

Chapter 1

“The soul is healed by being with Children.”

– ENGLISH PROVERB

Three minutes. She replaced the cap, laid down the test stick with the result window facing up, and read the directions yet again. *Three minutes.*

Staring at herself in the mirror, Maria looked at the dark, curly hair framing her oval face. She saw the pinched lips, the pucker between her brown, almond-shaped eyes. *How will Mal take the news?*

I didn't test positive last month, but I know I'm pregnant. I can feel it. I can smell it. Inhaling, she turned up her nose. The restroom's air freshener did nothing to mask the pizzeria's reek of oregano, greasy sausage, stale beer, and urine.

With a sigh, she checked the time. *Two minutes.* The sounds of 'You Belong To the City' wafted from the speakers. She remembered the first night she and Mal had heard Glenn Frey's song. *Our song.* Recalling the magical moment, Maria gave her reflection a wistful smile. *May first . . . nine weeks ago yesterday.*

She checked the time. A minute to go. How will he take it? She watched her reflection as her creased brow dissolved into smile lines. What am I worried about? Today's the Fourth of July and his birthday. This will be his best gift ever.

Maria focused on the test stick's result window. *One pink line.* She remembered the stories of home pregnancy tests giving false

readings. *I tested negative last month, but . . .* A second bar faintly appeared in the result window. *Is it? Am I?*

Yes! Test stick in hand, she stared at the two bars. Then she glanced at the mirror, saw her beaming smile, and squealed with delight. Too excited to keep it to herself, she joined Mal at the table.

He glanced at her and drew back his head, scrutinizing her. “You look like the cat that swallowed the canary. What’s up?”

Others were seated at the table, so she whispered in his ear. “Happy birthday, Mal. You’re going to be a daddy.”

Chapter 2

*“You never soar so high as when you stoop down
to help a child or an animal.”*

– JEWISH PROVERB

“Focus on the mother’s needs first.” Develyn turned toward Angela with a smile. “It’s like the airlines’ safety demo.” Develyn stood up straight, mimicking a flight attendant’s spiel. “If you’re traveling with children, make sure your own oxygen mask is on before helping others.”

“Mother first. Got it.” Angela nodded as she caught sight of her reflection in a car window: shoulder-length, dark hair, high cheek bones, and a creamy complexion.

“She’s in crunch mode, often struggling for her own survival.” Develyn grimaced. “I ought to know.”

Comparing Develyn’s black postulate jumper to her own tee-shirt and jeans, Angela studied her friend and former roommate. *Goth girl to postulate, she’s still wearing black, but that’s the only thing that hasn’t changed since our freshman year.* “What then?”

“Keep brochures from local health centers in hand, so you can offer them to women entering the clinic.”

“Check.” Angela held up a handful of pamphlets. “Then what?”

“Remember, it’s not so much what you say as how you say it.”

Angela cocked her head. “Meaning?”

“You have sixty seconds to communicate, from the moment she steps out of her car to the instant she enters the clinic’s doors.” Develyn’s eyes met Angela’s. “You have to engage her. Not only with

words, but through your body language, your tone of voice. To connect with you, the mother has to believe you'll help her."

"One minute to earn her trust, convince her you're her best hope." Angela took a deep breath. "That's not much time."

Develyn started to speak, but a parking car caught her attention. "Watch."

While Angela stayed on the sidelines with the prayer group, she saw her friend leap into action. Smiling as she approached a young woman, Develyn cradled a tiny replica of a baby in her palm. "This is a life-sized model of a baby at twelve weeks."

A clinic escort met the woman and accompanied her, engaging her in a loud conversation meant to drown out Develyn's words.

Develyn held up a brochure within easy reach for the woman. "You have alternatives. Would you like to discuss them?"

Both women ignored her as the orange-vested escort hurried the mother inside the clinic.

When Develyn returned to their group, Angela gave her a sympathetic smile. "You didn't have a minute. It was closer to twenty seconds."

"That's why it's called counseling on the fly." Taking a deep breath, Develyn shrugged her shoulders. "You have to reach out to women in crisis. No matter how some view it, we're their front line of defense."

Angela looked at the people gathered. Several were praying, creating an umbrella of spiritual protection about them. Two were kneeling in front of lit candles. Hands in pockets, clinic escorts milled about like shop-keepers keeping sharp eyes for incoming customers. Another 'angel' like Develyn watched the parking lot, waiting to approach abortion-minded mothers as they drove up.

"Is it just because this is San Antonio," asked Angela, "or are most of the women coming here Hispanic?"

