

# The Birth of Hope

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## Dedication

To my parents, Eddie B and Irene Hardy

## Acknowledgements

How does one know whom to acknowledge for a work that is the result of a lifetime of experience and learning. My husband and best friend, Larry (Dusty) Rhodes, who encouraged me throughout the writing process, must be at the top of the list. My children, Bebe Alexander and Scotte Burns, who have taught me so much about life and how to love, must be included, as well as their children, my grandchildren (Sonia and Jim Burns and Ian Mueller), who inspired my interest in prenatal and perinatal psychology with their coming into this life and who continue to inspire me with their zest for life and love of learning. There are friends, colleagues, and mentors, too numerous to list here, who will be thanked in person. I love you all and am grateful that you are part of my life.

## Chapter One: Pregnant

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Tasha couldn’t take in the doctor’s words, thinking, “I can’t be pregnant, I’m only 15, I just lost my nephew, I can’t have my own baby and go through that again.” The doctor confirmed that she was indeed pregnant, about 5 weeks along, based on the date of her last period. All the reasons why this was the worst possible news crowded her thoughts, while, deep down, a small voice said, “This is a miracle. This is the best thing that has ever happened.” But, that deep awareness was only a glimmer, covered over with questions and more than a little bitterness at the unfairness of it all. “Why me?” the loudest of the voices demanded, as Tasha tried to focus on the doctor, whose face swam in and out of her awareness. She felt the familiar crushing weight of victimhood, wondering for the thousandth time, “Do other people have mothers who are able to care to them? Families who are there when you need them? Who can I talk to about this? There are a lot of people in my life; my sisters, my foster mother, my case worker, the GAL, the CASA volunteer, the case manager from the placement agency, even my therapist, but no one who really feels safe, no one who truly listens. I don’t even know what it would feel like to have someone truly listen, someone who really connects with me.”

Tasha’s thoughts went quickly to her dreams of the future, reflecting that, even when her mother was teaching her and her sisters how to steal, shoplifting mostly, and asking them to help her procure drugs, she had gone through the motions, but believed there must be a better way to live. Their occasional months in foster care had provided glimpses of other ways, but some of them were almost as bad. Certainly no one ever actually asked Tasha what she believed about life or what her hopes and dreams were. She focused sporadically at school, inspired by a passing thought that this might be a way out, a way to become ----- something, find a new life, new hope. But, it was so easy to be discouraged – a put down from another student or negative words from a teacher could send her into a blackness where nothing mattered. From that place, turning in homework seemed like a lost cause, so her grades would plummet. Seventh grade was a really bad year, mostly D’s and F’s. Why try? There was no future, no bright, guiding light to help her find a way, only the day-to-day survival game. Then her older sister had become pregnant and her Mom was picked up for solicitation - again, so social services rounded up the girls. This time, miraculously, they were all placed in the same home. Four girls, Alyea, age 8, Sondra, age 10, Tasha, age 14, and Janiqua, age 16, with Janiqua pregnant. It was a miracle that they were kept together and found themselves in a two parent household. Tasha had always been “mother” to the others. Her older sister, Janiqua, was too into her own thing and having what fun she could salvage in life to pay much attention to her younger siblings. Being “mother” gave Tasha a sense of purpose. That Janiqua was going to have a baby had seemed miraculous and Tasha had wondered what this new life would bring. She would have a niece or nephew, someone to love and care for who would love her back. Not like her sisters, who just tolerated her – unless they needed something from her. The new foster family lived in a regular house, with a yard. A basement room had been furnished with two sets of bunk beds and that would be “home” for Tasha and her sisters. The family, actually named “Foster,” consisted of a mother, a father, and a 4-year-old, very spoiled, boy named Dillon. Dillon had his own room and more toys than Tasha had ever seen in one place. The basement room was rather bare and small for four girls, but still better than the mattresses on the floor at Mom’s last apartment – and that was better

than the dirty motel rooms with all of them sharing the same room, often even with one of Mom's "boyfriends."

