

Something woke her mid-dream. She didn't know whether it was the baby kicking, a gust of sea air tumbling in over the sill, surf breaking on the rocks, or even her mother's voice, liquid in the waves, but as she lay there open-eyed in bed in the dark, the dream remained vivid. It was an old dream, and no less embarrassing to her for knowing the script. She was out in public, for all the world to see, lacking a vital piece of clothing. In this instance, it was her blouse. She had left home without it and now stood on the steps of her high school - her *high school* - wearing only a bra, and an old one at that. It didn't matter that she was sixteen years past graduation and knew none of the people on the steps. She was exposed and thoroughly mortified. And then - this was a first - there was her *mother-in-law*, standing off to the side, wearing a look of dismay and carrying - bizarre - the blouse.

Dana might have laughed at the absurdity of it, if, at that very moment, something else hadn't diverted her thoughts. It was the sudden rush of fluid between her legs, like nothing she had ever felt before.

Afraid to move, she whispered her husband's name. When he didn't reply, she reached out, shook his arm, and said in full voice, 'Hugh?'

He managed a gut-low 'Mm?'

'We have to get up.'

She felt him turn and stretch.

'My water just broke.'

He sat up with a start. Leaning over her, his deep voice higher than normal, he asked, 'Are you sure?'

'It keeps coming. But I'm not due for two weeks.'

'That's okay,' he reassured her, 'that's okay. The baby is seven-plus pounds - right in the middle of the full-term range. What time is it?'

'One-ten.'

'Don't move. I'll get towels.' He rolled away and off the bed.

She obeyed him, partly because Hugh had studied every aspect of childbirth and knew what to do, and partly to avoid spreading the mess. As soon as he returned, though, she supported her belly and pushed herself up. Squinting against the sudden light of the lamp, she took one of the towels, slipped it between her legs, and shuffled into the bathroom.

Hugh appeared seconds later, wide-eyed and pale in the vanity lights. 'What do you see?' he asked.

'No blood. But it's definitely the baby and not me.'

'Do you feel anything?'

'Like terror?' She was dead serious. As prepared as they were - they had read dozens of books, talked with innumerable friends, grilled the doctor *and* her partners *and* her nurse-practitioner *and* the hospital personnel during a pre-admission tour - the reality of the moment was something else. With childbirth suddenly and irrevocably imminent, Dana was scared.

'Like contractions,' Hugh replied dryly.

'No. Just a funny feeling. Maybe a vague tightening.'

'What does 'vague' mean?'

'Subtle.'

'Is it a contraction?'

'I don't know.'

'Does it come and go?'

'I don't *know*, Hugh. Really. I just woke up and then there was a gush —' she broke off, feeling something. 'A cramp.' She held her breath, let it out, met his eyes. 'Very mild.'

'Cramp or contraction?'

'Contraction,' she decided, starting to tremble. They had waited so long for this. They were as ready as they would ever be.

'Are you okay while I call the doctor?' he asked.

She nodded, knowing that if she hadn't he would have brought the phone into the bathroom. But she wasn't helpless. As doting as Hugh had been lately, she was an independent sort, and by design. She knew what it was to be wholly dependent on someone and then have her taken away. It didn't get much worse.

So, while he phoned the doctor, she fit her big belly into her newest, largest warm-up suit, now lined with a pad from her post-delivery stash to catch amniotic fluid that continued to leak, and went down the hall to the baby's room. She had barely turned on the light when he called.

'Dee?'

'In here!'

Buttoning jeans, he appeared at the door. His dark hair was mussed, his eyes concerned. 'If those pains are less than ten minutes apart, we're supposed to head to the hospital. Are you okay?'

She nodded. 'Just want a last look.'

'It's perfect, honey,' he said as he stretched into an old navy tee shirt. 'All set?'

'I don't think they're less than ten minutes apart.'

'They will be by the time we're halfway there.'

'This is our first,' she argued. 'First babies take longer.'

'That may be the norm, but every norm has exceptions. Indulge me on this, please?'

Taking his hand, she kissed his palm and pressed it to her neck. She needed another minute.

She felt safe here, sheltered, happy. Of all the nurseries she had decorated for clients, this was her best - four walls of a panoramic meadow, laced with flowers, tall grasses, sun-tipped trees. Everything was white, soft orange, and green, myriad shades of each highlighted with a splotch of blue in a flower or the sky. The feeling was one of a perfect world, gentle, harmonious, and safe.

