



MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

The Bachelor's Baby

TERESA SOUTHWICK

Teresa Southwick
The Bachelor's Baby

«HarperCollins»

Southwick T.

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CONGRATULATIONS, COWBOY...Tucker Smith had waited one long year for his second "date" with the pretty lady he'd shared one passionate night with. But nothing had prepared the rugged rodeo man for the three little words that Casey Wright had come to tell him....YOU'RE A FATHER!That's all Casey had to say to Tucker. After all, besides a child, they had nothing between them but chemistry. And desire was not something to build a family on. But when Tucker hauled her to his ranch to set up house, she wondered if there was more to the sexy cowboy than blue eyes and brawn. Could this confirmed bachelor have marriage on his mind?

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“I came to see my child,”

Tucker said, resting his wide palm against the front door to keep her from slamming it
“That’s not what you wanted last night,” Casey replied.

“I’m sorry, Casey, but you have to admit news like that comes as a shock to a man.”

“Why did you bother to find me? For that matter, why did you keep a date we made a year ago?”

His gaze turned intense as he looked from the top of her head, down to her pink painted toenails.

“I had to see for myself if you were as cute as I remembered. If your eyes were still as green as the hills after a rainstorm.”

Her knees went weak as soft-serve ice cream. Just like the first time she’d seen him.

“As for why I bothered coming today, I want to see the baby. I *need* to see my son.”

Dear Reader,

The month of June makes me think of June brides, Father’s Day and the first bloom of summer love. And Silhouette Romance is celebrating the start of summer with six wonderful books about love and romance.

Our BUNDLE OF JOY this month is delivered by Stella Bagwell’s *The Tycoon’s Tots*—her thirtieth Silhouette book. As her TWINS ON THE DOORSTEP miniseries continues, we finally discover who gets to keep those adorable babies...*and* find romance in the bargain.

Elizabeth August is back with her much-loved SMYTHESHIRE, MASSACHUSETTS series. In *The Determined Virgin* you’ll meet a woman whose marriage of convenience is proving to be very inconvenient, thanks to her intense attraction to her “in-name-only” husband.

BACHELOR GULCH is a little town that needs women, *and* the name of Sandra Steffen’s brand-new miniseries. The fun begins in *Luke’s Would-Be Bride* as a local bachelor falls for his feisty receptionist—the one woman in town *not* looking for a husband!

And there are plenty more compelling romances for you this month: A lovely lady rancher can’t wait to hightail it out of Texas—till she meets her handsome new foreman in Leanna Wilson’s *Lone Star Rancher*. A new husband can’t bear to tell his amnesiac bride that the baby she’s carrying isn’t his, in *Her Forgotten Husband* by Anne Ha. And one lucky cowboy discovers a night of passion has just made him a daddy in Teresa Southwick’s *The Bachelor’s Baby*.

I hope you enjoy all of June’s books!

Melissa Senate, Senior Editor

Silhouette Romance

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The Bachelor's Baby

Teresa Southwick



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To the woman I shared an airport shuttle with who inspired this story. I hope you and your cowboy found a happy ending.

TERESA SOUTHWICK

is a native Californian with ties to each coast, since she was conceived in the East and born in the West. Living with her husband of twenty-five years and two handsome sons, she is surrounded by heroes. Reading has been her passion since she was a girl. She couldn't be more delighted that her dream of writing full-time has come true. Her favorite things include: holding a baby, the fragrance of jasmine, walks on the beach, the patter of rain on the roof and above all—happy endings.

Teresa also writes historical romance novels under the same name.

Chapter One

She'd always been a sucker for a guy with blue eyes and todie-for dimples. Unfortunately, tonight was no exception.

Casey Wright stared at the man standing in the doorway of the Cheatin' Heart. The man who could have written the *How To...* manual for guys with blue eyes and dimples. The man who had turned her life upside down a year ago tonight

The man who didn't know it yet.

She was as antsy as drops of water on a red-hot skillet as she watched him scan the room. When she waved, he nodded. Walking toward her through the crush of people, he flashed a wide grin, showing off his dimples to heart-stopping perfection.

"Tucker Smith," she said, when he finally made his way to her table. Trying to control the jackhammering in her chest was like trying to stop a Mack truck with failed brakes.

"I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

How could she not? She remembered everything about him, in Technicolor detail. A piddling three hundred and sixty-five days couldn't erase from her memory the way he'd mercilessly wielded his highintensity gaze against her. In all fairness, it wasn't his fault she had fallen head over heels.

"I'm surprised you showed up," he said, filling the strained silence as he nudged the brim of his black Stetson up a notch.

"We agreed to meet here at the Cheatin' Heart after the rodeo ended, one year to the day after our first date."

"Nine out of ten women would have blown me off."

"I know."

A part of her had wanted to do exactly that. There was only one reason she had come. There was something very important she needed to tell him. Suddenly she could hardly breathe. Her heart pounded so hard the blood rushing in her ears drowned out the country-western song playing on the jukebox in the corner.

Casey had spent one unforgettable night with this man. He had given her the best time of her life; but it couldn't happen again. Tucker Smith was the first, and last, rule she would ever break.

"Can I sit down?" he asked, removing his hat. He shoved his fingers through his black hair.

"I'm sorry. Of course," she said, lacing her fingers together to keep her hands from trembling. She sat forward on the edge of her seat.

He lowered his tall frame into the chair at a right angle to hers. "You look good, Casey. Different though." He looked closely at her.

