

LORRI ANTOSZ BENSON

*Foreword by
Phil Donahue*

to have

AND

NOT

to hold

*The Bonding of Two Mothers
through Adoption*

Praise for *To Have and Not to Hold*

“Anyone touched by adoption needs to read this book and inhale Lorri’s story. Lorri’s circumstances as a 26-year-old employed woman are not completely typical of women who find themselves with an unplanned pregnancy. However, her emotional experiences of learning of her pregnancy, forming a relationship with her unborn baby, grappling with her options within herself and with people in her life, and finally making a decision after Aimee’s birth DO completely represent the truth of each birthmother’s journey. Board members and staff of adoption organizations should especially take note: adoption is not a transaction. Our obligation is to recognize and honor the fact that the decision to make an adoption plan becomes a part of the fabric of each birthparent’s life. And it is a powerful fabric indeed.”

—Julie Tye, president of *The Cradle (Adoption Agency and Services, Evanston, IL)*

“Adoptions are a different as fingerprints. No two are alike. *To Have and Not to Hold* is a lesson in listening to heart and conscience and staying true to oneself. Lorri Antosz Benson takes the reader on an emotional journey as she struggles with the decision to place baby Aimee up for adoption.

“While the pivotal act may be the giving up of Aimee for placement, the account of the following years and living with the consequences of the placement are filled with honest longing for the child she never knew. This is a wonderful story of possibilities when there is faith in the future and unselfish love for a child. As an adoptive mom, I marveled at the openness of adoptive mom Anne as she tentatively began to allow Lorri into her family’s lives. *To Have and Not Hold* is a roadmap for what can happen when birthparents and adoptive parents put aside their fears. These moms took a chance and created a new family. This is a must-read for all parents.”

—Carol Ann Story, adoptive mother and former CBS *This Morning* book editor

“I wept with joy reading Lorri Antosz Benson’s eloquent and raw narrative *To Have and Not to Hold*. It provides undeniable proof that the universe makes no mistakes. Each and every one of us was always meant to be.”

—*Mary Beth McAdaragh, adoptee and National Media Marketing Executive*

“Lorri Benson shares her deeply moving story of surrendering her baby in 1981 in a classically closed adoption, and of her moving persistently over time with the support of the adoptive mother to opening the adoption and first meeting her daughter when she was sixteen. *To Have and Not to Hold* is a testament to the power of trust and opening hearts. It also shows the evolving shifts in policy and practice over the years and how open adoption at its best is normalized like other blended families.”

—*Lynn C. Franklin, first/birth mother and author of May the Circle Be Unbroken: An Intimate Journey Into the Heart of Adoption*

to have

A N D N O T

to hold



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

2016942948

Print ISBN 9781942934813

Ebook ISBN 9781944822217

Hardcover ISBN 9781944822224

Printed in the United States of America

Edited by Michele Robbins

Cover design by David Miles

Book design by Lindsay Sandberg and Maggie Wickes

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

LORRI ANTOSZ BENSON

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to hold

*The Bonding of Two Mothers
through Adoption*



To June and Leo Antosz:

I don't even know yet the depths of how much you will be missed.

Your example of love and family serves as the backbone of who I am.

Ding Hao!

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foreword

Very early in this beautifully rendered and often painfully sad story, Lorri decides to offer her newborn for adoption. While still in the hospital, immediately after giving birth, she writes:

I tried to keep Aimee in my room
as much as possible. I took photographs,
knowing well these would be the only
pictures of her I would have for a
long time, if not forever. I would lay on
my bed for hours, knees bent, with her on my legs,
staring into her perfect face and
talking to her about the life she would have.
I would watch her sleep, marveling
at her tiny nose and lovely eyelashes.
And I would tell her I loved her.

The older I get, the easier I cry; now I'm already into the Kleenex. What follows on these pages is the flat-out naked true story of a twenty-something female who had it all: good job (ahem, she worked for me), handsome boyfriend, big city romantic evenings, loving parents, and ski-champion good looks.

Lorri was also a devout, never-miss-Sunday-Mass Catholic. She didn't consider acquiring protection from the consequence of a mortal sin she didn't intend to commit.

Kaboom! She's pregnant.

Ho, hum—you've heard this story before? No, no, no. You have not heard this story. The characters are all here: the kind woman at the adoption agency, the biological father who can't seem to commit to any option, and the parents who resolutely stand by Lorri and then retreat when first meeting their new granddaughter—defending against the pain of holding a child they know they will never hold again.

Also in the cast of this drama are Lorri's coworkers at the *Donahue* program office who unanimously wanted her to keep the baby. One male staffer with a soft, Italian heart whispered to me on an elevator, "Me and the Mrs.—we'll take the baby." Only after reading this book did I realize that our well-intentioned pleadings were for the outcome we wanted, revealing an unintended disrespect for what Lorri wanted for herself and for her baby.

