

Chapter One

Pregnant?

Alone?

Frightened?

The flyer seemed to be speaking to her. Katie Hennessey stood and walked over to the board. The microphone overhead screeched a list of destination names and their corresponding track numbers. She tugged the flyer from the board and backed onto the hard wooden bench behind her.

Yup, that described her. Pregnant. Alone. Afraid.

The Boston Center for Teen Pregnancy? Advertising in Edison, South Carolina?

Katie tossed the flyer onto the bench and cast an eye toward the other empty benches. A forgotten sweater or even a discarded newspaper would help ease the chill in the train station. She rubbed her still-flat stomach as yet another rumble tore through her empty belly. She tried to remember when her last meal had been. Was it over at Tito's? Or maybe that half-eaten burger she had found in the parking lot of the pub?

She had to admit, being pregnant really made hunger pains excruciating. Even a few hours without a meal sent shards of pain racing through her head. Well, she would figure it out. Plenty of people got jobs and had babies and were able to make a life for themselves, right? Tomorrow, she would figure out a plan. She just needed some rest and something to eat. Once the windows shut down for the night, she would check the trashcans. That idea was gross, but plenty of food was wrapped tightly in packages when it was thrown out.

She could call Mama.

Or not.

Mama had made it clear, very clear, that she was no longer welcome in her house. The two-hour rant that Katie had endured before she was thrown from her mother's trailer had been torturous. *My fifteen-year-old daughter, pregnant? Didn't I raise you better than that?* Cigarette after cigarette had been stubbed out in the overflowing cereal bowl as her mother screamed at her, hissed her disappointment, called her a whore and a slut.

She had no other relatives, only Mama. Her mother's reputation in the Carson Springs Mobile Home Park was a little too tenuous to allow her to admit that her fifteen-year-old daughter had gotten knocked up. What would the ladies down at the community center think?

Katie had almost been glad to slink away from the house. Her backpack held a few changes of clothes and the meager couple of dollars she'd had hidden in her room. She had forgotten to pack a hairbrush, but thankfully she had enough toothpaste to get through another couple of days. The past month had been a nightmare: sleeping on friends' couches and curling up on friends' basement floors during the day while their parents were at work. The novelty had worn off as the days stretched into weeks. A night or two was all well and good, but none of them could hide her forever, and there was a limit to how much food anyone could sneak out before parents started to notice. None of her friends were rich, after all. And of course, none were pregnant.

Katie had struck out looking for work, but she was only fifteen, after all and jobs were scarce.

Katie glanced down at the flyer clutched in her fingers. Her hands shook, and a few tears threatened to slip out. She wiped her nose, hoping against hope that she had not just smeared her face even worse than she was sure it already was.

Boston Center for Teen Pregnancy.

Would they help her here in South Carolina?

The slam of the wooden windows in the train station closing one at a time made her jump. Eight o'clock. And eight o'clock in Boston. Too late to call?

Katie pressed her sleeve to her nose again when snot threatened to spill onto her lip. She lifted the flyer again and reread it, hoping to find something there to prompt her to either make the call or abandon the idea. She could wait until tomorrow. If she just got some rest, she could think about it.

She huddled in the oversized woolen coat and tugged it closer around her shoulders. She was so glad she had grabbed it on her way out the door. Her mother wouldn't even miss it. It was not like it was hers; it had belonged to one of the last boyfriends. Bill? Bob? Whatever his name was didn't matter—he was just another of the temporary men passing through the house.

The 800 number along the bottom of the page teased her. *No charge.*

Things will look better in the morning, after some rest, she assured herself. She hadn't slept in days. If she could find a safe place here in the train station, she would at least be warm, and she could think in the morning.

She glanced up at the clock. 8:10 p.m. It was still early. She would have to wait until after the last window closed to find a place to sleep. They didn't let you sleep in the train station. After hours, though, people slipped in and found dark corners to sleep in or

do whatever. The groans and the occasional scream scared her half to death. Last night she had finally fallen into a deep sleep, but a rough and dirty hand had shaken her awake, searching her clothes for God knows what. She had leaped up and run from the place before she discovered what the dirt-encrusted old bum wanted.

The phone booth beckoned. Katie ran a hand along her belly one more time. This baby was the reason for all of her problems, but she could not bring herself to harm it. That just wasn't her.

She continued the argument, back and forth, rising slowly from the bench. The world around her swam for a moment. She put a hand on the bench to steady herself. She caught the ticket seller watching her, a look of half dread and half disgust on her young, pretty face. When Katie glanced her way, she turned away and quickly began attending to some important task.

Katie clenched the flyer in her hands and realized that her stomach was rocking with fear. *What if someone answers? What if they want money?*

She made it to the phone booth and closed the wooden door behind her, placing the flyer on the small shelf beside the phone.

What if no one answers?

She bit her lip as she lifted the receiver and reached for the keypad. The dirt around her fingernails disgusted her. Even after the sponge baths she tried to take in public rest rooms, they would not come clean.

