hollie's death were a dim memory.

Hearing from Beth brought back memories of a time in his life full of plans and promises. The whole situation now seemed like something that shouldn't have happened. What good was the baby without his wife?

Thinking of what might have been still hurt too much to dwell on. But he couldn't ignore the call. The inevitable had happened; he'd heard from Beth again. He'd hoped to be ready, but apparently he wasn't.

He stepped out of the shower and caught a

glimpse of himself in the mirror. He looked like hell. Too many hours of work and too few hours of rest had left their mark on him. Also, he'd allowed his beard to grow to avoid the chore of shaving. With his bushy eyebrows over red-rimmed brown eyes, the beard gave him an even fiercer appearance than usual. No matter. Other than a rare visit from his brother, Sam socialized with no one.

Dropping onto his bed, exhausted, he thought again about Beth's message. What did she want from him? He'd assumed she wanted to keep the baby, but maybe she didn't. Maybe she wanted to go on with her life after giving the baby to him. Was it possible that there were some papers to sign regarding custody of the baby? He threw his arm over his eyes. Lord help him. What should he do? Should he sign them? Give his baby away? His chest tightened at the thought. Did he want the baby to raise alone? He balked at the idea of caring for an infant.

After tossing and turning for what seemed half the night, he gave up trying to sleep and looked for Beth's phone number.

To hell with the time in Boston. He had to get some answers.

Chapter Two



The ringing telephone jarred Beth awake. Groggily, she reached for the receiver. “Hello.”

“Beth, it’s Sam. How are you doing?”

“Fine,” she answered automatically, still trying to come to full consciousness. She squinted at her bedside clock. The red numbers glowed, “5:00.” “Why are you calling so early?”

“I couldn’t sleep. Your call yesterday really threw me for a loop. Were you calling about the baby?”

“Sort of.”

“I thought so. Did it have anything to do with custody?”

The “c” word and its resultant adrenaline surge shook away any residual confusion. “You want to sign custody papers?”

“Don’t you?”

He was going to take the babies from her. Pain lanced through her chest, and a groan escaped.

“Beth? Beth, are you all right?”

“No,” she whispered.

“What’s the matter?”

“I—I want this pregnancy.”

“I assumed that or you wouldn’t have done what you did. I’m extremely grateful to you, since I was in no... Well, you remember what I was like the last time you saw me.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” she answered, remembering well his reaction to her mention of a possible baby.

“Yes, I do. Without your foresight, the baby wouldn’t exist.”

Babies. For some reason she didn’t want to share that fact with him yet. Not until she knew his thoughts. It seemed he’d obviously changed his mind about the pregnancy, but she didn’t know at this point exactly what he wanted from her. The uncertainty made her heart beat so strongly she felt the pulse in her chest. If he wanted her to give up the twins, she didn’t think she could handle the raw disappointment right now.

“I didn’t call about custody,” she said, anxious to get to the point before he asked for something she couldn’t deal with.

“Then why did you call?”

Beth struggled to come up with a good way to explain without giving too much away. “I’m having some complications with the pregnancy....”

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his anxiety obvious.

“Nothing serious,” she quickly reassured him,

“but my doctor made me stop working.”

“Are you sure the baby is all right?”

“I’m sure. I’ve had every test to prove it.” She took a deep breath to fortify her courage. “The problem is, I don’t have any money. Can you,” she swallowed, the words sticking in her throat. “Can you send me some?”

“How much?”

“Enough to live on for about three months.”

A long silence greeted her request. Finally, Sam spoke. “Ah, Beth. I wish I could help you, but I can’t. I haven’t brought in any income since your sister died. Everything I have is sunk into a project I’m doing for my business. In fact, I refinanced the house for the money. I have only enough left to live on myself until the project is completed, and I can bid on jobs again. I know I should have set some aside for you, but so much time has passed....” His voice dropped. “I’m sorry, Beth, I don’t have it any longer.”

“Oh.” Though she hadn’t known what to expect, she still felt the disappointment all the way to her toes. What were she and the twins going to do?

“I’ll work out something. Give me some time, okay?”

“Sure,” she agreed, no longer expecting any help from him. “You can have all the time in the world.”

“I’ll get back to you soon. I promise.”

“Sure, Sam. Thanks for returning my call.” Beth listened to the dial tone a second before slowly reaching over to hang up the phone. Despite his promise, she doubted he would be able to help her. He’d made it crystal clear he had no money to spare. What he hadn’t said, and Beth knew, was Hollie’s job had contributed more than half to their joint income. The loss of her paycheck would have hit Sam hard, even if he had continued bringing in income himself.

She lay back against the pillows as tears formed in her eyes. She hated how pregnancy always kept her feelings so close to the surface and made her cry over the least little thing. But, darn it, right now she felt more alone than any time since Hollie’s death. Even her breakup with her boyfriend, Donald, hadn’t left her feeling this lonely. Without parents or a man in her life, she had no one to turn to. What was she going to do? She turned her head into her pillow and sobbed. How could you do this to me Hollie? I wanted to have a baby for you, and now you’ve left me alone and... pregnant.

Right then one of the babies gave a resounding kick to her rib, as if reminding Beth she wasn’t truly alone. Patting her belly, Beth sniffed, then said, “You’re right, little one. I’ve got you. We’ll all make it through this somehow.”

As if they understood, both twins kicked her at once.



“Hi, Phil,” Sam said, standing on his brother’s porch and clutching his A’s baseball cap in his hand.

“I don’t believe it,” Phil exclaimed, shaking his head. “What brings you here?”

“I—I needed someone to talk to,” Sam admitted, looking down at his scuffed work boots. He’d been compelled to seek out Phil this evening. Sam needed someone to confide in, and who better than his younger brother?

Phil stared at him, his expression similar to the way one looks when seeing a ghost. “You look terrible.”

“Yeah, I know. You look great. Family life really agrees with you.”

Phil ran his hands through his black hair, obviously uncomfortable with the compliment. They shared a family resemblance in size and coloring, but Sam’s knew his beard and the ravages of his grief made him look like the older brother. Prior to Hollie’s death, people always mistook Phil as being the older of the two.