To Have and Not to Hold boosts us all high enough to peek over the wall that surrounded the author during this deep and very personal drama. We become witnesses to the moral courage of a cast of people who know what love means, most especially the mother who was the answer to Lorri's prayers—the mother who adopted Lorri's baby and fiercely loves the daughter who is like her own flesh.

Also peeking over that wall will be Lorri's coworkers, including me. We will see how wrong we were in urging her not to surrender her baby. When we put this book down for the final time and discard the empty Kleenex box, Lorri will have shown us how unselfishly and courageously right she was.

And all the other readers will stare into space and know they have just been treated to a beautiful love story.

—Phil Donahue

life changer

November 8, 1981

“Owww!”
I woke up with a start, sitting straight up on the thin mattress of my pullout sofa bed.

What in the world was that? In a fog, I looked over at the LED digits on the alarm clock. One o'clock a.m. I tried to remember what it was that woke me up and what day it was. As my head started to clear, another sharp pain took my breath away.

Okay, okay, this doesn't feel like a Braxton-Hicks, I told myself. The contractions I'd felt and worried about in the past month were child's play compared to the powerful grip that was squeezing the life out of my abdomen now. Was this it?

It was November 8, 1981: six days past my due date. Yes, this was it. I reached toward my nightstand for my trusty stopwatch. I'd taken it home from work every night for the past three weeks, just in case. That morning, I'd used it to time a TV segment with the Bee Gees. Now I was using it to see if my baby was on its way.

I drifted off waiting for the next contraction, watch in hand. Forty-five minutes later, I was jolted from sleep by the baby's not-at-all-gentle reminder that the waiting was about to be over. Checking the minute hand, I realized that I didn't really know for sure just when one actually went to the hospital. I

had an hour's drive, though, and one thing was for sure—I didn't want to wait too long and have this baby on the highway.

My parents were sleeping in the next room, having arrived a few days earlier to help me during the birth. Each night, they'd given me instructions to wake them when "it was time." I was pretty sure they didn't mean after two contractions in the middle of the night. I picked up the phone, feeling a little reluctant to call anyone at two in the morning.

"I'm really sorry to call so late," I apologized to the voice at the other end of the line. "I may be in labor, and I thought I better call Dr. Morgan."

There was no hesitation from the experienced operator from my doctor's answering service. "How long between contractions?" she asked crisply.

"Umm," I stalled, suddenly feeling like I'd probably called a tiny bit too soon. "Forty-five minutes," I finally admitted, trying to sound like this was a perfectly acceptable response.

"Wait until five minutes apart," she instructed, "unless your water breaks; then come right in."

"But I live in Chicago," I protested, with undisguised panic in my voice. "I'm an hour from the hospital! Don't I have to come in sooner? How can I know for sure if this is really labor? What if I wait too long?"

She paused for a second or two. "Is this your first baby?" she asked. I knew she'd already guessed the answer.

"Yes," I muttered, to which she immediately replied with authority, "First babies always take a while. Five minutes apart will be plenty of time. And look for the bloody show."

Not willing to appear like a complete imbecile, I thanked her, hung up the phone, and wondered what the heck a bloody show was. Why hadn't I asked the doctor for more explicit instructions for game day?

With nothing else to do, I lay back down on my bed of strategically placed pillows with a notebook and the stopwatch and tried to relax. My bag had been packed for a week now, and I was as ready as I'd ever be. The night passed in a foggy cycle of sleeplessness. Just as I'd start to nod off, another death grip would jar me awake. I'd search frantically for the watch, which would have invariably fallen from my fingers. After flipping on the light for the tenth time, I finally got a flashlight so, without completely waking up, I could record the time elapsed since the last contraction.

By five thirty, I couldn't put it off any longer. The pains were coming around eight minutes apart, and a trip to the bathroom had introduced me to the world of bloody shows. I took a quick shower and beautified myself as only a hugely pregnant woman, who has had no sleep and is about to give birth, can do.

I crept into my own darkened bedroom and shook my parents awake, answering my mother's "Are you sure?" with a patiently tolerant tone: "Of course, Mom." No need to mention my confusion and total ignorance from hours before.

We were on the road by six o'clock, making a quick stop at my boyfriend Andrew's apartment to tell him we were on the way to the hospital. As my mother ran up and knocked on the door, I lay in the backseat of my dad's car. I was on a towel spread to protect the Cadillac's leather seats in the event of an unexpected surge of amniotic fluid. Or worse. I fought back the urge to scream as another searing wave of pain spread through me. I waved weakly to Andrew as he wished me well from his front door.

An hour later, we were walking into Sherman Hospital in Elgin, Illinois. The infamous Chicago potholes and I-290's well-traveled and rough roads had not done much for my mood, but I was happy to be there and pleased that my contractions were now the requested five minutes apart.