She had definitely changed, but was surprised he noticed anything in the bar's shadowy interior. The lights glaring down on the wooden dance floor in the center of the room were the main source of illumination in the place. Glancing at her Laura Ashley outfit, Casey figured she did look a far cry from the woman he had met a year ago. That night she had dressed in jeans and a fringed, cotton blouse, like everyone else who hung out in the bar, down to the boots that had slid easily over the floor. Tonight, in her spaghetti-strapped floral jumper with the white, cap-sleeved T-shirt beneath, she knew she stood out like a nun in a Vegas chorus line. And her white canvas sneakers would make a heck of a squeaking noise if she got out there to dance. Not a chance of that happening again. Cheek to cheek with Tucker had been the beginning of her problems.

That brought her back to the reason she had kept this date in the first place.

"Tucker, there's something I have to tell you—"

"I guess. A year's a long time. We've got a lot to catch up on. Starting with why you never returned my calls."

The knot in her chest tightened a notch. "I intended to. Every time I tried, you had moved on."

He looked puzzled. “Sounds like there’s some stuff we have to sort out. Would you like a glass of wine? White, right?” he asked, starting to signal the waitress.

Nine out of ten men wouldn’t have remembered that, she thought, echoing his earlier comment about her. “No, thanks. I can’t—”

“Can’t?” He raised one black eyebrow questioningly. “Are you all right? You look like you’re about to be sick.”

“Actually, that part stopped after the first trimester.”

“That part?” His gaze narrowed as he rested his forearms on the table. His knuckles brushed her clasped hands, and she leaned back as if she’d been burned. “What are you trying to say?”

She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I’ve rehearsed this over and over, trying to find just the right words, but I don’t think there are any.”

“What, Casey? Spit it out.”

“I got pregnant a year ago tonight, Tucker.”

His eyes blazed like twin blue flames. He didn’t move or flinch. He just stared at her for several moments. Finally, in an angry tone, he asked sarcastically, “And I’m the father?”

She recoiled as if he’d slapped her; she couldn’t have been more shocked if he had. She’d never expected this reaction, because deception wasn’t something she ever practiced, and no one who really knew her would accuse her of it. His accusation made her feel cheap and dirty.

Breathing hard, she stood. Her hands started to shake, and she curled her fingers into her palms. But the shivering spread straight through to her center. With an effort she kept her voice steady. “There’s only one reason I’m not going to slap your face for that remark. We spent one night together, and you couldn’t possibly know anything about me.”

“You got that right.”

Tears burned the back of her eyes, and Casey blinked hard. So much for playing by the rules. She had felt it only right to tell him face-to-face he was a father, not interrupt his life on the rodeo circuit. It was probably for the best that during her pregnancy and the birth, when she had no family support, she hadn’t known he felt like this or she would have known how alone she truly was. Always in the back of her mind was the dim fantasy that Tucker was there. That when she told him they had a baby, he would be happy about being a father.

She couldn’t have been more wrong. The truth hurt more than she’d thought possible.

“No matter what you think, *Mr. Smith*, I don’t lie. I thought you should know you had a child. Now you do. What you do with the information is of little consequence to me. Goodbye.”

She turned on her heel.

“Casey, wait—”

Her shoes squeaked loudly on the wooden floor, muffling the sounds behind her. The only thing that had gone right all evening was that she made it outside before the tears she’d been holding back fell, turning her into a blubbering fool.

“Don’t slam the door, Casey.”

Tucker put his wide palm on her front door when she pushed against it. If she’d been tall enough to see through the peephole, she’d never have opened it in the first place. Against his strength, there was little she could do to shut him out unless he chose to leave.

Still, a good bluff couldn’t hurt. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t.”

“I came to see my child.”

“Yours? That’s not what you thought last night.”

“I’ve had a chance to think.”

She glanced at the cow watch on her wrist that she’d bought a year ago at the rodeo. It showed eleven in the morning. “It’s been all of fifteen hours since you got the news. Is that enough time to change your mind? You all but called me a liar—”

“You didn’t give me a chance to say much of anything.” He held up a hand. “Not that I blame you. I’m sorry, Casey, but you have to admit that news like that comes as a shock to a man.”

“It comes as a shock to a woman, too.”

“Look,” he said, moving his body into the doorway. “Can I come in? Or would you like your neighbors to get an earful?”

“No, I don’t want you to come in, and no, I don’t want to be grist for the rumor mill in this building.”

“It’s one or the other,” he said, pushing gently on the door.

“All right.” She let him into the entry way, then shut the door after him. “How did you find me?”

“Palmdale’s not all that big. I found that accounting firm you’d told me you worked for in the phone book. Wasn’t too hard to charm your address out of the receptionist.”

Kim Delaney had the loosest lips in the world—a failing Casey planned to take up with her friend at the first opportunity.

“So you found me. Why did you bother? For that matter, why did you keep a date we made a year ago?”

His gaze turned intense as he looked from the top of her head, over her buttercup yellow tank top, khaki shorts, bare legs and down to her pink painted toenails. The heat of the megawatt smile he turned on her never reached his eyes.

“I had to see for myself if you were as cute as I remembered. If that wheat-colored hair of yours was as spiky and flyaway. If your eyes were still as green as the hills after a rainstorm.”

Her knees went as weak as soft-serve ice cream. Just like the first time she’d seen him. She leaned back in the entryway, trying to make the movement appear relaxed. The leaning had more to do with selfpreservation, since she needed to sit down before she collapsed. As it was, she could barely manage to find the wall and plant her rear end firmly against it.

She’d been almost glad last night when he’d thought she was a deceitful witch. It had given her a good reason to leave and not look back. If he kept up this sweet talk, she would have no defenses left.

She didn’t have enough self-control to keep from asking breathlessly, “Am I?” She blinked. “Spiky, flyaway and green, I mean?”