“Can I come in?” Sam asked.

“Of course.” Phil immediately opened the door wide in invitation, and the aroma of food cooking in the kitchen wafted out to Sam. “Have you eaten yet?”

Sam shook his head, embarrassed to have intruded on his brother's dinner. He'd been so anxious to talk to Phil, he hadn't noticed the time. He hesitated in the doorway. "I'll come back later, after you're done."

"Don't be silly." Phil tugged on Sam's arm, pulling him inside. "Lisa can set another place. There's plenty of food." A gentle prod on his back from Phil pushed Sam toward the kitchen.

"Sam! What a nice surprise," Lisa cried, turning from where she fed their toddler son in his high chair. The meal must have been a shared event, because bits of food clung to Lisa's pink blouse and short brown hair. "You will stay for dinner, won't you? There's plenty of food."

The smell of Lisa's home cooking made Sam's stomach grumble, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. "So I've heard. Are you sure it won't be any trouble?"

"Of course not. Even though you haven't taken us up on the offer in months, you know you're always welcome here." Lisa's blue eyes met his directly. Her mouth tightened slightly, but she refrained from insulting him like Phil had. "Why don't you go clean up while I fill a plate for you?"

Sam, hearing her subtle hint, looked down at the grease and dust his day's work had accumulated. He should have gone home to clean up and change out of his jeans and T-shirt. He shouldn't have come at all. But now that he was here, he

knew of no graceful way to bow out without insulting Phil and Lisa. “I’ll only be a minute,” he said, turning toward the bathroom in the hall.

As the water ran in the sink, he heard the murmurs of conversation from the kitchen as his brother and sister-in-law discussed his surprise visit. They probably wondered why he no longer visited them, always offering an excuse when invited over.

Actually, it wasn’t them specifically he shied away from. He loved his brother, and Lisa was a great mate for him. But the wholesome family unit of three tore at his heart. They had what he wanted, and the jealousy he felt in their presence made him stay away rather than face his feelings.

He gritted his teeth, steeling himself for what was to come. Somehow he’d sit through dinner with Phil, Lisa, and little Craig for the chance to eventually be able to talk to Phil alone and share his secret. The time had come for Phil to hear about “the pregnancy.” Maybe Phil would have some words of wisdom to help Sam with his dilemma.

He wiped his face and hands on the guest towel, then took a deep breath before leaving the relative haven of the bathroom to face the three-some.



The telephone rang, causing Beth to jump. Was it him again? Had she been wrong; could he send her money? “Hello,” she said tentatively.

“How’s the little mother?”

Beth let out a sigh. Disappointment mixed with delight at having her best friend call when she needed her the most. “I’m bored to tears,” she admitted to Julie. “I’m reading until my eyes blur, and my sides, both of them, are already on the verge of bed sores. I don’t know how I’m going to stand this for six or more weeks.”

“Did you call Sam?” Julie asked.

“Yes.”

“And?” Julie prodded.

“He says he can’t help me.”

“Darn!”

“Make that a little stronger,” Beth said, feeling less lonely already. In her despair earlier, she’d forgotten the importance of Julie’s friendship.

“Beth, I want you to move in with me.”

“I can’t, Julie, I’d be in the way.”

“Russ wouldn’t mind.”

“But I would. How do you think I’d feel horning in on you two. You only have a one-bedroom apartment, and it’s already crowded with the two of you and that dog. Besides, I need a place for the twins afterwards.” Beth’s heart swelled, and her throat closed, making speech difficult. “But thanks for offering. It means a lot to me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” The tears she’d shed earlier threatened again, and she blinked to hold them back.

“We’ll think of something, Beth. You’re not alone.”

“I know I’m not,” Beth said, looking down and patting her belly. “Besides the twins, I’ve got you and Tim.”

“And the other nurses. They’ve all been asking about you. No one quite has your touch with the preemies.”

“Who said that? Peg?” Even though only three workless days had passed, she missed her job. Holding and feeding the babies in the nursery provided her with a sense of completeness she couldn’t explain.

“All of them, especially me.”

“Tell me about the babies, Julie. How is each one doing? And don’t leave out any details.”

Beth listened intently as Julie gave her the rundown on the current inhabitants: who had suckled their own milk today, who had breathed without the respirator, who had been transferred. Working in the preemie nursery gave Beth and Julie a true respect for the tiny accomplishments in life.

Beth sighed, leaning back against her pillows. She renewed her vow to do whatever necessary to keep her twins from going through that.



“Was it as bad as you expected?” Phil asked.

“What do you mean?” Sam responded, pretending he hadn’t understood. Lisa had excused herself to give Craig his bath, and Phil had ushered Sam into the den.

“Do you think I don’t know why you’ve been avoiding us all these months? I’m your brother, remember? I understand how hard it must be for you to see me and my family all together.”

Frowning, Sam sank into a brown leather chair. “Am I that transparent?”

“No,” Phil answered, handing Sam a beer, then sitting across from him on the matching sofa. “We think alike. I’d be feeling the same way.”

Sam gave inordinate attention to his beer can while he digested this information. For six months he’d been worrying about hurting Phil’s feelings, but his brother had understood all along. He shook his head, then looked up. “Actually, being here tonight was a lot easier than I thought it would be. I ate the best meal I’ve had in a long time, and I enjoyed the company. Eating alone gets old.”

Phil smiled. “Don’t I know. I was a bachelor a long time before meeting Lisa.”

“You didn’t eat alone very often,” Sam said, remembering. “You were at our house half the time.”

Phil raised his right hand. “Guilty. It’s not my fault you didn’t pay me back by dropping in here as often as I did to you.”

“But my situation was totally different. Hollie was usually out of town.”

“True. And I didn’t have any reason to stay away.” Phil stared at Sam so directly, he almost began to fidget. “What brought you here tonight, fella? Something must have happened to make you break your self-imposed isolation.”

“It did,” Sam acknowledged.

“Well?”

Uncomfortable with what he had to explain, Sam admitted, “I’m not sure where to start.”