Self-sufficient she might be, but she had dreamed of a world like this from the moment she had dared to dream again.

Hugh had grown up in a world like this. His childhood had been sheltered, his adolescence rich. His family had come to America on the *Mayflower* and been prominent players ever since. Four centuries of success had bred stability. Hugh might downplay the connection, but he was a direct beneficiary of it.

'Your parents expected pastel balloons on the wall,' she remarked, releasing his hand. 'I'm afraid I've disappointed them.'

'Not you,' he answered, 'we, but it's a moot point. This isn't my parents' baby.' He made for the door. 'I need shoes.'

Moving aside knitting needles that held the top half of a moss green sleep sack, Dana carefully lowered herself into the Boston rocker. She had dragged it down from the attic, where Hugh hid most of his heirloom pieces, and while she had rescued others, now dispersed through the house, this was her favorite. Purchased in the 1840s by his great-grandfather, the eventual Civil War General, it had a spindle back and three-section rolled seat that was strikingly comfortable for something so old. Months ago, even before they had put the meadow on the walls, Dana had sanded the rocker's chipped paint and restored it to gleaming perfection. And Hugh had let her. He knew that she valued family history all the more for having lived without it.

That said, everything else was new, a family history that began here. The crib and its matching dresser were imported, but the rest, from the changing pad on top, to the hand-painted fabric framing the windows, to the mural, were custom done by her roster of artists. That roster, which included top-notch painters, carpenters, carpet and window people, also included her grandmother and herself. There was a throw over one end of the crib, made by her grandmother and mirroring the meadow mural; a cashmere rabbit that Dana had knitted in every shade of orange; a bunting, two sweaters, numerous hats, and a stack of carriage blankets - and that didn't count the winter wool bunting in progress, which was mounded in a wicker basket at the foot of her chair, or the sleep sack she held in her hand. They had definitely gone overboard.

Rocking slowly, she smiled as she remembered what had been here eight months before. Her pregnancy had just been confirmed, when she had come home from work to find the room blanketed with tulips. Purple, yellow, which - all were fresh enough to last for days. Hugh had planned this surprise with sheer pleasure, and Dana believed it had set the tone.

There was magic in this room. There was warmth and love. There was security. Their baby would be happy here, she knew it would.

Opening a hand on her stomach, she caressed the mound that was absurdly large in proportion to the rest of her. She couldn't feel the baby move - the poor little thing didn't have room to do much more than wiggle a finger or toe - but Dana felt the tightening of muscles that would push her child into the world.

Breathe slowly. . . . Hugh's soothing baritone came back from their Lamaze classes. She was still breathing deeply well after the end of what was definitely another contraction when the slap of flip-flops announced his return.

She grinned. 'I'm picturing the baby in this room.'

But he was observant to a fault. 'That was another contraction, wasn't it? Are you timing them?'

'Not yet. They're too far apart. I'm trying to distract myself by thinking happy thoughts. Remember the first time I saw your house?'

It was the right question. Smiling, he leaned against the doorjamb. 'Sure do. You were wearing neon green.'

'It wasn't neon, it was lime, and you didn't know what the piece was.'

'I knew what it was. I just didn't know what it was called.'

'It was called a sweater.'

His eyes held hers. 'Laugh if you want - you do every time - but that sweater was more angular and asymmetrical than anything I'd ever seen.'

'Modular.'

'Modular,' he repeated, pushing off from the jamb. 'Knit in cashmere and silk - all of which comes easily to me now, but back then, what did I know?' He put both hands on the arms of the rocker and bent down. 'I interviewed three designers. The others were out of the running the minute you walked in my door. I didn't know about yarn, didn't know about color, didn't know about whether you were any kind of decorator, except that David loved what you did for his house. But we're playing with fire, dear heart. David would kill me if I don't get you to the hospital in time. I'm sure he's seen the lights.'

David Johnson lived next door. He was an orthopedic surgeon and divorced. Dana was always trying to set him up, but he always complained, saying that none of the women were *her*.

'David won't see the lights,' she insisted now. 'He'll be asleep.'

Placing her knitting on the basket, Hugh hoisted her - gently - to her feet. 'How do you feel?'