“Nope.” A muscle in his cheek jerked as his jaws clamped tightly together.

“Oh.” She should have been relieved. Instead, disappointment settled over her.

“As for why I bothered coming today, I want to see the baby. Boy or girl?”

“What?”

“Last night you didn’t say whether it was a boy or a girl.”

“I had a boy.”

A small smile lifted the corners of his nicely shaped mouth. That information seemed to please him. Absurdly, she was glad he was glad.

“Can I see him?” He took his hat off and jammed his fingers through his hair.

“He’s asleep.” For reasons she didn’t understand, her protective instincts started blinking like a pediatrician’s switchboard on Monday morning.

“I won’t disturb him.”

“He’s a light sleeper,” she said quickly.

She needed time to think through the ramifications of suddenly having her baby’s father in the picture. If she was lucky, he would get good and mad at the abrasive attitude she assumed just for him, tell her off, then turn around and walk out before she could say, “Been nice knowing you, Cowboy.” Instead, he stood his ground, looking at her as if she’d cut the stirrups off his favorite saddle.

His mouth thinned, making his jaw look more square. “Look, Casey, I’ve been up all night. I’m not in the mood to play games. I just want to see my son.

“Why do you suddenly believe he’s yours?” She stared up at him. Lord, he was tall. Six foot two if he was an inch. At her own five foot two, that was a lot of distance between mouths. A year

ago they'd succeeded in overcoming that problem. The memory set off a serious fluttering in her stomach, a sensation she tried her best to ignore.

"I'm not sure," he admitted. "Just a feeling."

He glared down at her. Funny, she thought, those eyes carried as big a wallop angry as they did when passion filled. He rubbed a hand across his jaw, setting off a rasping that told her he hadn't shaved any more than he had slept.

"I don't want his routine upset." It was worth a last-ditch effort to see if she could make him angry enough to leave her in peace.

She hoped for one final mad-as-hell scowl before he turned on his boot heel and hit the trail. But he stood in her doorway looking as tall as a mountain and just as immovable. Apparently she wasn't going to be lucky. He was ticked off, all right. But he wasn't leaving. She was stalling, and he knew it.

Actually, what harm could it do for him to see the baby? It would be quick, she told herself. He'd do his duty, feel noble, then he could go. After all, one reason they had hit it off so well was because they had both agreed relationships were a complication. Neither wanted any strings attached. She hadn't changed her mind about that, except where her son was concerned. Since Tucker was a transient rodeo cowboy, the odds were in her favor that he hadn't changed his mind, either, and would be especially reluctant to want a child hampering his life-style.

She stood up straight and held a hand out, finally indicating that he should come in. "I apologize. I'm being rude. Please..."

"Thanks." He frowned, then walked in, his boots thudding on the oak floor in her entry way.

Without hesitation she could say that there had never been a pair of boots in this condo. If all went as she hoped, there never would be again. Blue eyes, dimples, black hair, cowboy hat and boots. There was more masculinity under her roof than she was prepared to handle.

She led him up the two steps into her living room. "Have a seat," she said, indicating the mauve-and-blue floral chintz sofa.

"Thanks."

He laid his hat on the rosewood coffee table. Then he sat down, draping both arms across the back of the couch as he rested one booted foot on the opposite knee. She bit back a smile as she thought how out of place he looked in her feminine surroundings. His loose-limbed, relaxed posture said he felt right at home. As the rolled-up sleeves on his white cotton shirt pulled up his forearms, she was amazed at the muscles there.

"He should be waking up anytime for a feeding. Would you mind waiting until then to see him?"

His black eyebrows pulled together thoughtfully as he nodded his head. "Give us a chance to talk, without one of us running out."

"One of us had a pretty good reason," she said.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner that you were pregnant?"

She cursed the heat that burned her cheeks. For God's sake, she was a twenty-eight-year-old woman. Why couldn't she do this without blushing like a teenager?

She sat in the powder blue velvet wingback chair across the table from him. Nervously twisting her fingers, she gathered her thoughts. "You move around a lot."

"Yeah. I know. You said something about that last night."

She shrugged. "I'll admit, I didn't try very hard."

"Why's that?"

"Because when it comes right down to it, the whole thing was my fault. I know that. I didn't want you to feel that you had to do anything. No one should take responsibility for me. I made my bed—" she glanced up quickly "—metaphorically speaking. And I had to lie in it."

"It's an awfully big bed to lie in by yourself. What's his name?"

She blinked. "Who?"

"My son."

She frowned. He was suddenly taking this more seriously than she had expected. “I named him Jason Smith Wright.”

“My father’s name was Jason.”

“I know. He weighed eight pounds, four ounces. He was twenty-one inches long.” She looked into Tucker’s blue eyes, then lower to the dimples that were more like slashes on either side of his mouth as he frowned. “He’s the spitting image of you.”

He took a deep breath. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I’d figure you to question again whether or not I’m telling you the truth.”

“My gut tells me you didn’t plan to tell me anything at all if I hadn’t showed up on your doorstep today. Why would you lie?”

“I wouldn’t.”

He frowned. “That night—a year ago, we discussed this. Well, not this, but pregnancy. Right after I told you there was nothing to worry about from me. You said it was a safe time for you.”

“I truly believed that. Apparently I practiced the idiot’s method of rhythm contraception. I counted wrong. My cycle threw me a curve. My body has a wacky sense of humor. I zipped when I should have zagged. I don’t know what happened.” She threw her hands in the air. “It’s all my fault. Not yours.”

He shook his head. “It takes two.”