“The beginning is usually a good place,” Phil said softly.

Sam rolled the can between his hands, gathering his thoughts. “You know how much Hollie and I wanted children....” He glanced at Phil, watching for his nod. “And you remember how disappointed we were when the doctor diagnosed her problem and said she couldn’t have any.” He took a deep breath. “Hollie’s sister, Beth, came up with a suggestion. She offered to carry a pregnancy for Hollie.”

“You mean be a surrogate mother?”

“Something like that. Only the baby would genetically really be Hollie’s and mine.”

Phil frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Damn! Talking about this was harder than he’d

expected it to be. The words seemed to stick in his throat as telling the story forced him to remember a time he'd rather forget, a time full of anticipation and hope.

He swallowed some more beer, hoping the alcohol would numb his achy throat, then told the story as fast as he could. "The doctor gave Hollie some fertility pills to make her body produce several eggs at once. He removed the eggs from Hollie, put them into a special tube, then fertilized them with my sperm. They were injected into Beth's womb."

Phil leaned toward Sam, shaking his head incredulously. "That's pretty incredible."

"That's what I said. I thought things like that only happened in science fiction. But Hollie showed me articles proving it had been done before."

"When did you do this?"

"Three weeks before Hollie died." He felt the familiar tightening of his chest at the memory.

"And?" Phil prompted, oblivious to Sam's pain.

"And Beth is pregnant with our baby."

"Wow." Phil sat back, shaking his head again. "How did you find out?"

"I've known all along. Beth wrote me months ago to say the pregnancy took."

"I can't believe you never told me about it," Phil murmured.

"Hollie and I decided not to tell anyone in case

the procedure failed. Then she... she died, and everything changed. I didn't care about the baby anymore." Sam bowed his head, trying to regain control. Grown men didn't cry in front of others, even their brothers.

"I understand," Phil said, his voice sympathetic.

"Thinking of the baby reminded me of Hollie, our plans...." He shrugged and swallowed. "It was just too painful, so I conveniently forgot. I knew I'd have to face the situation eventually, but...." He looked to his brother for help.

"Why are you telling me this now?" Phil asked.

"Beth called last night," Sam said, his voice a mere whisper.

"What did she say?"

"She needs money. Something's wrong, and she had to stop working."

"Are you sure the baby's yours?"

Sam blinked, stunned by Phil's question. "How could it not be?" he asked, hardly able to get the words out.

Phil answered logically, "She could be pregnant with some other guy's kid. After all, she's a grown woman and probably has a boyfriend."

Sam hardly heard his brother. Beth's soft voice filled his head, as he remembered her difficulty in asking him for help. He shook his head, suddenly protective of Beth. "You don't know her, Phil. I can count on the fingers of one hand how many times she asked her sister for anything."

“So you believe her?”

“Yeah, I do.” Before Phil posed the question, Sam had never doubted Beth. After considering the possibility, he felt even more certain. “Beth’s desperate, or she wouldn’t have called me. She didn’t want to remind me of the pregnancy,” he said, remembering another part of their early morning conversation. He smiled ruefully. “She wants the baby for her own.”

“What do you want?” Phil asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted, spreading his hands in dismay. “I haven’t had much time to think about it. I want my baby, but I’m not capable of caring for one right now. Beth wants the baby, and I don’t want to take it away from her, but she needs my financial help.”

“I see your problem.”

“Thanks.” Sam’s lips lifted slightly. He felt more relieved than he’d thought possible after sharing his problem with someone. “That’s why I came to you. I knew you’d understand.”

“Let’s start with what she asked for. Do you have any money to send her?”

“Unfortunately, no. You know about my project. After Hollie died, I needed something positive to do, something to build, so I refinanced the house for the money. I haven’t bid on a job or worked for anyone else since I started building the scaffold.” Sam felt his face heat. “The money’s almost gone now.”

“Did you want me to lend you some?”

“Hell no, Phil. I know you don’t have any. Besides,” Sam added, “the scaffold’s almost finished, and I’ll be making money again as soon as it is.”

“But you need the money right now.” Phil drummed his fingers on the couch arm. “Hummm.” After a minute, Phil grinned broadly.

“Want to share the joke?” Sam asked.

“I have an idea.”

“I guessed as much. Tell me.” Sam leaned forward. “I’m open to anything.”

Phil gave Sam a smug look. “You can ask her to come live with you.”

Sam cocked his head in disbelief. He knew his brother sometimes had screwy ideas, but this? “What did you say?”

“You heard me.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Sam said, shaking his head. “She won’t want to move out here.”

“How do you know if you don’t ask her? It’s perfect. You don’t have any cash, but you do have that big house. If she’s telling the truth and needs your help....”

“If?”

Phil flinched. “Don’t look at me like that.” He eyed Sam warily, as if Sam might jump off the chair and attack him. “All right. Let’s assume she is telling the truth. You’ll be able to help her by

giving her a place to stay.” Phil stood and walked toward the doorway. “Think about it,” he said, pausing, “while I say good night to Craig.”

Still pondering Phil’s suggestion, Sam stayed seated. The longer he let the idea work on him, the better he liked it. Asking Beth to stay with him would solve his current problem. He could help Beth and buy himself some time to make a decision regarding the baby. He’d call her as soon as he got home.



Beth heard the phone ringing when she shut the shower off. She wondered who could be calling at this late hour. Resting all day, she had difficulty falling asleep at night. Consequently, she was awake later than her usual bedtime. Probably a wrong number. She decided to rely on her answering machine to take the call for her.

The sound of Sam’s deep voice asking her to call back made her stop toweling herself and reach for her robe. Sam. She should have known. What was he calling about? Had he found a cache of money somewhere?

However, before the robe let loose of its hanger, the message ended. Disappointed to have missed his call, Beth reassured herself with the thought that he’d still be there when she called him back in a few minutes. Whatever he had to say could

wait until she had some clothes on.