"In Texas, the highest number of people using Parentage Incorporated are Hispanic. At first, they come for the low-cost

contraceptives, which makes them easy targets later, when they come back for the abortions.”

A woman walked out of the clinic. Pale, looking neither left nor right, she stumbled past their prayer group as if in a daze. Angela watched her get into her car, momentarily slump over the steering wheel, then start the engine and drive away. She turned to Develyn.

“How often is that scene repeated each day?”

“Twenty, twenty-five times.”

Angela gave a low whistle. “You mean, this clinic aborts that many babies a day, every day?”

“That’s just this facility.”

“It’s like,” Angela searched for an analogy, “a terrorist shooting a classroom of school children.”

Develyn nodded. “Multiply it by the number of abortion clinics around the country.”

Angela took a deep breath. “That puts it in perspective.”

They stopped talking as a woman got off a bus, crossed the street, and started walking toward them.

Angela studied her, trying to place her. *She looks familiar.*

Develyn hopped into action. She held up the tiny doll, two and a half inches long. “This is a life-sized replica of a baby at twelve weeks.” Working quickly, before the clinic escort met the woman, Develyn held out a brochure. “You have alternatives. Would you like to discuss them?”

The woman’s eyes opened wider. She moved her lips silently.

Develyn gave her a reassuring smile. “We can help you.”

Shaking her head, the woman said, “I have no choice.”

“You do. Would you like to discuss your choices?”

As the clinic escort approached, the woman said. “I have no money.”

“We can help,” said Develyn.

While the escort led her toward the clinic, the woman hesitated, looking back over her shoulder.

“We can help,” Develyn called.

Angela watched as the escort spoke to the uncertain mother and hurried her into the clinic.

When Develyn returned to their group, Angela gave her a sympathetic grimace. “She seemed interested.”

An hour later, the same woman walked out of the clinic. Her red eyes searched the crowd until she spotted Develyn. As she began walking toward her, Develyn rushed to meet her. Although Angela could not hear their words, she saw them talking. Then they bowed their heads in prayer, crossed themselves, and the woman nodded.

Develyn waved Angela over.

Angela scrutinized the young woman as she approached. *I know I've seen her somewhere.*

“Angela, can you drive my friend Maria and me to the health center?”

“Sure.” Angela squinted, trying to recall. “Maria . . . now I remember. Weren't you in my Foundations—”

Wearing a startled, wounded expression, Maria's eyes suddenly peered left and right as if looking for an escape. She started nervously rubbing her hands and wrists.

“It's all right, Maria.” Placing her hand lightly on the woman's wrist, Develyn spoke softly. “Angela's here to help. She's going to drive us to get a sonogram.”

Angela nodded, worried she had said the wrong thing. She swallowed as she contritely glanced at Develyn. “My car's parked over here, and the health center's five minutes away.”

Develyn nodded to her and then spoke gently to the woman. “You're doing the right thing, Maria. It's going to work out.”



An hour later, Develyn and Maria emerged from the office, smiling, holding up a manila envelope.

“It's a boy,” said Develyn.

“Congratulations.” Angela shook Maria's hand. Then she looked from one to the other. “You can tell the baby's sex so soon?”

LONE STAR CHRISTMAS

“For boys, yes,” said Develyn, “as early as twelve weeks into the pregnancy.”

Maria looked into space as she counted on her fingers. “May Day was twelve weeks ago yesterday.” Suddenly her eyelids fluttered and she lurched as if she was going to faint.

Develyn caught her by her shoulders. “Are you all right?” She helped her sit down.

Angela got a cup of water from the cooler. “Here.”

Nodding her thanks, Maria sipped it.

“Do you need to lie down?”

Maria shook her head. “I’m fine.” She started to get up and then fell back into the chair.

“Maybe we can get a clinician to look at you.”

Again Maria shook her head. “I’m just a little hungry. I haven’t eaten today.”

“That’s not healthy,” said Develyn, “either for you or your baby.”

Angela looked at her watch. “It’s almost lunch time.” She turned to Maria. “Want to join us for a bite to eat?”

“That’s just it. I—”

“Our treat.”



Over soup and sandwich, Angela watched Maria. “What made you change your mind and leave Parentage Incorporated?”

“As I was filling out the paperwork, I read a permission slip about disposing of the ‘products of conception.’ Not a baby, but by-products, waste . . .” Maria glanced at Develyn as her eyes welled up. “Since the moment you talked to me, I’d been second-guessing my decision to have the abortion.” She swallowed hard. “But after reading that form, I was too uncomfortable to sign. Even in my anxious state of mind, I realized it gave Parentage Incorporated permission to do whatever it wanted with my baby . . . or its parts. The technician must have sensed a change of heart.”