An undeniable fact. So she didn’t bother contradicting him. He laced his hands together and rested his elbows on well-muscled thighs encased in jeans. Wranglers, she remembered.

That’s part of what had set the course of events in motion. She had admired his boots, then wondered how he got those jeans over his boots. Then she’d put that wondering into words. The next thing she knew, he had taken her to his room to show her exactly how easy it was to pull those Wranglers over his boots. They had talked and laughed long into the night. Then he had turned those eyes and dimples loose on her, and she’d been a goner. It wasn’t his fault. He shouldn’t be stuck with the consequences. After all, Jason didn’t need anyone but her. And she would never let him down.

“You don’t owe me anything, Tucker. I’m not asking you to be involved in any way.”

He stood up. “Now hold on. Not so darn fast. You don’t spring this on a man, then say *adios*.”

“I’m the first to admit that I find security in rules, but I don’t think there are any for a situation like this. I don’t know what to do.”

“You might start by giving me time to take all this in.”

Nervously she looked at her watch again, wishing the baby would wake up. “Okay. You’re right.”

“It’s not every day a man finds out he’s a father.”

“And thank goodness for that. The world is overpopulated as it is.” She stood up and stuck her hands in the pockets of her shorts. “I’m sorry, Tucker. This has to be a shock, and I guess I’m not handling it very well. Let me make myself clear. I’m not asking you for anything. I don’t expect anything from you. I’m trying to make this as easy for you as I can.”

Brave words for a woman in her situation.

“There’s no way to make it easy.”

“Sure there is. Just walk away,” she said, holding her hand toward the door.

“Is that what you want me to do?” he asked, irritated.

“Isn’t it what you want?”

“No. But I’m getting the feeling it’s what you want. You didn’t want me here in the first place. Now you’re trying awful damn hard to get rid of me. Why, Casey?”

She looked away for a moment. “My feelings could best be described as mixed. How about this — if you want to go, it’s okay with me. If you want to stay and see the baby, it’s okay with me.”

“I want to see him.”

Casey smiled. “Okay. I think I heard some noises from the nursery. Follow me.”

The thick beige carpet silenced their footsteps as they climbed the stairs to the nursery. Opening the first door on her right, Casey led him over to the white crib on the wall opposite the door. When she peeked in, Jason was on his back, big blue eyes staring up at her.

“Hi, big boy,” she crooned.

A big toothless grin greeted her as he kicked his legs and waved his arms. She felt Tucker behind her, looking over her right shoulder. His nearness sent shivers through her.

Tucker wrapped his hand around the rail and looked down at the baby. “I feel stupid asking this, but how old is he?”

“Three months. He just started rolling from his tummy to his back. Of course I think that’s because he’s the smartest, most well-developed child ever born. But every baby book I’ve read says he’s within normal range.”

“Is it all right with you if I pick him up?”

“Sure.”

He reached in, then stopped and looked at her. “I don’t know how.”

“It’s easy as falling off a horse,” she assured him.

“That’s not all that easy.”

She laughed. “Put your palm up under his back and neck to support him. Like this.” She took his wrist, shivering at the harnessed strength she felt. Ignoring her reaction, she placed his hand beneath the baby. “Put your other hand under his bottom and lift.”

He did as she directed and cradled the baby’s head in the crook of his elbow, while the rest of Jason’s chubby body trailed down his arm.

She slanted Tucker an approving look. “See? You can do it with one arm tied behind your back.”

“I think I’d rather wrestle a steer.” When his uneasy expression faded slightly, he glanced at her. “He’s a sturdy little fella.”

“He’s not fat,” she said defensively.

Tucker looked at her and raised one brow. “Didn’t say he was.”

“Good. Because he’s not.”

So she was a little sensitive. The pediatrician had made her aware of fat cells and a person’s predisposition to putting on weight. Although, seeing the lean, rugged strength and height of Jason’s father, whom he resembled more than a little, she wasn’t nearly so worried. Although it occurred to her, and not for the first time, that she hardly knew anything about her son’s father.

The baby started to fuss and Tucker froze. “What do I do?”

“Unless you have breast milk, not a thing. It’s time for his feeding.”

“Do you want me to leave the room so you can have some privacy?” he asked.

She took the baby from his arms, wondering why he’d qualified that, as in “leave the room,” not the premises and her life. Jason started fussing louder, and she didn’t give it any more thought.

“You can stay if you want. I’ve gotten used to doing this discreetly.” She looked up at him as she sat in the rocker by the window. “Unless you’re embarrassed.”

“Me? Embarrassed? Heck no, doesn’t bother me at all,” he said, turning his back to her.

Casey grinned as she grabbed a receiving blanket and threw it over Jason and her shoulder, then pulled her T-shirt up and unhooked her nursing bra. Nestling Jason against her, she smiled when he latched on to her nipple with the strength of a vacuum. He started smacking loudly, and Casey glanced at Tucker. He was still staring at the back of the condo building across the alley, as if a woman was stripteasing in the window. In the past three months she’d spent enough time rocking Jason in this spot to know for a fact the stucco was not that interesting.

“Really, Tucker. This is the most natural thing in the world. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I’m not.” But he didn’t turn around. “I’m sort of surprised that you’d nurse him.”

“Why?”

He raised his broad shoulders as he tucked his fingertips in his front pockets, pulling the denim a little tighter across his backside. She was just as glad he was embarrassed. From where she sat, the view was pretty darn good.

“Most working women wouldn’t.”

Casey started at the words and tone. It pricked the knot of worry she carried around with her. Did he know about her present situation? That was silly. How could he?

“A lot of women have to work. That doesn’t mean they don’t want the best for their babies,” she said defensively.

