

Chapter One

WHEN THE ELEVATOR doors opened, I saw that the maternity ward lobby swarmed with baby-worshippers. Flanked by their own offspring, they bore Mylar balloons, bouquets, and every species of stuffed animal. One little hellion parted the crowd, twirling a diaper bag as if it were his partner on *Dancing with the Stars*. This mayhem was the last thing Anne needed. If only she would stay on the elevator with me and let it take us away.

The elevator doors were closing. The diaper bag vanished, then the toddler, then everything but one pink balloon. Had Anne decided I was right—that now was not a good time for her to visit a newborn? No. She thrust her arm between the doors, and they slid back open. Some friends spied us and waved. When Anne stepped toward them, I had no choice but to follow.

“Anne!” Inez proclaimed. “Mara!” She smothered us with hugs. “The entire community is here.”

Even though there were enough people for a gay pride rally, my girlfriend wasn’t among them. Nor was Anne’s.

Inez’s partner, Becky, nodded her greeting as she kept watch on their son, Diego, a three-year-old poster-child for ADHD. He was plucking the petals off a bouquet that someone had unwisely allowed him to carry.

“Diego,” Becky said, “those are for the new baby.”

Diego kept plucking.

Anne squatted next to him and smiled. “Such pretty flowers. May I hold them?”

He shook his head vehemently.

“Did you get a haircut?” she asked.

If he did, it was at Cowlicks-R-Us.

Anne stroked his head, and he dashed behind his moms.

“It’s so great,” Inez said, “Sophie and Esther getting pregnant on their first try.”

Anne’s smile faded. She eased herself back up.

“Talk about lucky,” Inez continued. She gave Becky a teasing smile. “They even chose their baby’s donor super fast.”

Anne folded her arms over her chest. The sleeves of her sweater left her delicate wrists exposed.

“We took forever choosing,” Inez said.

I should have been interested—I was developing a radio series about artificial insemination—but all I could think about was how hard this conversation must be for Anne. She watched a wobbly toddler clutch her mother’s knee. Diego offered the girl a flower. When she rejected it, he used the stem to probe the inside of his nose. Anne shook her head at him, and he pulled it out.

“Inez,” Becky said, gently chiding, “it didn’t even take us a month to choose Diego’s donor.”

The boy resumed his nasal explorations. Perhaps his mothers should have deliberated a tad longer.

“Diego Sanchez-Smith,” Becky said firmly. “Give me that.”

He handed her the ruined flower.

“And the rest.”

He scowled and thrust the ragged bouquet at her. “I wanna go.”

“Not until we’ve seen the baby,” Inez said.

“Esther is allowing only four visitors at a time,” Becky explained.

Sophie’s partner, Esther, was a notorious control-freak. She probably had the baby’s nap times planned out on a spreadsheet.

“How long have you been waiting?” Anne asked.

“Forever,” Inez said.

“Half an hour,” Becky corrected.

Anne and I didn’t have half an hour. In twenty minutes, we were due on the other side of the sprawling University of Iowa Hospital. My friend, Dr. Grace Everest, had agreed to meet us in her lab, the Center for Advanced Reproductive Care. She was reluctantly abandoning her Sunday “swim club” with a retired paramedic who shared her penchant for vigorous exercise and brunching so I could interview Grace and Anne about an endowment to fund fertility treatment for low-income women. Grace had dreamed the endowment into being. Anne and the Women’s Center she directed were helping to fund-raise. I was helping with publicity by including the endowment in my series about artificial insemination.

Anne smiled sadly at Diego again, and we excused ourselves.

“We can’t be late,” I said. “Let’s come back after the interview.”

Two little girls ran past, squabbling about who the new baby liked best.

“Or better yet,” I said, “let’s wait until Sophie and Esther are back home. We can bring them a casserole.”

The lines between Anne’s eyebrows made the number eleven.

“You could wait until Orchid gets back,” I said, “and visit the baby with her.” The suggestion wasn’t easy for me to make. I hated the fact that Anne and Orchid were partners. Nearly four years ago, they’d hooked up exactly 23 days after Anne had dumped me. Anne and I had been together five years. Numbers like that are not good for a girl’s self-esteem. Nor does it help that Orchid is my boss.

“She may not be back for days,” Anne said.

Orchid was helping her parents move to a retirement community in suburban Chicago. “She’ll want to see the baby,” I countered.

“Mar-Bar!” My housemate Vince emerged from the crowd near the front of the baby-viewing line. He waved a pink and blue feather boa through the air. “Anne!” he called, sashaying toward us.

“I want Sophie and Esther to know I’m happy for them,” Anne said. “I want to *be* happy for them.”

“Diego!” his mothers shouted in unison as the boy reached for Vince’s boa. Diego attempted to flee with it and smacked into a woman with a camera.

“An accessory is not a toy.” Vince’s stage voice silenced the crowd, and Diego let the boa fall to the floor. Vince retrieved it and, literally smoothing his feathers, once again approached us. “Ladies,” he said, “it’s my turn to meet the new baby. Care to join me?”

Anne nodded eagerly. I wasn’t sure whether to thank him or curse him.

THERE WASN'T MUCH to see. The baby—not yet named—slept in Sophie’s arms, blanket up to her chin, and hat nestled over her eyebrows. But that was enough to keep Anne entranced. She took her eyes off the baby only long enough to congratulate the mothers.

“She has eyelashes to die for,” Vince said.

“And Sophie’s hair,” Esther added. She reached over the bed where Sophie rested and gently moved the baby’s hat. The kid did have lots of hair for a newborn.

“Won’t be long before you’re buying barrettes,” Vince said.

“Not me.” The only thing Esther ever did with her own hair was get a monthly buzz cut. I asked Sophie how she was feeling.

“Unspeakably happy,” she said, beaming at Esther. Then they both glanced at Anne, and the beaming stopped.

“Of course, Sophie is tired,” Esther said.

I took that as an excuse to bow out, but Anne kept gazing at the baby, her eyes sad behind her heavy-framed glasses. I wanted to touch her, run my finger along her chin and tuck her hair behind her ear. But since she’d left me, there was a vast list of things I could no longer do. And since she’d begun her monthly visits to Grace’s lab, the list had morphed into a complex set of conversational rules.

Thou shalt not ask Anne how she is feeling.

Thou shalt not complain about PMS or anything menstrual.

Thou shalt not mention pregnancy, not even that of your housemate’s guinea pig.

Thou shalt not discuss children or anything related to children—your nieces, your friends’ offspring, your stash of Girl Scout cookies, or your incisive analysis of gay sub-texts in Disney movies.

Thou shalt not appear to avoid any of the aforementioned topics.

I joke, but, really, it’s not funny. Most of time when we’re hanging out, I have no idea what to say, and Anne fills the silence with epic sagas about her dog’s latest hi-jinks. If she weren’t keeping an audio diary for my series on Grace’s lab, I’d know precious little about her quest to become a mother. And, truth be told, the more I hear, the less I understand. Sometimes, when we’re huddled over a tiny table at the Java House, I see the never-ending disappointment in Anne’s beautiful maple-syrup eyes, and I wonder why she’s torturing herself.

The baby whimpered and squirmed in Sophie’s arms. Anne looked away from her, and I looked away from Anne, only to find Vince watching me. He says I’m the one torturing myself. It’s one of our standing arguments. “Why do you need to understand her?” he asks. “Why do you keep trying to be friends when you know you’ll always want more?” I remind him that I have a girlfriend, but he shakes his head as if he knows my own heart better than I do.

Esther cleared her throat and checked her watch. I checked my own. Anne and I had three minutes to get to Grace’s lab.