The doctor's voice intruded on Tasha's thoughts. This little review would need to wait. The doctor was giving her some brochures about pregnancy and suggesting that she talk with her therapist about her "options." What options were there? She was pregnant. She reflected briefly that Janiqua had said that her therapist had talked with her about abortion, but Janiqua said that would be murder and the memory of her sister's words ended any thoughts along those lines for Tasha. Now Mrs. Foster was in the room, apparently invited by the doctor while Tasha's thoughts were elsewhere. Oh, no, the doctor is telling Mrs. Foster about the pregnancy. Tasha can feel the chill from Mrs. Foster's cold stare. She couldn't wait to get home, to find some quiet place to think, to allow that little voice within some room to speak.

The drive home was long and quiet, until the icy silence was broken by Mrs. Foster's voice demanding, "How could this happen. Your life is ruined. You had a chance to really do something with your life, but you had to follow in your sister's footsteps and get yourself pregnant. How could you get pregnant? Your case worker said you were on the patch. You haven't been dating. Was this one of those quickies behind the bushes at school. Don't think I don't know about that activity at school. I hear the talk. But, I thought you were different. I thought you had more self-respect." The voice droned on, sending Tasha deeper and deeper into the blackness. How could this have happened? She had been very consistent in applying a new patch every week since Dr. Jerico had insisted on writing the prescription. Tasha knew that her case worker had requested this, even though Tasha told her she never intended to have anything to do with boys in "that" way. She had seen enough of the pain from that, watching her mother and sister. Plus, there was that "boyfriend" of her mother's who messed with her just two years ago and she swore no man would ever get that close to her again. But Justin was just a friend, someone who understood because he was in foster care too, until they let things go too far on that day just before school was out. Thinking about the coming summer and not having him to talk with every day had created the vulnerability that Tasha had so resisted. Justin told her he would never do anything to hurt her, he just wanted to be close to her. The words and his eyes looking into hers was just so, so thrilling – and, at the same time, comforting. She felt safe and, for the first time ever, truly cared for. He would do nothing to harm her. She wanted to please him, to be close to him. After she surrendered to his warmth and caring, she became frightened and scared and pleaded with him not to ever do that again. His reaction was to tell her that there were plenty of other girls, girls who were willing to have fun and not create problems over nothing. Could this have happened with just that one time? Why didn't her mother get pregnant – she did it all the time, with so many different men. Tasha had never talked to Janiqua about how she got pregnant or what it was like being pregnant. Now Tasha wished she had been able to ask more questions, that she hadn't just assumed that her sister got what she deserved for her behavior. Thinking about that brought the face of her nephew and a smile, quickly followed by pain, as she thought of his no longer being a part of her life. He was so perfect, so cuddly, so dependent on Tasha. Janiqua essentially ignored him from the moment they came home from the hospital and added his basinet to the basement room the girls shared. Mrs. Foster tried to take over, but wasn't there all the time, as she had a job and left for work about the time Tasha got home from school. Mr. Foster

came home about that same time, but he wasn't into caring for babies, so Tasha was "mother" to little Jacques (where did Janiqua get that name?). This arrangement suited Tasha just fine. In fact, she wished she didn't have to go to school and be away from him during the day. It wasn't long before the case worker decided that Janiqua wasn't being a good parent and that somehow moving her away from Jacques would be the way to get her to be a better parent. After her move, Janiqua had daily visits at first, but often didn't show, so the frequency of visits was officially decreased. Even when she was there, she sat and watched TV or was on the phone with friends and let Tasha take care of feeding and changing Jacques. By the time Jacques was 8-months old, he was seeing his mother once a week and social services was taking steps to terminate her parental rights. Tasha was very frightened of this possibility, but Mrs. Foster had a friend who was interested in adopting Jacques, so she had soothed herself with the thought that she would at least get to see him. Mrs. Foster's voice barged into Tasha's reverie as their car pulled into the driveway, "Have you been listening to a word I've said? We will talk more about this later. We are home now and you still haven't washed the dishes from this morning. I don't know why you couldn't have done them before we had to leave for your doctor's appointment. You are on summer break and had all day. I have to sleep during the day because I work at night. I don't get a summer break. I don't have that luxury. You always leave things to the last minute. We provide you with a home and ask very little of you – now get into the house and get those dishes cleaned up. I know I don't have to go to work this evening, but your case worker is stopping by soon and we can't have her coming into a mess. It will be bad enough to have to break the news to her about your being pregnant."