A glance at herself in the mirror over the sink was all it took to momentarily forget Sam's call. Amazement stilled her movements, and she paused to stare. The changes to her body, although they'd come gradually, taken in total were still a shock. Her breasts had enlarged to almost twice their normal size, the veins in them more prominent, the nipples larger, darker, and more sensitive. Her usually slim hips had spread slightly, turning her walk into a waddle. Where she'd once had a flat tummy, she now looked as though she'd eaten a watermelon seed, actually two of them, and they had sprouted.

Beth ran her hands over her swollen belly, her heart swelling to the size of her tummy. Given the choice, she'd make the same decision all over again. The changes to her body were a small price to pay for what grew inside. She pulled on her robe, hiding her body from her view and walked as quickly as she could to the phone.

With a pounding heart and shaking fingers, Beth dialed Sam's number. But, as the phone rang and no one answered, she swore softly to herself. Where could he have gone so quickly? The answering machine clicked on. Beth almost hung up, then forced herself to wait patiently for the short message to end so she could leave another one. Sometimes it seemed that the infernal machines were talking to each other. "Hi. This is Beth...."

“Beth?” Sam came on the line, interrupting her. His voice sounded breathless, as if he’d been running.

“I was in the shower when you called a few minutes ago,” she explained.

“I was about to take one myself,” he said. “Thanks for calling back. I’ve spent the whole day thinking about your call.”

“You have?” she asked, relieved to hear he’d taken her request more seriously than she’d imagined.

“You sound surprised.”

“I am,” she admitted.

“It is my baby you’re carrying.”

“I know,” she said, as a feeling of trepidation washed over her. Was he reminding her for any specific reason?

“And even though I haven’t kept in close touch, I do feel somewhat responsible.”

“You don’t have to....”

“Yes, I do. If Hollie hadn’t died... Well, things would have been different.”

“I know,” she said again, feeling the familiar burning behind her eyes.

“The point is, you need help, and I should be giving it to you.”

Hopeful, she asked, “You can send me some money?”

“No.”

She swallowed back the pain of his answer.

“Then what kind of help are you talking about, Sam?”

“I want you to come to California and stay with me.”

“That’s crazy,” she said, instantly rejecting the idea.

“Why?”

“Because...” she paused, attempting to put her strong emotions into focus. “Because my life is here, my doctor, my friends, my job. I can’t just up and move to San Diego.”

“There are good doctors here. I’m not asking you to move to Timbuktu. And it’s not permanent. You can go back after you have the baby.”

“But—”

“Look, Beth,” he interrupted, “the truth of the matter is I can’t afford to pay for two homes. If you move in with me, I can take care of you. Otherwise, I have no way to help. I’ve thought a lot about what you asked, and this is the best I can do.”

“I don’t know,” she hedged, buying some time.

He seemed to understand her indecision. “Then think about my proposition and get back to me. Okay?”

“Okay. Bye.” Beth hung up the phone, and took a deep, shaky breath. What should she do? His “proposition” left her thoroughly confused. Just when she’d decided he had no interest in the baby, he said he felt responsible, that the baby was his. He told her she could go back to Boston

after the baby was born, but he didn't specify with or without the baby. At this point, she didn't dare ask—what if he said without?

As she'd told him, her whole life was here. She'd moved to Boston at eighteen to do her nursing training and stayed. It was home to her. Could she give up everything she knew and everyone she loved right now?

What were her options? Lying in bed like this, she couldn't support herself, and she had no savings account to speak of.

She tried to look at the proposal from his perspective. If he could only afford one household, his would be the logical choice. Sam owned a three-bedroom house, more than enough space for her and the babies.

But could she live there, even temporarily? Remembering the last time she saw the house, the day of Hollie's funeral, sent a chill down Beth's spine. What would be changed now? The house would still be Hollie's, the memories of her sister close and painful. As Hollie had decorated the house, room by room, she'd related to Beth her choice of patterns and wallpaper, all in the country style.

Beth had seen the result firsthand when she'd come for the funeral, but she'd been too upset to really take notice. Even the notion of living in the home made Beth feel like a trespasser.

Beth hit her pillow with her fist, again and

again. Why had this happened to her? Why had she volunteered? Why did the result have to be twins?

As usual, when she thought like this, a minute later she came back to reality. Why didn't matter—she had no control over the past. All she could do was make plans for the future, and Sam offered her a solution. Should she take advantage of his offer?

What would Hollie want her to do?



“Sam?”

“What time is it?” he asked sleepily, wondering who the hell would be calling him in the middle of the night.

“Seven o'clock.”

He recognized Beth's voice and grinned. “Seven o'clock your time, but it's only four o'clock here. Couldn't you have waited until morning to call me?”

“I did.”

“That's a matter of opinion,” he muttered. Pulling himself to sitting, he said, “Okay. We're even now. What was so important that you called this early?”

“I've decided to take you up on your offer.”

“Why?” he asked, as surprised as he was curious. She'd been as opposed to the idea as he'd

expected. “What made you decide to accept?”

“I feel it’s the right thing to do. Besides, I don’t have a choice. What you’re offering me is my only option.”

He heard the certainty in her voice. For whatever reason, Beth had made up her mind to give up everything and come to California. The ball was in his court. “When are you coming?”

“How soon can I come?”

He glanced around his bedroom. Though too dark to see more than shadows, he could picture the room and the rest of the house. The whole thing was in drastic need of cleaning. Because she worked outside the home, Hollie always had a housekeeper come in once a week to clean, but Sam let her go the week after the funeral. “Give me a day or two to arrange things,” he said, hoping Beth would give him more than that.

“I’ll give you a week. Is that enough time?”

“Sure,” he lied. It would take a month to get this place ready for company.

“I’ll call you back when I get my plane reservations.”

“Fine,” he said, smiling more broadly. He didn’t know why, but the thought of her coming buoyed his spirits. “And Beth?”

“Yes, Sam?”

“From now on, let’s try to call each other at a more reasonable hour.”

Chapter Three



“How’s it going, Beth?” Tim asked as he walked into the exam room for her next appointment.

“Pretty well,” Beth answered, uneasy about what she planned to tell him today. Tim had wanted to be there for her when she delivered the twins, and after all the hours he’d put into this pregnancy, she hated to disappoint him.