He glanced over his shoulder, then quickly back out the window. “Yeah, but something tells me they’d frown on you doing that in between clients.”

“That’s true.” She sighed. “But I’ll manage when I go back.”

“Where would you be going back to?”

She glanced up at him sharply. There was definitely an odd note in his voice, as if he was setting a trap for her to walk into.

“My job at the firm—”

“Why are you trying to hide it from me?”

“I’m not trying to hide anything—”

“Come off it, Casey.”

Tucker was too tired to sort through his feelings about Casey and what kind of game she was playing. But a couple of things he knew for a fact. She hadn’t lied about Jason being his son. His instincts told him that even before he saw the unmistakable resemblance. But with that first look and touch, he’d known a wave of love and protection so fierce, so powerful, it had taken his breath away.

“How did you know?” she asked a note of accusation in her voice.

“That receptionist who gave me your address told me.”

“I should have guessed. Actually it was sort of a mutual decision. Because of Jason I didn’t want to work the seventy-hour week they envisioned for a potential accounting partner. And they were concerned that motherhood would dilute the energy I could give the firm.” He heard the worry mixed with bravado in her voice.

“What are you going to do?” he asked. He turned away from the window and caught the tender way she was looking at the nursing baby. His flesh and blood—*his son*. The thought brought him more joy than he’d ever felt in his life.

“I’m looking for another job. I’ve filed for unemployment. I’ll be fine.”

Tucker watched her rock gently back and forth. Last night he’d thought she was more beautiful than she’d been the night he’d met her. Now he understood why. Motherhood suited her. But she seemed damned determined to deny him a chance at fatherhood.

That wasn’t going to happen.

He wasn’t sure why she was so resolved to do this on her own. But he knew for a fact he wouldn’t let her get away with it. Tucker had driven around a long time before knocking on her door. He’d had a lot of time to think. An idea had come to him, and the more he thought about it, the better it sounded to him.

“What if you can’t find a job? What happens when the money runs out?”

She sighed. “I’m an intelligent woman. I’ll find a way to take care of myself and my son.”

“You haven’t said anything about family. Is there someone who can help?”

“No.” The one curtly spoken word told him a lot about what she had gone through in the past year.

Anger, at her and himself, flowed through him. “You should have tried harder to find me.”

Her gaze snapped up to his. “It’s not your problem, Tucker.”

“The hell it’s not. He’s my son.”

The baby started squirming, and she raised him to her shoulder, then gently patted his back. “I understand how you feel. I didn’t know it was possible to love someone this much.”

Jason burped loudly and Tucker laughed. “With a little practice he could be a champion.”

Casey snorted. “I’m not sure it’s a skill that should be encouraged.” She settled him at her other breast and he nursed happily again.

“So what are your plans now?” Tucker asked. “Do you have any solid leads on a job?”

“One or two,” she answered vaguely.

“You don’t sound like a typical, enthusiastic career woman.”

“The one thing I hadn’t counted on was how hard it would be to leave my baby—” Her voice caught.

In two strides Tucker was beside her and down on one knee. “Casey, don’t.”

“Don’t what? Don’t leave him? Don’t nurse him? Don’t cry—”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. With her hands full of baby, she couldn’t discreetly brush it away. Tucker did.

“There’s no reason to cry,” he said.

“Oh, yeah? He’s my baby, and I’ll cry if I want to.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

Another tear slipped down her cheek. “I don’t need your permission.”

“Of course not—”

“Don’t patronize me, Tucker. I hate crying. I despise being at the mercy of my hormones. And seeing you isn’t helping, either.”

He wasn’t exactly sure what she meant by that, but chose to believe she was feeling the same way he was. Disturbed by how strong his attraction still was even after a year.

“I’m just trying to help. I’ve got an idea—”

“I don’t need help. Especially from a man.” She sniffled. “Tucker, you’ve seen Jason. He’s happy, hearty, healthy—sturdy,” she said, meeting his gaze. “I’ve played by the rules. It’s time for you to go. Happy trails and all that.”

He gritted his teeth. “Not yet.”

“Yet?” she asked suspiciously. “What does that mean?”

“You’re not the only one who plays by the rules. I’m not leaving until you hear my proposition.”

Chapter Two

Tucker suppressed his anger at her dismissal. He needed a clear head, something he could never manage when he was mad as hell. Like now. Casey Wright had confessed, unburdened her conscience, come clean and told him about his son. Her halfhearted attempt to find him didn't cut it, as far as he was concerned. He didn't trust a woman who would keep secrets from him, especially something as important as the fact that he was going to be a father. If she expected him to walk out of his son's life, she'd better think again.

"This is a proposal that you might want to seriously consider," he repeated.

"If this is about marrying you," she said quickly. "That's out of the question."

"I wasn't going to ask you to."

"Oh. Good, because the answer would have been no."

"Fine. I don't want to get married, either. But I've got another idea. Will you hear me out?"

She stared back at him, her delicate jaw rigid with stubbornness. Big green eyes in a pixie face, surrounded becomingly by short, jagged-cut blond hair, regarded him suspiciously. He realized he had lied when he told her she wasn't as cute as he remembered. She was cuter.

When she took a deep breath and nodded, he knew she would listen. "I don't think I'll like it, but the least I can do is hear you out."

"How do you know you won't like it?" he asked, irritated.

"I just do. But go ahead."

Still on one knee beside her rocking chair, he felt as if he *should* propose marriage to her. It was the honorable thing to do. He couldn't. It might be noble, but it wasn't right. Not for Casey or Jason or him. Marriage implied love and commitment that would last forever, and he didn't believe that was possible. But he could offer her the next best thing.