Tasha lost herself in the cleaning of the kitchen, feeling the warm water as she rinsed the dishes and placed them in the dishwasher. Imagine, having a dishwasher. At Mom's last apartment, they didn't even have dishes. Oh, there were a few chipped plates and an odd assortment of plastic glasses that had been picked up from various fast-food places. These were seldom washed, maybe rinsed occasionally before reuse, but the hot water was somewhat random, so rinsing often didn't do much. It seemed odd to enjoy this simple task. She didn't want Mrs. Foster to know she actually enjoyed it, as she was sure that would lead to her being assigned a different household chore. The sense of enjoyment seemed to connect to that place deep within that rejoiced in her pregnancy. But the connection was brief, replaced almost immediately with the pain of remembering the separation from her nephew. She didn't even get to say goodbye – the worker from the placement agency had come and picked him up while she was at school. Tasha understood a bit about why it happened that way – the events leading up to that day were still so fresh. One morning Jacques had been crying in the play pen where he slept and her sister, Sondra, always the impatient one, grabbed him by the arm and yanked him out of the play pen. He screamed even louder, bringing Tasha and Alyea out of bed and to the playpen. Sondra had put Jacques back into the play pen, but his arm hung at an odd angle. They agreed to say nothing and all went back to bed. Mrs. Foster, who had apparently been sleeping soundly, finally came to check on Jacques, after yelling for the girls several times to take care of him. She immediately roused the girls, saying they needed to take Jacques to the emergency room. At the emergency room the doctor on call was able, fairly easily, to reset Jacques arm, which was dislocated at the shoulder. Then came the questioning, which seemed to go on forever. Tasha knew that their social worker and all the other people involved in their lives would become involved in this situation, but she didn't know that it would go way beyond

that, to supervisors of supervisors. The Foster's were scheduled to leave for a trip to visit relatives in another state early the next morning, with Tasha and Jacques accompanying them. Arrangements had been made for Sondra and Alyea to go to respite care in another home. Tasha knew she had been invited on the trip as a baby sitter, but she didn't mind that. She would be caring for Dillon and Jacques, as well as Mrs. Foster's nieces and nephews, but she would be going to St. Louis and she had never been out of Colorado before. Plus, she really didn't mind taking care of the little ones. The phone calls came daily while they were in St. Louis. They knew something was seriously up, but didn't know until the day they returned home that all those supervisors at the State level decided that Jacques was not safe in the Foster home and that, despite their case worker's attempts to stabilize the placement, the decision had been made to move him the day after they returned from vacation. Tasha learned later that "they" had discovered a recently healed fracture, in addition to the dislocated shoulder, during the medical exam of Jacques. It was widely suspected that Sondra was responsible for the most recent injury, but it could not be proven. Mrs. Foster had always seemed to harbor a deep dislike for Sondra and this increased dramatically after Jacques was removed, until Sondra, too, was moved to another home. Although Tasha still had her little sister, Alyea, in the home with her, she felt abandoned and betrayed. She wished she had just told the truth about Sondra – maybe then only Sondra would have been moved. But, how could she have known that Jacques would simply disappear from their lives. What she didn't know at this point was that they would not be allowed to see him until over two years later. Even after Janiqua's rights were terminated and the friends of Mrs. Foster had adopted him, the case workers would feel it best to let him get adapted to his new family before having any contact with his young aunts.