1-8-0-0-9-7-3 ...

Deep breath. Deep breath, she urged herself. She would probably only get a recording. She wiped her eyes and once again lifted the flyer into the light to see the remainder of the numbers. *Is that a three or an eight?*

Ring.

A breath exploded out of her lungs.

Ring.

Recording, right? She would get a recording, and she would listen, and then she would decide if she wanted to—

“Hello, Boston Center for Teen Pregnancy. May I help you?” The woman’s voice was warm and kind.

“Uhm.”

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Katie.”

“Hi, Katie. How are you tonight?”

“I ... uhm ...” Katie began to shake. “I am okay.”

“Katie? I am sorry, but I am having trouble hearing you.”

Katie felt a sob escape. She tried once again to speak. “I’m scared.”

“Katie, we are here for you. I know you are frightened, but we can help.”

“But I am in South Carolina.” Katie wailed into the phone, all pretense of self-control slipping as a bubble escaped her lips, her face now awash with fresh tears.

“Well, that is quite all right. We can help you there too.” The woman’s voice was so nice that Katie cried even harder. “Katie, I am going to have to get some information from you, and then we can arrange to get you some help, all right?”

Katie nodded. It didn't even register that the woman could not see her. "Kay."

The woman's questions began, and Katie answered them all, her breath coming in short gasps. As they spoke, her sobs began to abate, and her words were clearer.

Yes, she was pregnant. She was fifteen and in South Carolina. No, she had not run away; she had been thrown out of the house by her mother. She had no siblings. She had no father. No other family that even knew she was alive.

Katie felt her tears drying. She used her sleeve to clean her face the best she could as the questions began to wind down. The woman had put her on hold, said she was checking to see how they could get her to Boston as quickly as possible.

"Katie?" Another woman's voice came on the line. This voice was not as kind and warm, more clipped and professional. Katie froze, senses on full alert.

"Yes?"

"Katie, my name is Victoria Ristucci. I am an attorney here in Boston. I run the Boston Center for Teen Pregnancy."

"Hi."

"You have done a wonderful thing by calling us, do you know that?"

"Uhm, okay." Tension coursed through her. *Who is this woman? Is she in charge? Am I in trouble?*

"Katie, the first step in caring for your baby is to put your own needs aside and make sure that you are doing everything you can to ensure that baby is as healthy as possible."

"Uh huh."

“When you get to our home, you will have your own room, plenty of food, and medical care. I promise you that you will be well cared for.”

“How much does it cost?” Katie croaked out.

The woman laughed softly. “Cost? Nothing. We are a nonprofit center designed to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves. You are fifteen and homeless, am I right?”

“Well—”

“At fifteen, you cannot get a job yet.”

“Uhm ...”

“Katie, when was the last time you ate something?”

Tears began to tickle her eyes again, and she looked down at her dirty sneakers. “I dunno.”

“I am here to help you.”

Katie wished the other woman would get back on the line.

“Jean tells me you are at the train station outside of Edison, South Carolina?”

“Yes,” Katie mumbled.

“All right. Katie, we have a ticket for you on the train heading out of Edison tonight. It will take you to New York. I will have someone meet you in New York.”

Katie felt fear grip her belly again. “Tonight?”

The woman laughed. “Did you have other plans?”

“No.”

“Katie, get on the train. They have warm seats. You can get some rest. When we meet you in New York, we will get you a hot meal and take you to our center. I promise you, Katie, you won’t regret it.”

“Okay.”

“Katie, I will stay on the phone. Go over to the ticket window and get your ticket. Jean has made the arrangements. Go get your ticket and come back and tell me you have it.”

Katie let the receiver hang from its cord and opened the phone booth door. The last window was still open. She watched the flash of the woman’s hands as she stacked and sorted ticket stubs. Katie approached the window and glanced in at the woman.

“May I help you?”

“Uhm, yes. Do you have a ticket here for Katie Hennessey?”

The woman nodded and handed it to her. “They just called in. This is your ticket. It includes a meal from the food car. The train leaves at 10:40 from track eleven. The food car closes at midnight, so if you plan on eating, grab something before they close.”

“Thanks.”

Katie grabbed the ticket and the card and ran back to the phone booth. Her heart was racing, and she was slightly breathless when she picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Yes, Katie, I am here like I promised you I would be.” Victoria’s voice no longer sounded cold and professional; now she was familiar. A friend. “Did you get the ticket?”

“I have it.”

“Will you be all right getting on the train? Katie, do you have a pen?”

“No.”

“Run over and get one. I will give you my direct phone number. Please call me if anything happens. Otherwise, I will have someone meet you when you get off the train in New York. I promise.”

“Okay.”

“Katie, everything is going to be all right. We are going to take care of you and your baby.”

Katie’s eyes stung with tears. “Thanks.” She hung up the receiver and slowly opened the door.

Nine o’clock.

In two hours, she would have a meal and be on her way to New York.

For the first time in two months, Katie began to feel like everything would be all right.