"I want you and Jason to move in with me on my ranch." He took one look at her face and added, "Temporarily. Say, three months. A month for every one I missed out on."

"You want—" She stared at him for a moment.

Then she moved. Beneath the soft little blanket that hid his son and her breast, she squirmed as she righted the straps of her bra and shirt. She threw off the flannel covering, lifted the contented baby to her shoulder and burped him. With quick, angry movements, she arranged a small plastic chair in the crib.

"What's that?" he asked. "What are you doing?"

This baby thing was all new to him. Everything was fascinating. Especially the feeding part, he decided, noticing the way her T-shirt molded to the soft curve of her breasts.

She spread the chair straps wide with one hand as she held the baby in her other arm. "This is called an infant seat. I'm going to put him in here in a semiupright position."

"Why?"

"If I put him on his tummy when it's full, he'll throw up. If I put him on his back, I'm afraid he'll spit up and aspirate it into his lungs."

"That doesn't sound good."

"No, it's not."

"What does he do when he sits in the chair—infant seat?"

"Nothing."

"Sounds boring."

"Probably. Pretty soon he'll get tired and take a nap."

"How does he get tired from doing nothing?"

She glared at him. "I don't know. And I don't know what makes you think you have the right to make a suggestion like you just did."

“You think moving to the ranch is a bad idea?”

“Very bad.”

“Why? You said you don’t want to leave him. The way the world is today, a wacko on every corner, I don’t like the idea of him with a total stranger—”

“I’d never leave him with someone untrustworthy.”

“I have a right to approve of my son’s caretaker.”

“You never heard of Jason until today. This isn’t your problem or your business.”

As she heaved a huge sigh, her chest went up and down in a tantalizing way that made his blood race and his pulse pound. She had a lot of things to explain, like why she hadn’t tried harder to find him. Why she hadn’t returned the calls he’d left on her voice mail. Whether or not she ever would have told him he had a son. But one thing was clear to him, the attraction that had provoked him into taking her to bed against his better judgment hadn’t lessened in a year.

As he watched her strap the baby in the chair, Tucker carefully gathered his thoughts. “Casey, I’m sensing that you don’t like the fact much, but the reality is, I’m Jason’s father. Everything about his welfare is my business.”

“Damn. This is exactly what I was afraid of.” She glared at him and marched out of the room.

Tucker glanced at the baby, sitting quietly in his crib. “Hey, there, little fella. Son,” he said, testing the word. He liked the way it sounded.

He wound up the music box on the mobile mounted on the crib rail. Strains of music filled the room as the suspended animals slowly turned. Jason waved his arms, trying to catch the moving figures, Tucker guessed.

He reached out a finger and the baby grabbed on. “Good grip, buddy,” he said. Jason grinned.

The mobile’s movement drew the baby’s wideeyed blue gaze. As he smiled and gurgled happily, dimples formed in his cheeks. Tucker noticed again the resemblance. The boy was a Smith through and through. Although there was some of his mother in him, too. He was sort of bald at the moment, but the little bit of hair he had was light. Looked like it might turn out to be wheat colored like Casey’s.

He, and a woman he barely knew, shared this baby. It was an amazing, unsettling thought.

As he studied his son, Tucker’s chest swelled and his heart melted. His feelings were bittersweet. He’d missed out on Casey’s pregnancy, watching her belly grow big with his baby, being at the hospital for the birth, seeing her learn to nurse before she had become discreet about it. He hadn’t been included in bringing Jason home. He’d just missed out on the baby rolling from his tummy to his back for the first time.

His son was already three months old, and Tucker keenly felt the irretrievable loss. He didn’t intend to miss anything else. Including getting acquainted with his son’s mother, so he could better know the boy, he told himself.

He walked into the living room and frowned as he took in the feminine furnishings. Shaking his head, he was amazed at how his perspective had changed since learning he had a son. The room he once would have thought pretty and definitely female, and so suited to Casey, now became the worst possible environment for raising a boy.

The question was, how was he going to make *her* realize that. He had no idea what his legal rights were, with them not being married. Although he intended to find out. Still, he didn’t want to force her into a decision. It would be best for everyone if she came to the ranch because she believed it was the right thing to do.

Standing in front of the white brick fireplace, she stared at a photo on the mantel, her back to him. She must have sensed his presence, because her shoulders stiffened.

Tucker moved beside her. “You want to explain what you meant by what you just said?”

“What did I say?”

“You were afraid that would happen. Exactly what were you afraid of?”

She looked at him. “That you would try to rescue me.”

“What the hell are you talking about? You don’t look like you’re drowning. Haven’t fallen down a mountain. Far as I can tell you’re not shipwrecked. Exactly what does *rescue* mean?”

“That you would try and make everything better for me and the baby, which implies that things are not fine just like they are.”

“Things aren’t fine. You don’t have a job. Because of the baby. I share half the responsibility for that. Why did you decide to have him?” He held up a hand. “Don’t pretend to misunderstand. You could have taken the easy way out, but you didn’t. The path you’ve chosen is bound to have a pothole or two. So why’d you do it?”

“Because I wanted a child. Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t set out for it to happen. I’m not the sort of woman who meets a man and falls into bed with him.”

“I never thought you were.” One of the things that had charmed him that night a year and a day ago, had been her shy innocence. He had known then she didn’t make a habit of going to a man’s motel room. It had pleased him that she trusted him enough to do that with him.

“When I found out I was pregnant, I was pretty upset.”

“You said you don’t have family—”

“I said no family to help.” Her eyes darkened. He waited for her to say more, but she didn’t. He could only guess what she must have gone through—dealing with the pregnancy and birth all by herself.