The door bell brought Tasha back to the kitchen. Her task with the dishes was complete and her case worker, Anika, had arrived. She actually liked her worker, who really seemed to care about her and her sisters. Anika had been assigned to their case for almost 5 years, a very unusual situation from the stories Tasha heard from other foster kids. Anika had been the one responsible for keeping them all together in this current placement and had worked very hard to keep them in the Foster's home during all that business with Jacques. She even encouraged Tasha's desire to go to college – to be the first person in her family to go to college. Anika would not be happy to hear about Tasha's pregnancy. This knowledge was a heavy weight as Tasha walked into the living room to join Mrs. Foster and Anika before being summoned. Mrs. Foster had welcomed Anika and was beginning to say she had some disturbing news when Tasha entered the room. "I guess you may as well be here for this little announcement. Or, better yet, Tasha, why don't you tell Anika." Mrs. Foster's voice was harsh and more than a little demeaning. Tasha looked at the floor then lifted her gaze to Anika's waiting face. She knew she was again going to prove to be a big disappointment. Anika had been more encouraging than anyone else in her life and Tasha felt the abandonment even before the news registered on Anika's face. "I'm pregnant." They were the hardest words to get out and somehow increased the weight Tasha was feeling as she released them. Anika immediately became her professional self. Tasha felt the distance widen between them in the small, overcrowded room. There were piles of clothes strewn about and boxes waiting to be packed. The Foster's were preparing for a move to another home. The chaos seemed to fit perfectly with Tasha's mood. Anika was speaking in an unemotional voice, saying they needed to get an appointment with Tasha's therapist as soon as possible to discuss their "options."

There was that word again. It felt ominous and added to Tasha's sense of being crushed under the descending weight of the negative opinions of everyone in her life. Anika was asking how far along she was. Tasha vaguely recalled the doctor saying something about 5 weeks, so she volunteered this information. Anika then asked Mrs. Foster why she had scheduled the medical appointment – was this pregnancy suspected? Tasha felt as if she had become invisible as the two women continued to discuss her as if she weren't in the room. Mrs. Foster said, "No, I had no clue. It was just the required yearly physical. When Dr. Jerico called me into the room, I was totally shocked. I tried to talk with Tasha on the way home from the appointment, but got nowhere. She wasn't even listening. My guess is that Dr. Jerico asked Tasha about her last period and discovered she was late, so ordered a pregnancy test. I just don't know if I want to go through another pregnancy with one of these girls. Janiqua was just impossible, so lazy, and never paying any attention to Jacques. I had to do everything for that baby. He didn't have a mother. Tasha will probably be just the same way, although she does show a little more ambition than her sister. Of course, that was before she went and got herself pregnant. I'm sure things will change now." She took a breath just long enough to allow Anika to bring the subject back to what needed to be their next step. "Options are somewhat complicated for Tasha because she is in foster care and she is only 15, although her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday is coming up soon. If she decides to continue the pregnancy, her decision will be whether she wants to try and keep the baby or prepare for adoption before the baby is born. She will also need to think about the coming school year. We've got a little time to think about that as summer break has just recently begun. Oh, I had such high hopes for this girl. How could she let us all down like this? Oh, well, nothing to be done now but deal with what has happened. There are so many things to think about. Would you be willing to keep her through this pregnancy at least?" Mrs. Foster frowned, but said, "I suppose so. At least she is helpful around the house." Anika glanced at Tasha, but continued in her professional tone, "Tasha, I am very disappointed, but I will work with you to make the best of this situation. Could you ask your sister to come in now? I need to visit with her a bit before I leave. I will get back to you after I've contacted your therapist."

Tasha longed from a hug from Anika, which was their usual habit after a visit, but none was offered, so she dropped her gaze to the floor and quietly left the room to get her sister. She descended the narrow stairs to their room, where Alyea was lying on her bunk looking at a book. "Alyea, Anika is here and needs to see you." As her sister left to go upstairs, Tasha wished that Alyea were a little older, perhaps she could talk to her. They had become a little closer since being in the home without their other sisters and their nephew, but there was still a distance that was more than age. Alyea seemed to miss Sondra and Anika had arranged for weekly joint therapy sessions for the two of them. Tasha hadn't wanted to participate. She was very angry that Sondra's actions had led to Jacques being taken away. She had never felt so alone, but in the quiet of the room, the small voice inside reminded her that she was not alone. She was going to have a baby. With all of the worries about what that reality meant, Tasha felt something magical happening deep within. This wasn't going to be just another teen pregnancy – this was her baby and a very special person, whom she intended to nurture and care for in all the ways she had never experienced or even witnessed. Her eyes fell on the wall plaque that was a gift from her new therapist. It read, "Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it." Goethe. Tasha certainly needed some magic. She didn't know how or in

what form it might appear, but she slipped into a dreaming nap where anything was possible.