Things were happening faster now. Everything was going according to plan, and I hadn't had any time to second-guess myself. My focus was on having this baby and getting someone to make the pain go away. The labor room was tiny and nondescript. Being from a different generation, my father soon excused himself from the claustrophobic commotion in the room.

My savior walked into the room soon after all the check-in, assessment, and wardrobe changes had taken place. "Dr. Morgan!" I shouted in relief. "Thank goodness! How about that paracervical block we discussed?"

It was after ten o'clock in the morning, and I'd about had it with the constantly recurring, womb-ripping pain. It was 1981, after all—I saw no reason why a woman should need to feel every aspect of a child bursting through her body. It didn't help that I was now hooked up to a monitor and could literally watch with fear and dread as each contraction approached. Plus, I wanted to get the block before my Lamaze coach made her entrance and started in on her whole "natural breathing" regime. I didn't want anyone to get in the way of my drugs!

Dr. Morgan calmly smiled, introduced himself to my mother, and looked over my chart. “Well, let’s see . . . your first contraction was at one in the morning . . . you’ve had a long night, haven’t you?” I looked at him, stifling the impulse to say “Enough small talk . . . inject already!” and instead answered, “Yes, I’m pretty tired and ready to stop feeling like this.”

My mother kissed me and left the room while Dr. Morgan conducted his examination. After explaining the process one more time, he administered the highly anticipated paracervical block and, finally, I felt some much-needed relief. Epidurals were not in use yet, and the blocks were Dr. Morgan’s method of choice.

“You’re textbook,” he said proudly, as if I had something to do with this accomplishment. “You’re moving right through dilation, and the baby is in perfect position.”

“Well, thank you,” I replied, happy that the onslaught of pain had begun to wane. “That’s great news.” As I asked him to bring my mom back into the tiny room, Mariellen, my Lamaze coach, strolled in with a smile on her face. Andrew and I had spent six Wednesday nights with her, learning breathing techniques and practicing for the main event. We were honest with her from the beginning—that this wasn’t your average situation—and by the second session, knowing Andrew couldn’t face being in the delivery room, I asked her to be my delivery coach.

“Wow, you look terrific!” she exclaimed. I knew I’d asked her to be here for a reason.

“Well, I just got a block,” I confessed. “You should have seen me an hour ago.” I cringed slightly, knowing her career was all about helping women have natural births. I still felt a tiny bit guilty, but I’d warned her ahead of time that she would most definitely have a pharmaceutical assistant.

“Hmmp,” she snorted. “Oh, well; your breathing will still come in handy. Andrew called me so early; I thought I might be too late.”

“Nope, plenty of time,” Dr. Morgan interjected as he left to find my mother. I looked at Mariellen, frowning at the doctor’s remark. She smothered a smirk and glanced at my chart.

“Don’t worry,” she reassured me, “you’re already seven centimeters! This will all be over before you know it.” Her grin faded and her eyes shifted quickly away from me, as though she’d said the wrong thing. I just smiled at her and looked over as the monitor leapt into action and a painless contraction began. In the past months, I’d gotten used to people feeling awkward around me.

The next few hours were a blur of breathing, being poked and prodded by the doctor and nurses, and talking on and off with my parents and Mariellen. Anything to keep my mind off the elephant in the room. And then it was time.

“Ten centimeters,” Dr. Morgan crowed. “Time to push!” My mother joined my dad in the waiting room while my small entourage pushed my gurney into the delivery room. A different kind of pain began coursing through me, and Mariellen grabbed my hand, orchestrating my breathing as I began the final phase of childbirth.

It didn’t take long from there. After only two or three pushes, Dr. Morgan quietly announced that he could see the head. As the next contraction came, I bore down with all my might, there was a searing pain, and then the head was there. With one more push and a swoosh, before I could comprehend what was actually happening, Dr. Morgan was holding my baby in his hands! Dark hair, tiny fingers, all ten of them outstretched, and everything where it should be. Perfection. A small cry. And the words “It’s a girl!”

Mariellen gasped. “Oh, Lorri, she is just beautiful.” She was—so beautiful. She took my breath away. I looked at her with tears brimming.

“Aimee Elizabeth,” I murmured, giving her the name I’d chosen if the baby was a girl. “A beautiful gift from God.” Dr. Morgan looked at me carefully. We had decided to play this part by ear.

“Do you want to hold her?” he asked tenderly. There was a sympathetic silence in the room.

“YES, I really, really do,” I whispered, the tears now freely flowing. He carefully placed her on top of me, and I gathered her up, the umbilical cord still attached. She was still, momentarily, a part of me. She was a living, breathing part of me, and she was crying softly . . . and so tiny . . . and so angelic.

My baby was here. How had I ever imagined I wouldn’t hold her? How could I have known she would cling to me like this and that I would love her with a force so powerful—like nothing I’d ever felt before?

Now I just had to figure out how I was going to give her away.