“After the shock wore off, I realized I wanted this baby. I wasn’t getting any younger. I like kids and figured, Why not?”

“What about a husband?”

She sighed as she met his gaze. “Are we talking about you?” Before he could answer she added, “I thought about this a lot. Really I did. It just didn’t seem wise to make a difficult situation worse.”

“How would telling me about the pregnancy make it worse?”

She looked down. “Tucker, I barely knew you or anything about you. I had no way of knowing if you would insist on a marriage that neither of us wanted. I’m sorry if this sounds selfish, but I had more at stake than your feelings. I don’t mean to sound cold, but the responsibility of bringing a new life into the world was frightening enough without having to worry about what you would do.”

“So that’s why you didn’t return my calls? You did get them?”

“Yes. I tried to call you after the first one, two weeks after you’d left here. I didn’t get the message right away. I’d taken a long weekend. By the time I was able to call you back, you were gone.”

“What about the other two?”

She looked at him, then her gaze settled on a point beyond his shoulder. Her gaze darkened as she frowned at her memories. “When I got the second call, I was two months pregnant and not sure what to do, whether to tell you or not. I agonized over it.” Her fingers twisted together as she caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “Finally I decided you had a right to know, and I called. You were gone again.”

“Is that when you tried, not too hard I might add, to find me?”

She nodded. “I got the third call, too. By then I was so confused. I was beginning to see how much you moved around. A baby would really disrupt your life. The two of you would only be in the same city once a year.”

“That was a big assumption.”

“What else was I to think? I hardly knew you. Until ten minutes ago, I didn’t even know you had a ranch.”

“Well, I do. A prosperous one.”

She looked mildly surprised. “So how come you’re never there—prospering?”

“I’m on the rodeo circuit.”

“That part I knew. What I don’t understand is why you want Jason and me to go to the ranch if you won’t be there? Why should I pull up stakes and take my baby away from everything that’s familiar?”

“What does a three-month-old know about familiar?”

“I was talking about things that are well-known to me. I trust his pediatrician. The friends I have here are the best.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “You’re leaving out one very important fact. You’re out of a job.” Her mouth tightened at the reminder, and he hated doing that to her. But somehow, he had to get through to her. “Admit it, Casey. It’s a good solution.”

“Not for me.”

“Don’t start with that rescue thing again.”

She took a deep breath. “There’s something you need to understand about me, Tucker.”

“Shoot.” He stuck his fingertips in the front of his jeans and gave her his undivided attention.

“When I was a little girl, we didn’t have much money. Didn’t go to the movies or do a lot of anything, for that matter. What we did have was a TV set. My mother scrimped and saved to buy it” She stopped and waited for him to say something.

“Go on. I figure you’re going somewhere with this. I’m listening.”

“Besides books I borrowed from the library, my only entertainment was that TV. I grew up on John Wayne Westerns, reruns of *Maverick* and *Bonanza*. Clint Eastwood was my hero.”

That was a little irritating. Hard to go up against a fella who was bigger than life. Not that he wanted to compete. “Go on.”

“My favorite part was when the cowboy rescued the heroine. He’d ride in on his white horse, dispose of the bad guy in short order, then carry the damsel in distress off and take care of her as they lived happily ever after.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Not a thing, except it’s fantasy. I found out soon enough real life was very different from that.”

“So do you have a point?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a cowboy, for goodness’ sake.”

Was he supposed to know what that had to do with the price of a Stetson? “Last time I checked it wasn’t a crime.”

“That’s true. But something else you should understand. I’m an accountant. I’ve always been good at math. I like rules, regulations, equations, and formulas. My point is this—cowboy equals rescue. Rescue equals myth. Therefore, cowboy equals myth.”

“I’m no myth, sweetheart,” he said sarcastically. “I’m a flesh-and-blood man who found out his own flesh and blood is in the other room. This has nothing to do with rescuing you and everything to do with the fact that I want to be a part of Jason’s life.” She opened her mouth, and he pointed at her. “And don’t tell me you were afraid of that.”

Her mouth pulled in a straight line as she crossed her arms over her chest. “You have no legal rights to him, Tucker.”

“The hell I don’t. My father taught me that every man should live by a code. He said, ‘Write it in your heart and stand by it. Ask no more and give no less than honesty, courage, loyalty, generosity and fairness.’” He took a deep breath, remembering the way his father had always said those words with a hand on Tucker’s shoulder. He wanted to be that kind of an influence in *his* son’s life. “You don’t need to hold me responsible, I can do that all on my own. The way I see it, I have a moral obligation to that boy, more binding than man-made laws. But if necessary I’ll use them.”

“What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything. I’ll say it straight out. I intend to be a father to my son. If you force my hand, I can tie you up for a long time in court.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I don’t want to.”

She paced for a few moments, her forehead puckered thoughtfully. Finally she stopped in front of him and said, “Tucker, I need some time to think about this. I’m glad you know about Jason. But, truthfully, I never expected to see you again. For the past year I haven’t had to consult with anyone about anything.”

Once again he realized how little he knew about the mother of his son. More than ever he was convinced that he was right about this. “You said you had no family to help you—”

“My mother and sister have their hands full taking care of themselves.”

“What about your good friends? Who took you to the hospital when you had the baby?”

“Let it go, Tucker. I got there and had a normal birth and a beautiful baby boy. You didn’t know. You have nothing to feel guilty about.”

“Maybe not. But all the same, I can’t help feeling that there’s a lot to make up for.”

“I’m sorry. As far as your proposal, there’s a lot to consider.”

“Like what?”

“Where would I live? What would I do?”