'Excited. You?'

'Antsy.' He slid an arm around her waist, or thereabouts, but when he saw from her face that another contraction had begun, he said, 'Definitely less than ten minutes. What, barely five?'

She didn't argue, just concentrated on slowly exhaling until the pain passed. 'There,' she said. 'Okay - boy or girl - last chance to guess.'

'Either one is great, but we can't just hang out here, Dee,' he warned. 'We have to get to the hospital.' He tried to steer her toward the hall.

'I'm not ready.'

'After nine months?'

Fearful, she put her hand on his chest. 'What if something goes wrong?'

He grinned and covered her hand. 'Nothing will go wrong. This is my lucky tee-shirt. I've worn it through every Super Bowl the Patriots have won *and* through the World Series with the Red Sox.'

'I'm serious.'

'So am I,' he said, all confidence. 'We've had tests. The baby's healthy. You're healthy. The baby's the perfect birth size. It's in the right position. We have the best obstetrician and the best hospital -'

'I mean later. What if there's a problem, like when the baby is three? Or seven? Or when it's a teenager, you know, like the problems the Millers have with their son?'

'We aren't the Millers.'

'But it's the *big* picture, Hugh.' She was thinking of the dream she'd had prior to waking up. No mystery, that dream. It was about her fear of being found lacking. 'What if we aren't as good at parenting as we think we'll be?'

'Now, *there's* a moot point. A little late to be thinking of it.'

'Do you realize what we're getting into?'

'Of course not,' he said. 'But we want this baby. Come on, sweetie. We have to leave.'

Dana insisted on returning to the master bath, where she quickly washed her face, rinsed her mouth, and brushed her hair. Turning sideways for a last look, she studied her body's profile. Yes, she preferred being slim - yes, she was tired of hauling around thirty extra pounds - yes, she was dying to wear jeans and a tee-shirt again. But being pregnant was special.

'Dana,' Hugh said impatiently. 'Please.'

She let him guide her down the hall, past the nursery again and toward the stairs. In architectural circles, the house was considered a Newport cottage, though 'cottage' downplayed its grandness. Built in a U that faced the sea, with multiple pairs of French doors opening to a canopied patio, a large swatch of soft grass, and a border of beach roses that overlooked the surf, it was a vision of corbels, columns, white trim and shingled gently grayed by the salt air. One wing held the living room, dining room, and library; the other, the kitchen and family room. The master bedroom and nursery were in one wing of the second floor, with two additional bedrooms in the other. The dormered attic housed an office, complete with a balcony. Every room in the house, with the sole exception of the first-floor powder room, had a window facing the sea.

It was Dana's dream house. She had fallen in love with it on sight. More than once, she had told Hugh that even if he had turned into a frog with their first kiss, she would have married him for the house.

Now, approaching the nearer of two staircases that descended symmetrically to the front hall, she asked, 'What if it's a girl?'

'I'll love a girl.'

'But you want a boy deep down, I know you do, Hugh. It's that family name. You want a little Hugh Ames Clarke.'

'I'd be just as happy with Elizabeth Ames Clarke, as long as I don't have to deliver her myself. Careful here,' he said as they started down the stairs, but Dana had to stop at the first turn. The contraction was stronger this time.

She was prepared for pain, but the fact of it was something else. 'Can I do this?' she asked, shaking noticeably as she clung to his arm.

He held her more tightly. 'You? In a *minute*.'

He had trusted her right from the start. It was one of the things she loved. He hadn't hesitated when she suggested barnboard for the floor of his otherwise modern kitchen or, later, when she insisted that he hang his family portraits - large, dark oil paintings of Clarkes with broad brows, square jaws, and straight lips - in the living room, though he would have gladly left them packed away in the attic.

He took his heritage for granted. No, it was more than that. He rebelled against his father's obsession with heritage, said that it *embarrassed* him.

Dana must have convinced him that he was a successful figure in his own right, because he had let her hang the oils. They gave the room visual height and historical depth. She had splashed the large leather furniture with wildly textured pillows, and Hugh liked that, too. He had said he wanted comfort, not stuffiness. Butter-soft leather and a riot of nubby silk and chenille offered that. He had also said he did not like the settee that had belonged to his great-grandfather because it was stern, but he gave her wiggle room there, too. She had the oak of that settee restored, the seat recaned, and cushions and a throw designed to soften the look.