He pulled the bottom of the table out, signaling that she should lie down. “Any more contractions?”

She shook her head while awkwardly laying herself on her back. “No, the pills you gave me seem to do the trick, though they make me as jittery as you said they would.”

Tim nodded, pulling her royal-blue maternity shirt to just below her breasts. “But it’s tolerable?”

“I can deal with it.”

“Are you finding it hard to stay in bed?” He began the usual exam, measuring the growth of her belly and listening to the babies’ hearts.

“Sort of, but I’m finally catching up on all the reading I wanted to do.”

Finished, he extended a hand to help her to sitting again. “Are they moving a lot?”

“Constantly.” The exam completed, she looked down, unable to meet his eyes. The moment she’d been dreading had arrived.

He must have sensed her discomfort because he reached over and tipped her chin up so she’d face him. “Your blood pressure is stable, and everything seems fine. Why the long face?”

“I called Sam.”

“And he won’t help you,” Tim finished for her, balling his hands into fists. “I don’t understand how he could be so selfish.”

“Not exactly,” she hedged. “He can’t send me any money, but he’s offered help in another way.”

Tim raised a gray eyebrow, as if waiting for her to finish.

Beth took a deep breath and gave him the news. “He wants me to come live with him in San Diego.”

“When? After the babies are born?”

“No. Now.”

Tim crossed his arms. “What did you tell him?” he asked softly, as if he already knew the answer.

With a heavy heart, she said, “I have reservations to fly there on Thursday.”

Tim shook his head. “When I suggested you

call him, I never suspected....”

“I know. Neither did I. But he doesn’t have any extra money to send me, and I don’t feel I have any choice.”

“Sure you do. There has to be another way.”

She reached out to lay a comforting hand on his arm. It was important to her that he understand she wasn’t going on a whim. “I’m going for more than one reason, Tim. My financial situation is only one of them. I’ve remembered whose babies they really are—his—and he sounds more interested in them than I thought.”

“Then he wants the babies?”

“He says he does, but he hasn’t said anything specific about who’ll get them after they’re born.”

“You’ve told him about the twins?” Tim asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Not yet.”

“When are you planning to tell him?”

She shrugged. “After I get there.”

“Beth,” Tim admonished, “you should have told him already.”

“Don’t scold me, Tim,” she begged, willing him to accept her decision. “It’s been traumatic enough talking to him about the pregnancy. I didn’t want to complicate matters.”

Tim stared at her a second before saying, “You’re still worried he’ll take them from you, aren’t you?”

She nodded. Her heart, already going faster

than usual due to the drug, sped up at the thought, making her dizzy.

Tim must have noticed her distress, because his voice became soft and soothing again. “Try not to worry about it, Beth. Things will all work out.”

She smiled, letting him know she felt better. “That’s what I keep telling myself. I know this sounds crazy, but I feel this is what Hollie would want me to do, to give him a chance to participate in this.”

“In that case, I guess you’re doing the right thing.” He turned to mark something in her chart. “But I don’t know if you should be flying across the country.”

“You’d rather I took the train?” she asked facetiously.

He grinned, as she’d hoped he would. “No, flying’s fastest if you’re dead set on this.”

“I am. We’re only talking about a few hours, Tim,” Beth said, finding herself in the strange position of reassuring her doctor. “I haven’t had any contractions since you gave me the pills. Don’t worry, I’ll be, I mean we’ll be fine.”

Tim nodded and faced her again, his expression sheepish. “You’re right. Sometimes we obstetricians get a mite overly cautious. What about medical care once you arrive?”

“I was hoping you’d recommend someone.”

“I don’t know anyone in San Diego personally, but I’ll check into it and contact them for you.” He

made himself a note and stuffed the paper into his lab coat pocket.

“Thanks, Tim.” She felt lighter now that the burden of telling Tim had passed. He understood, and he’d help her. “Anything else I need to know?”

“This is going to be difficult for you, you’re so darn independent, but let someone else pack for you. Do as little walking as possible around the airports. Ask for some method of transportation, even if it’s a wheelchair.”

She winced at the thought of being pushed around that way a second time. “I’m not an invalid, Tim.”

“In this case, you are. The trip alone will be arduous in your condition.” He gave her a stern look. “Don’t ask for trouble. As soon as you arrive, have Sam get you right to bed. Call your doctor if you have more than six contractions in any hour or if you have any bleeding.” He winked. “And let me know as soon as you have those babies.”

“Yes, Doctor,” she said, smiling. Over the years, she’d come to know him well. “I’ll miss you,” she admitted.

He helped her down from the table and gave her a quick hug. “I’ll miss you, too. Take care of yourself and Dawn and Boy, and keep in touch, okay?”

She nodded. “I will.” Turning, she blinked back

tears and walked quickly out of the office. She had the strangest feeling she may never see Tim again, though she didn't understand why. Her trip to San Diego was temporary; she planned to come back to Boston as soon as she was able. So why did she feel she was beginning a whole new life?



“You don't have to go to San Diego. There must be some way you can work it out to stay here,” said Julie.

“You're right. There probably is,” Beth replied. “Should I take any of my regular clothes, or leave them all here?” she asked. Julie had come over today to help Beth pack, but her friend hadn't stopped arguing against the move, even while she folded and stuffed Beth's belongings into two categories. Those to take, and those to leave behind. Julie had found a place to store the latter and arranged for the moving men who were coming tomorrow afternoon.

“Leave them here,” Julie answered. “You're coming back as soon as the twins are born.”

“Not quite. They have to be old enough to travel. I'll need something to wear in the interim.”

“I still don't understand. Why leave everything you have here—your doctor, your apartment,” Julie's voice sounded suspiciously choked, “me?”

Beth blinked back her own tears. She could

hardly talk. “Ah, Julie. I’ll miss you, too. But I know I’m doing the right thing. It’s hard to explain, but I feel Hollie is compelling me to go.”

Julie’s mouth dropped open. “Hollie?”

