

ORIGINAL FIRST CHAPTER OF FIRST DRAFT FOR FACT OF LIFE #31

THE ORIGINAL TITLE OF THE BOOK WAS *NEIGHBOR PAINS*

CHAPTER 1

I delivered my first baby between A.P. World History and Calculus.

Well, not exactly between those classes. But that was where I would have been if I'd been in school instead of in Linda and Mr. Linda's bedroom having the most incredible, life-changing experience of my life.

I had been assisting Abra, my mom and the best home birth midwife in the Rocky Mountain region, for over a year now. And as Abra's assistant, I prided myself on a first class, fresh as a baby's bottom, birthing experience. I made it my business to know the mother and know her well. I found out her musical tastes (very important), favorite scents, and whether she was a screamer, a hummer, a droner or the meditative type. I made sure I knew whether she wanted an audience for one of the greatest performances of her life, or just a few close friends. Whether she wanted the birth taped and if so, from what angle. Whether she would suck on the ice chips I gave her or spit them back in my face. Whether she would have a death grip on my hand and if so, would it necessitate physical therapy or just a massage to work out the kinks and smooth away the imprint of her clutching fingers.

"Almost there, Linda. You're doing beautifully." Abra's voice brought me back into Linda and Mr. Linda's bedroom (I never could remember her husband's name). She spoke in her

trademark soothing croon, in rhythm with Linda's breathing, as if her voice was a part of Linda's breath, a part of her. I placed a cool cloth to Linda's head as Abra's voice lulled me as well, and I breathed deeply along with Linda, my heart beating in time with the pulse I could feel in her neck. It was like everyone in the room was a single being--one breath, one beat, one mind focused on a single purpose.

Watching my mom croon softly to Linda, I recalled her stories of her first delivery, how at the end she said she had cried. Slow, quiet tears that came from somewhere deep inside, like a silent spring that had bubbled up unexpectedly.

Smiling, I blinked in the dim light, basking in the almost cave-like atmosphere, the glow of candles flickering in time to breath and movement, the rumpled earthiness of the blankets forming natural hills and valleys on the bed. It was like I'd stepped into another world, one where high school and the trauma that went with it didn't exist.

I breathed in mint and eucalyptus mingled with clean sweat and closed my eyes briefly before opening them again. Smiling down at Linda, I pulled my mind back to concentrate on what I needed to do for her.

I knew Linda from her first baby--90's rock, Windham Hill, Celtic and flute music. Droner with occasional "whoa's" as if she had missed a step on a staircase, not experienced a Stage Three uterine-stabbing contraction. No audience except hubby, Abra, and me. No videotaping but she did want a mirror strategically placed so she could see it live. Ice chip sucker, no death grip.

After consulting with her, I had selected her music very specifically, timed each CD and song to the rhythms of her labor. For her first stage, in the early phase, I'd started off with some 90's rock, reminiscent of her high school days, letting her get the feel of those less intense contractions

while she could still carry on a conversation and joke about her varicose veins.

As she moved into the active phase of Stage One, where the contractions came harder and she started to focus, I segued smoothly into some soft rock and pop. As we entered the transition phase, I knew it was time to pull out the big diapers. Gone was the rock and pop and in its place I spun Native American flute music, gentle and natural, carrying her through to Stage Three where she was now--pushing like a pro.

I glanced at Abra from my place behind Linda's shoulders, where I still held the cloth against her forehead. As if my glance was a tap on her shoulder, Abra looked up and gave me a quick smile. Then she nodded ever so slightly, and I gently removed my hands from Linda's head, leaving the cloth in place.

"I can see the head, honey!" Mr. Linda stared at the mirror positioned at the foot of the bed, eyes bright with excitement. He smiled at me as I passed him to get to the CD player, where I pressed Play. The Lion King's "Circle of Life" filled the room. It was a little too corny for my taste but Linda had requested it and I aimed to please.

As I knelt next to Abra in the catch position, I felt the muscles in my shoulders jump. Was I really going to help bring a new life into the world? I glanced at her and her eyes caught mine and held them. She gave me a confident smile. I smiled back, feeling my shoulders relax, my heartbeat steady as I breathed deeply.

Mr. Linda looked at his wife, then they both looked down at the mirror to my right.

"Oh, God. Look at that hair!"

I hardly heard the words as I extended my hands, arms tucked against my sides, eyes riveted on the top of that little head, dark hair slicked over it.

"Put pillows behind her," I said quietly, anticipating Linda's next move. Mr. Linda did as instructed, instinctively placing his hands behind Linda to support her back.

"I can see it," Linda said excitedly. I saw her body change, could almost feel the surge of strength flow through her as she got a first, top-side glimpse of her baby reflected in the mirror.

"Another push," Abra and I said together. The baby's head emerged.

"One more," Abra whispered, almost to herself. Because Linda already knew. She was there.

When Linda gave her final push, Abra nodded and I reached out and touched the baby's head. I supported her as she slid out, overcome with the strangest sensation, as if my mind and body had separated and all that remained were raw emotion and the feel of her warm, slippery wetness against my skin. Time stopped, suspending the baby and I in a moment of pure joy where sight and sound and taste didn't exist--only touch. The electric touch of skin, heart, and soul.

The spell broke when she let out her first healthy cry and I placed her gently on Linda's chest after Abra cut and tied the umbilical cord.

Claire was 7 pounds, five ounces, 20 2 inches long, with a head circumference of 14 inches. I, myself, was 140 pounds, six ounces, 71 inches, with a head circumference of about 20. Since I wasn't measuring my head all that often, I had Abra do it for me, just to compare.

Leaning back against the wall, I grinned at Abra, no words in the world able to describe what I felt at that moment as I watched Linda and Mr. Linda stroke their new baby, watching her reddened back rise and fall as she pulled air into her brand-new lungs.

And then I started to cry. Slow, quiet tears that came from somewhere deep inside.