Not that she saw *any* of that now. She focused on one step after the other, thinking that if these contractions were just beginning, labor might be pretty bad, and if there were any other way to get this baby out, she would opt for it now.

They were barely at the bottom when she gasped. 'I forgot my pillow.'

'They have pillows at the hospital.'

'I need my own. Please, Hugh?'

Settling her on the bottom step, he ran up the stairs and was back with the pillow under his arm in less than a minute.

'And water,' she reminded him.

He disappeared again, this time into the kitchen, and returned seconds later with a pair of bottles. 'What else?'

'Cell phone? Blackberry? Omigod, Hugh, I was supposed to have a preliminary meeting with the Cunninghams today.'

'Looks like you'll miss it.'

'It's a huge job.'

'Think maternity leave.'

'This was supposed to bridge it. I promised them that I'd make schematic drawings right after the baby was born.'

'The Cunninghams will understand. I'll call them from the hospital.' He patted his pockets. 'Cell phone, Blackberry, what else?'

'Call list. Camera.'

'In your case.' He scooped the bag from the closet, staring in dismay at the yarn that spilled from the half-zippered top. 'Dana, you promised.'

'It isn't much,' she said quickly, 'just something small to work on, you know, if things are slow.'

'Small?' he asked as he tucked in the yarn. 'What are there, eight balls here?'

'Six, but it's heavy worsted, which means not much yardage, and I didn't want to risk running out. Don't be impatient, Hugh. Knitting comforts me.'

He shot a do-tell look at the closet. There were bags of yarn on the shelf above, the floor below. Most closets in the house were the same.

'My stash is not as big as some,' she reasoned. 'Besides, what harm is there in making the most of my time at the hospital? Gram wants this pattern for the fall season, and what if there's down time *after* the baby's born? Some women bring books or magazines. This is *my* thing.'

'How long did they say you would be in the hospital?' he asked. They both knew that, barring complications, she would be home the next day.

'You're not a knitter. You wouldn't understand.'

'No argument there.' Squeezing the water bottles into the bag, he zipped it, put the strap on his shoulder, and helped her out the front door. They crossed the porch to the cobblestone drive where Hugh's car was parked.

Rather than think about how she was trembling or, worse, when the next pain would hit, Dana thought about the little cotton onesies in that bag. They were store-bought, but everything else was homemade. Hugh thought she had packed too much, but how to choose between those tiny knitted caps and booties, all cotton for August and exquisitely done? They took up no space. Her baby deserved choices.

Of course, her in-laws hadn't been any wilder about these items than they had about the nursery decor. They had provided a layette from Neiman Marcus, and didn't understand why the baby wouldn't be wearing those things at home.

Dana let it pass. To explain would have offended them. Hand-knit to her meant memories and her mother, the love of her grandmother, and the caring of a surrogate family of yarn-store friends. Hand-knit was personal in ways her husband's family couldn't understand. The Clarkes knew their place in society, and much as Dana loved being Hugh's wife, much as she admired the Clarke confidence and envied their past, she couldn't forget who she was.

'Doin' okay?' Hugh asked as he eased her into the car.

'Doin' okay,' she managed.

She adjusted the seat belt so that the baby wouldn't be hurt if they stopped short, though there was little chance of that. For an antsy man, Hugh drove with care, so much so that as time passed and the contractions grew more intense, she wished he would go faster.

But he knew what he was doing. Hugh always knew what he was doing. Moreover, there were few other cars on the road, and they had green lights all the way.

Having pre-registered at the hospital, he had barely given their name when they were admitted. In no time flat, Dana was in a hospital gown, with a fetal monitor strapped around her middle and the resident-on-call examining her. The contractions were coming every three minutes, then every two minutes, literally taking her breath.

The next few hours passed in a blur, though more than once, when the progress slowed, she wondered if the baby was having a final qualm itself. She knit for a while until the strength of the contractions zapped her, at which point Hugh became her sole source of comfort. He massaged her neck and her back and peeled her hair from her face, and all the while, he told her how beautiful she was.

Beautiful? Her insides were a mass of pain, her skin wet, her hair matted. Beautiful? She was a mess! But she clung to her husband, trying to believe every word he said.