Beth felt a bit sheepish explaining this out loud. The idea had seemed so natural when it occurred. “That’s the only way I can describe the feeling, like an invisible thread is pulling me west. When Sam called and offered to let me stay there, I told him ‘no’ for the same reasons you just said, but after I hung up, I thought of Hollie, asking myself, what would she want me to do?”

Julie didn’t look the least convinced. “And you decided she’d want you to go?”

“Yes, she’d want me to give Sam a chance to participate with the twins. They’re the only bit of Hollie left, and....” Beth sighed, then added, “they’re his.”

Julie spread her arms and looked at the ceiling, as if talking to someone there. “I give up.” She abruptly changed the subject. “What’s the weather like in San Diego?”

“I have no idea. It’s spring, though, so it should be moderate.”

“I think you should wear this outfit on the plane tomorrow.” Julie held up a pair of black and white polka dot slacks and a white blouse with large black buttons down the front. “It looks good on you and should be comfortable on the plane.”

“Nothing looks good on me any longer,” Beth

whined, pulling her rust-colored blouse tightly over her belly. “I look like a blimp no matter what I wear.”

Julie shook her head, “I know how you feel, but it’s not true. You look radiant, as most pregnant women do.” Before Beth could argue, Julie changed the subject again. “How does Sam feel about your coming?”

“I think he’s as nervous about this as I am,” Beth replied. “But he doesn’t sound annoyed or anything like that.”

“That’s good. I’d hate to think of you putting up with a grouch,” Julie teased.

“So would I. No, Sam’s not like that,” she said without thinking.

“Then what’s he like? You never talked about him except to say he was Hollie’s husband.”

Beth frowned and tucked her hand under her head. “I don’t really know. I hardly ever saw him. Hollie and I usually got together when her business trips brought her out here.”

About to put a book into the box, Julie stopped and straightened, waving the book as she asked, “You’re going to live with a man you don’t know?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.” She giggled at the expression on Julie’s face. “You don’t have to look at me like that. It’s not as if he’s a wife-beater or child-molester. And Hollie loved him, so he must have some good qualities.”

“What does he look like?” Julie asked, the forgotten book still in her hand.

“The last time I saw him was at the funeral, so that doesn’t count. But I remember him as being about six feet tall, slender, but not thin, thick, dark hair, and coffee–brown eyes.”

“Is he handsome?”

“Why should that matter? I’m only going to live with the man, not marry him. All right,” she said, responding to the exasperation on her friend’s face. “No, his features are too strong to be handsome. He has a sort of chiseled look.”

“Mmmm. The strong, dark, and granite type.”

Beth, lost in thought, barely heard Julie’s words. For the first time since meeting him, she pictured Sam as an attractive man rather than her sister’s husband.



“What does she look like?” Phil asked.

“You’ve seen her before,” Sam said wiping down the kitchen counter. He’d asked his brother over on the pretext of giving the house a final inspection before Beth came. But the truth was he wanted to tell Phil his decision regarding Beth and the baby, and this was too significant to share over the telephone.

“I’ve only seen her twice, once at your wedding and again at Hollie’s funeral. The first time she

was just a child, and the second... Well, who was in any condition to notice?"

"I haven't seen her that many times myself," Sam admitted. "She rarely came out here, since Hollie managed to visit her there pretty frequently. But from what I remember, she's short, shorter than Hollie was, her hair was darker blonde, and her eyes were—" He frowned. "I don't remember what color they were."

"She sure left abruptly after the funeral. When we returned to your house, she was noticeably missing, and you were a wreck."

Sam winced at the memory. "She wanted to talk about the pregnancy, and I couldn't even think about it then. I—I guess we upset each other." His mind had made a one hundred–eighty degree turn this week. He'd thought of nothing else except the baby, and the decision he'd made had been based on its welfare.

"So she left?"

"Yeah, the second the limo arrived at the house. I got the feeling she couldn't stand to be around me for one more second."

"Then why is she coming back here?"

Sam threw the damp towel at his brother's face, then turned to walk out of the room. "You suggested the idea, remember?"

Phil easily caught the cloth and laid it by the sink. "That doesn't explain why she took you up on your offer."

Sam whirled around, annoyed. “Are you still thinking she has some ulterior motive?”

Phil shrugged. “You can’t stop me from wondering.”

Sam slapped his hand down on the counter and swore under his breath. “Do me a favor, will you? When you see her, don’t let her know what you’re thinking. She’s feeling badly enough about this move as it is.”

“How do you know?” Phil taunted. “Maybe she’s looking forward to moving.”

“Put yourself in her place, will you? She’s leaving her doctor, her friends, everything she knows. She wouldn’t be coming out here if she weren’t desperate.”

“All right.” Phil raised his hand, asking for a truce. “I’ll reserve judgement until I meet her.”

“Do that,” Sam snapped.

Phil cocked his head to one side and grinned. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you were nervous about her coming.”

“Maybe I am. She is carrying my baby, you know.”

“So you said. Have you decided what you’re going to do about it?”

“Not yet,” he lied. He’d be darned if he’d share his decision with a still-doubting Phil. His brother would probably laugh at him. “For now I’m going to give her a place to stay and help out in whatever way I can.” He pointedly looked at his watch. “I’d

better get going. Her plane lands in an hour, and I don't want to be late."

"Okay, big brother, I get the hint," Phil said, opening the kitchen door. "I'll check on you tomorrow. By the way, the place looks fine."



As the plane rolled up to the terminal, Beth scanned the faces in the large window, looking for Sam. Nope. If he were here, he wasn't anxiously awaiting her arrival. Maybe he'd changed his mind and hadn't told her.

She wiped her sweaty hands on the napkin left over from the lunch the airline had provided. Stop it, she admonished herself, he'll be there. She took several deep breaths to still her rapidly beating heart. The medication combined with the stress of seeing Sam had her heart going at a rate that was almost as fast as what she'd heard when the doctor checked the babies'.

The plane came to a stop and some of the passengers stood, anticipating their exit after the long flight. Rather than take the chance of getting jostled by the crowd, Beth decided to wait until most of them were gone.