“Why do you say that?” Develyn’s eyes caught hers.

“She asked if I was an organ donor. When I nodded, she said donating fetal tissue was the same thing. It would all be used for scientific research.” Her lip curled. “Research, another name for experimentation.”

“It’s obvious you don’t want an abortion, yet you went to the clinic.” Angela asked softly, “Why?”

“I never wanted it.” Maria’s eyes met hers. “I just didn’t . . . *don’t* have any options.”

“Yes, you do, more options than you may realize.” Develyn shared the story of her pregnancy and how it had worked out in an open adoption.

“My birth mother, Ceren, gave me up for adoption when I was born,” said Angela.

“Then, full circle, Ceren adopted my baby.” Develyn smiled gently. “Those pregnancies had happy endings. Yours will, too.”

“What about the father?” asked Angela. “Can he—”

Eyes focused on her chest, Maria shook her head. “When I told my fiancé I was pregnant, he simply ran out on me.” She looked up. “I’ve texted and called, but I haven’t heard from him in three weeks.”

Angela grimaced. “What about your parents? Can—”

Again Maria shook her head. She took a deep breath and then spoke in a monotone. “When I told them, they said, ‘You got yourself into this . . .’” Taking another deep breath, she shook her head. “They won’t help.

“Where have you been living?”

“I tried crashing on my friend’s couch.” She raised an eyebrow. “Let’s just say my friend’s boyfriend was a little too friendly. I left the first night and started sleeping in my car, moving it every couple hours, whenever the police made their rounds. Thursday, when I was out looking for work, they towed it, impounded it. I didn’t have money for the fines, so . . .” She shrugged.

“Where have you been sleeping the past two nights?”

LONE STAR CHRISTMAS

“Under a bridge.”

Develyn’s eyes met Angela’s.

Maria swallowed. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“That’s when you decided to go to Parentage Incorporated?”
Angela asked gently.

Eyes red, she took a deep breath, and nodded. “I didn’t know where else to turn, what else to do.”

“You said you were looking for a job.” Getting an idea, Angela leaned across the table. “I work at the Alamo, and I happen to know they need an intern for the summer. Are you still a student at UTSA?”

“I was during the spring semester, but I haven’t registered for the fall semester . . . ”

“That qualifies you for the summer. Are you interested?”

“Yeah!”

“I can put in a good word for you, but you’ll need to apply online.”

Maria grimaced.

“What?”

“I don’t have access to a computer.”

“You still have your UTSA email address, don’t you?”

“Yeah . . . ”

“The library’s not far. I can drive you. We’ll fill out the forms online.” Angela smiled at Maria as she finally recognized her. “You *were* in my ‘Foundations of Communication’ class at UTSA last semester, weren’t you?”

When Maria gave a stilted nod, Angela studied her. “I thought so, but I wasn’t sure. You look so different with short hair. Didn’t you have long, curly hair last semester?”

Her shoulders drooping, the girl sighed. “I cut it yesterday.”

“Because it’s cooler for the summer?”

Maria grimaced. “Without a mirror and a blow dryer, let alone electricity,” she took a deep breath, “let’s just say this style’s easier to manage.”

Angela caught Develyn’s eye.



At the library, all went well with filling out the form until the last page. Then Maria looked up from the keyboard.

“What’s wrong?”

“It needs a mailing address . . .”

“Let me type in mine.” Angela turned the keyboard toward her. “That should work.”

Maria hesitated. “How will they get in touch with me for an appointment?”

Angela thought a moment. Then she glanced from Develyn to Maria. “The form needs an address, and so do you. My roommate’s away for the summer, and the apartment has an extra room. Why don’t you stay with me?”

Maria’s eyes lit up, then faded. “I can’t put you out.”

“No worries, it’s just till you get settled.”

Maria’s mouth screwed up as if fighting tears. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath as she focused on the online form. “Today’s July twenty-fifth.” Smiling through wet eyelashes, she said, “For me, it’s Christmas in July.”



The next day, Maria’s smile lit up her face. “I got the job.”

Angela grinned from behind the Alamo gift shop’s counter. “I had a feeling you would.”

“Thanks for lending me your clothes for the interview.”

Angela shrugged her shoulders. “Not a problem.”

“Everything I own is in the trunk of my car.” A worried ‘V’ appeared between her eyes.

“You’ll be all right. After work, we’ll get your car from the impound lot.” With a quick wink, Angela gave her an encouraging smile. “You’re getting your life back on track one piece at a time. Don’t worry. It’ll all come together.”