All in all, their baby came relatively quickly. Less than six hours after Dana's water had broken, the nurse declared her fully dilated and they relocated to the delivery room. Hugh took pictures - Dana thought she remembered that, though the memory may well have been created later by the pictures themselves. She pushed for what seemed forever but was considerably shorter, so much so that her obstetrician nearly missed the baby's birth. The woman had barely arrived when the baby emerged.

Hugh cut the cord and, within seconds, placed the wailing baby on her stomach - the most beautiful, perfectly formed little girl she had ever seen. Dana didn't know whether to laugh at the baby's high-pitched crying or gasp in amazement at little fingers and toes. She seemed to have dark hair - Dana immediately imagined a head of fine, dark-brown Clarke hair - though it was hard to see with traces of milky-white film on her body.

'Who does she look like?' Dana asked, unable to see through her tears.

'No one *I've* ever seen,' he remarked with a delighted laugh and took several more pictures before the nurse stole the infant away, 'but she's beautiful.' He smiled teasingly. 'You did want a girl.'

'I did,' Dana confessed. 'I wanted someone to take my mother's name.' Incredibly - and later she did remember this with utter clarity - she pictured her mother as she had last seen her, vibrant and alive that sunny afternoon at the beach. Dana had always imagined that mother and daughter would have grown to be best of friends, in which case Elizabeth Joseph would have been there in the delivery room with them. Of the many occasions in Dana's life when she desperately missed her mother, this was a big one. That was one reason why naming the baby after her meant so much. 'It's a little like being given her back.'

'Elizabeth.'

'Lizzie. She looks like a Lizzie, doesn't she?'

Hugh was still smiling, holding Dana's hand to his mouth. 'Hard to tell yet. But 'Elizabeth' is an elegant name.'

'Next one'll be a boy,' Dana promised, craning her neck to see the baby. 'What are they doing to her?'

Hugh rose off the stool to see. 'Suctioning,' he reported. 'Drying her off. Putting on an ID band.'

'Your parents wanted a boy.'

'It's not my parents' baby.'

'Call them, Hugh. They'll be so excited. And call my grandmother. And the others.'

'Soon,' Hugh said. He focused on Dana, so intent that she started crying again. 'I love you,' he whispered.

Unable to answer, she just wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly.

'Here she is,' came a kindly voice, and suddenly the baby was in Dana's arms, clean and lightly swaddled.

Dana knew she was probably imagining it - infants couldn't really focus - but she could have sworn the baby was looking at her as if she knew that Dana was her mother, would love her forever, would guard her with her *life*.

The baby had a delicate little nose and pink mouth, and an every-bit-as-delicate chin. Dana peered under the pink cap. The baby's hair was still damp, but it was definitely dark - with wispy little curls, *lots* of curls, which was a surprise. Both she and Hugh had straight hair.

'Where did she get these?'

'Beats me,' Hugh said, sounding suddenly alarmed. 'But look at her skin.'

'It's so smooth.'

'It's so *dark*.' He raised fear-filled eyes toward the doctor. 'Is she all right? I think she's turning blue.'

Dana's heart nearly stopped. She hadn't seen any blue, but given the speed with which the baby was snatched from them and checked, she barely breathed herself until the staff pediatrician had done a thorough exam, given the baby a resoundingly high Apgar score, and pronounced her a hearty, healthy seven pounds.

No, her skin wasn't blue, Dana decided when Lizzie was back in her arms. Nor, though, was it the pale pink she had expected. Her face had a coppery tint that was as lovely as it was puzzling. Curious, she eased the blanket aside to uncover a tiny arm. The skin there was the same light brown, all the more marked in contrast to the pale white nails at the tips of her fingers.

'Who *does* she look like?' Dana murmured, mystified.

'Not a Clarke,' Hugh said. 'Not a Joseph. Maybe someone on your father's side of the family?'

Dana couldn't say. She knew her father's name, but little else.

'She looks healthy,' she reasoned.

'I didn't read anything about skin being darker at birth.'

'Me, neither. She looks tanned.'

'More than tanned. Look at her palms, Dee. They're lighter, like her fingernails.'

'She looks Mediterranean.'

'No. Not Mediterranean.'

'Indian?'

'Not that, either. Dana, she looks *black*.'

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