The flight had gone smoothly, no problems with the pregnancy that she could detect. Her only complaints were that she was tired, hungry, and needed to go the bathroom—again. She'd purposely

asked for an aisle seat in the large DC-10 so she wouldn't have to walk over anyone every time she awkwardly made her way up and over to the tiny cubicle of a bathroom—which she'd learned early was not designed for pregnant women.

She'd taken Julie's advice and worn the black and white outfit, but Julie had been wrong. The outfit did little to hide what looked like the advanced state of her pregnancy. Several of the passengers had commented on it when they'd seen her waddle past.

After what seemed like an eternity, the plane emptied enough so she could stand and walk up the aisle to the exit. When she thanked the flight attendant at the doorway, she could almost see the man's relief that she was getting off the plane. If she hadn't been so concerned about her impending meeting with Sam, she would have found his expression humorous.



Where the hell was she? He'd watched what seemed like hundreds of people come off of the plane, and not one of them had even vaguely resembled Beth. It seemed as if he'd been waiting here for an eternity, since he'd arrived a good half an hour before her plane landed.

Then he saw her and almost fainted from shock. The serene face was familiar but fuller.

The honey-blonde, chin-length hair a little longer. But the biggest change was her body. She was huge! Not everywhere, just in front. He didn't know much about pregnancy, but from the looks of her, she could drop the kid any second. How could that be? By his calculations she was no more than seven and a half months pregnant.

Had Phil been right? Had she lied to him? Could she have already been pregnant when they'd injected the fertilized eggs, and she'd pretended to go through with the agreement? His gut clenched. Good lord, what a mess he'd gotten himself into.

Look, he told himself, she's here because you asked her to come. You can't just leave her standing there. Whatever her scheme is, you'll find out soon enough.

Regretting his invitation and feeling foolish for listening to Phil in the first place, Sam took the few steps necessary to reach Beth.



Becoming more anxious by the second, Beth looked at the people still milling about by the gate. Since most of the passengers had left the plane before her, what must have been a large crowd had thinned out to no more than twenty or so people. Where was Sam?

“Welcome to San Diego, Beth.”

“Sam?” Beth stared at the man by her side,

trying to assimilate what she saw with her memory of him. The voice matched the one she'd spoken with on the telephone, and the black hair was the same, as were the eyes and the bushy eyebrows. But the full beard made him look like a different person altogether.

As if he abruptly understood her confusion, he reached up to stroke his beard. "I guess I have changed a bit since the last time you saw me." He looked down at her protruding belly. "But so have you."

She unconsciously placed her hand protectively over her abdomen at the same time feeling a warmth suffuse her face. It was one thing to have strangers stare at her, but to have Sam, her sister's husband and the father of the twins, stare so pointedly made her feel incredibly uncomfortable and bulky.

Sam finally looked away and shifted from one foot to the other. "How did the trip go?" he asked.

"Fine," she answered, not knowing what else to say.

"Good. Good. I guess we ought to get your bags." He started walking, apparently expecting her to follow.

"I—I need to ride," Beth said, before Sam took more than two steps. "The doctor insisted I walk as little as possible."

"Oh," he said, "I didn't know." She could have sworn he glared at her abdomen for a split second

before looking around for someone to ask. “Wait here while I get you something,” he ordered, then strode purposely toward the attendant by the gate.

Puzzled by Sam’s gruffness, Beth watched him speak to the man, while gesturing toward her. The man’s eyes widened, making Beth feel as large as an elephant, then he nodded. Immediately, she heard an announcement over the PA. “We need a wheelchair at gate six, please.”

Beth groaned. Not again. Not only was a wheelchair conspicuous, it would make people she passed think she was in labor. “Did you have to ask for a wheelchair?” she asked Sam as soon as he returned.

“Was there a choice?” Sam responded, placing his hand on his hip.

“At Logan, they had these carts—sort of like golf carts,” she started to explain, then noticed his expression. His eyes held no warmth, and his lips were in a straight line. With his beard, he looked positively fierce. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You asked for a ride, and I got you one,” he answered, as if the subject were closed.

Something more was wrong than the fact she’d asked for a ride, but Beth had no idea what it could be. Had Sam changed his mind since she’d last spoken to him? She was tempted to tell Sam to forget his offer, that she’d catch the next plane back. And she might have, except one of the babies kicked, reminding her what she’d been

thinking before departing from the plane. “Excuse me,” she said, gritting her teeth. “I need to use the restroom.”

Spying the universal sign beside the gate, she started toward it, knowing Sam watched her and feeling acutely self-conscious about the waddle she’d developed. By the time she’d finished in the bathroom, Beth had calmed down enough to realize she shouldn’t act in haste. It was possible Sam’s gruff manner could be due to his nervousness regarding the situation. After all, she was a bit nervous herself.

She also remembered the real reason she’d come—the bottom line, so to speak. Hollie. These were Hollie’s babies, and for Hollie, Beth would give Sam a chance. She’d do her best to be pleasant despite his attitude.

Beth took a deep breath and exited the restroom, almost bumping into her nemesis, who waited by the doorway, open wheelchair in front of him.

“Are you ready now?” he asked, his tone of voice implying her use of the restroom had been an imposition to him.

Beth nodded, biting her tongue to keep from telling him he’d better get used to it, since she needed to use facilities frequently. She stepped between the foot pedals to sink into the wheelchair seat.

Sam leaned over in front of her, and, without once glancing up, situated the foot pedals so

Beth's feet rested on them. He silently pushed the chair toward the baggage claim, and Beth did her best to ignore the curious, knowing looks she received from those they passed.

The silence between them persisted except for the absolutely necessary, such as, "What does your luggage look like?" and "Give me your baggage claim," until Sam drove up to the curb in his silver Toyota pickup.

After placing her two large suitcases in the bed of the truck, he opened the passenger door and turned toward Beth. He lifted an arm toward her, then dropped it, as if uncertain what to do. Unwilling to ask for help, she began struggling to get out of the seat by herself.

A split second later, she felt a warm hand around her arm, pulling and steadying her until she stood securely. This was the first time he'd ever touched her, even casually, and his touch felt strange. Strange, but somehow right.

She glanced up at Sam to thank him, but he immediately dropped his hand and looked away.

"Do you need any help getting into the truck?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, thanks. I can manage." Pregnant or not, she still valued her independence and pride. The height of the curb aided her in getting her rear into the bucket seat, and Sam closed the door behind her.

Moments later, he got into the driver's side and

slammed the door. The next few minutes were spent in silence again as Sam negotiated the heavy traffic around the terminal.

Beth closed her eyes against the familiar sights of the airport. They reminded her too strongly of why she came the last time.

“What’s wrong with the baby?” Sam asked.

She opened her eyes and blinked, looking at him to gain a clue as to where that question came from. But he stared straight ahead, and she couldn’t read his expression. “Nothing,” she said. “I told you that.”

“Then why did you call me in the first place? Why did your doctor tell you not to walk?” His voice had that hateful cutting edge she’d noticed ever since she’d arrived.

“I had both preterm labor and pregnancy-induced hypertension,” she answered.

“What do those terms mean?”

Only her earlier decision to be nice kept her from losing her temper. “They mean,” she said, enunciating carefully out of annoyance, “the baby will come too early, be premature, if I’m not careful. I have to rest and take special pills to keep from contracting.”

The light changed, and he turned out of the airport onto the two-lane highway. “How many months pregnant are you now?”

“Depending how you look at it, about seven to seven and a half months.”

“You don’t look only seven and a half months.” He glanced pointedly at her abdomen, the same way he had when he first saw her.

“I know. It’s due to—to one of the complications,” she answered, deliberately vague. She didn’t like his tone of voice, nor the direction of his questions. He sounded like he didn’t believe her and was testing her rather than come right out and ask her what he really wanted to know.

“Complication, huh?” he said, his voice triumphant to have caught her in a lie. “I thought you said the baby was fine.”

“I did.” Losing her patience with this whole line of questioning, she asked bluntly, “What is your problem, Sam? You’ve been acting strange ever since you first saw me.”

“All right. I’ll be straight with you.” She noticed his hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were white. “Is that my baby you’re carrying, or were you already pregnant with some other guy’s before we ever gave you the eggs?”

Ah! So that was the problem. Beth knew she should feel insulted by his accusation, but she felt overwhelming relief instead. His anger had nothing to do with not wanting her here. “They’re yours, Sam,” she said softly, “Yours and Hollie’s.”

“Then why are you so big?” he continued, his voice booming in the small pickup.

She explained more clearly. “Anyone who car-

ries twins looks bigger than normal.”

Sam pulled over to the shoulder so quickly that the car behind him honked. Turning to Beth, his eyes wider than she’d ever seen them, he asked, “Did I hear you right? Twins?”

She nodded, smiling at his reaction. “A boy and a girl. I’ve already named the girl Dawn. You can name the boy whatever you’d like.”

He buried his face in his hands. “Lord, help me,” she heard him mumble. Turning toward her once again, he demanded, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to tell you in person.”

What little of his face she could see above the beard seemed to suddenly have added color. Staring straight ahead, Sam said, “I’m sorry for the way I acted. I thought—”

“You already told me,” she interrupted, not wanting to hear the insult again. “I understand. I am rather large.” She patted the area in question.

Sam hit the steering wheel with his hand. “Wait until Phil hears this.”

“Phil?” she asked. What did Sam’s brother have to do with their conversation?

“He’s the idiot who....” He stopped in mid-sentence. “Never mind,” he added. Changing the subject, he pointed toward her stomach. “Are they really doing all right? The plane trip didn’t cause any problems?”

“None that I know of.”

“Do you need anything before we go home?”

Home. Hollie’s home. Would living there be as difficult as Beth anticipated? She pictured the house the way she’d last seen it, the day of the funeral. Shaking her head, she tried to dispel the notion that she’d be trespassing to stay there.

“Beth? Are you all right?”

When she opened her eyes, she saw the worried look on Sam’s face as he leaned toward her. “I’m fine,” she reassured him.

Sam leaned back into his seat, tapping his fingers against the wheel as if making a decision. He turned toward her, his face serious. “Since you called me, I’ve done a lot of thinking about our situation, and I’ve come to one conclusion.”

“What’s that?” she asked, her heart pounding with fear that he’d say he wanted to keep the babies.

“I want my baby,” he swallowed and corrected himself, “babies born legally with my last name.” Before she could respond to this statement, he dropped his bombshell. “I want you to marry me.”

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Anita Lynn

Anita Gunnufson, writing as Anita Lynn, is drawn to romance because the stories have a positive message and a happy ending. “I enjoy the stories most when the characters make a difference in the lives of those around them.”

A member of Romance Writers of America, since 1986, she founded the Northern Arizona chapter in 1992 and served as its first president.

After being a Golden Heart semi-finalist twice, she became a finalist with the entry of this book. When she received that exciting call that her book had sold to LionHearted, she screamed then cried. “My family came running to see what was wrong. The validation meant the world to me.”

Happily married for almost 20 years to her real life hero, Craig, she uses bits and pieces of him in every hero she creates. They have two sons, Brandon and Mathew.

Anita has worked as a Woman’s Health Care Nurse Practitioner since 1978. “I felt women needed to be seen by an advocate who cared about them.” Most of her novels reflect her medical background.

When she has time, she loves to hike in the forest surrounding her home with her dogs, Colt and Oro. “I’m really attached to animals and can tele-communicate with them. All I have to do is think ‘forest’ and the dogs are waiting by the door.”

You can email her at healthylife@mediaone.net.



Photo by Glamour Shots

Anita Lynn

“Wonderful characters who come alive in a beautifully written, poignant story”

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Beth and Sam barely know each other, and don't really like each other, but they have something in common.

Beth offered to carry a pregnancy for her older sister, Hollie, never expecting her sister to die and leave her pregnant with twins.

Sam thought he'd lost everything, not only his beloved wife but his hope for a family. Then, seven months after Hollie's death, Beth contacted him asking for his help.

For the sake of the babies, they move in together. Can Sam live with Beth until the twins are born, then let her go? Will Beth fall in love with Sam and replace Hollie in his heart?

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