“The house is big enough for all of us. You’d have your own room, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I wasn’t worried,” she said too quickly.

“Yeah. As far as what you’ll do, taking care of Jason is a full-time job.”

She shook her head. “I can’t just stop looking for work.”

“You don’t have to. There’s no reason why you can’t do it from the ranch.”

She shook her head. “I can’t make a snap decision about what happens now. You’re going to have to understand that.”

He didn’t understand. It seemed cut-and-dried to him. She didn’t have a job, and she didn’t want to leave the baby. On the ranch she could take her time about finding work, while she cared for his son.

Something else his father had told him: “It’s better to sit on your horse and do nothing than to wear him out chasing shadows.” Her agreement to come to the ranch was not what he would get if he continued to push.

He walked to the table and picked up his hat. “I do understand that you need some time to think. I’ll just be going now.”

“Are you leaving town?” she asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“In the past, every time I needed to get in touch with you, you’d moved on.”

“Not this time.”

“Being my Lamaze coach does not constitute saving my life, thereby giving you control of it.”

“So you invited me to lunch to yell at me? Silly me for thinking that you might have been grateful I sent you the man on the white horse.”

“Grateful that you took matters into your own hands and interfered?”

Casey was only half joking as she looked at Kim Delaney, sitting across from her in a booth at the local burger joint. Dark brown hair in a short pageboy fell sleekly around her pretty face. Her warm brown eyes were highlighted by the longest, thickest black lashes Casey had ever seen. In fact, Kim was pretty enough to thoroughly dislike. But their friendship transcended mere physical attributes and petty female envy.

Kim was the very good friend she had told Tucker about. She had been there for Casey through everything. Including the night she’d met Tucker and the night she’d given birth to his son. Beside her in the booth, Jason slept peacefully in his car seat, while his mother had lunch with his godmother. Casey smiled tenderly as she tucked the receiving blanket snugly around him, a protection against the air-conditioning.

“Define *interfere*” Kim said, not in the least intimidated.

Reluctantly Casey pulled her gaze from her son to her friend. “You sent Tucker to the condo and told him I’d been let go from the firm. I think that’s interfering. Since when do you break company rules and give out the home address of an employee?”

“Rule, schmule. It was vague verbal directions.”

“I’m serious, Kim.”

She sighed. “I know you are. And you deserve an explanation.”

Casey looked at her and waited. When one wasn’t forthcoming she said, “Well?”

“I’m thinking. Technically, since you were canned, I didn’t have to withhold your address. Besides, you and Tucker have a lot to talk about.”

“You said the same thing to me a year ago when I met him.”

“I was right, too. The two of you chattered like magpies all night.”

“If we’d stopped at that, I wouldn’t be in this bind now.”

Kim sighed. “I’ll never forgive myself for talking you into going to that bar with me. It’s just that I couldn’t stand to see you wasting the best years of your life staying home night after night with TV and books.”

“What happened is not your fault.”

“I know how you are about blue eyes and dimples. I should never have left you alone with him.”

“You stayed until two in the morning, until you could barely keep your eyes open. I refused to leave with you. That’s ancient history, Kim. I’ve got bigger problems now.”

“What?”

“He’s making noise about his legal rights. He wants me to move to his ranch with the baby.”

“Boy, howdy!”

Casey couldn’t tell if that remark was sympathetic to her plight, or encouraging her to accept Tucker’s offer. She decided the latter. Part of the reason their friendship had endured since high school was that opposites attract. Kim was a fly-by-the-seat-of-her-pants sort of gal; Casey planned her life step by step. Moving to his ranch was not one of the steps she intended to take.

“My job contacts are here, Kim. Jason’s pediatrician is here. You’re here.”

“I could be talked into going with you, if he’s got any more at home like him.”

“Be serious.”

“I am. Dead serious.”

“This is all about him and what he wants. He can’t just swagger in here and get things his own way.”

“Case, I’ve got news for you. Cowboys don’t swagger. They can’t really. It’s sort of physically impossible with those bow legs from riding horses. They sort of sashay—”

“Kim! You’re splitting hairs, and I don’t really care how he walks.”

“Yeah, and I’m Princess Di.”

The server deposited a tray littered with burgers and drinks. When they were alone again, Casey looked at her friend.

“I know it sounds like a wonderful adventure to you. But I’m not the sort of person who just picks up and moves at the drop of a hat—not even a cowboy hat.”

“Why not?”

Casey sighed. Kim wasn’t going to make this easy. Drawing in a big breath, she willed herself to patience. “There’s a term for it, maybe you’ve heard. It’s called *cautious*.”

“You’ve got to learn to be a risk taker, Case.”

“I’d need a personality transplant to do that. Besides, I’ve got Jason to think about.”

“Come on, you’re just throwing down stumbling blocks. Quit being so contrary. You can find a pediatrician near the ranch. Dr. Olsen may be able to give you a reference. You can send out your

résumé from there just as easily as you can from here. And while you're at it, you won't have to worry about a roof over your head and food on the table."

Casey thought about that and knew Kim was right. She had someone more important than herself to worry about. Jason. If not for him, she'd have told Tucker Smith to take a flying leap. She stared long and hard at the woman across from her, happily chewing and swallowing the last bite of her hamburger. "Do you stay awake nights thinking of ways to complicate my life? Or does playing devil's advocate just come easily to you?"

Kim grinned. "What are friends for?"

It was damned irritating that her friend made such good sense.

That evening Jason fussed long after he should have gone to sleep for the night. Casey couldn't quiet him. She'd tried walking him until her legs were ready to fall off, and had rocked him in the chair until she was dizzy. No dice. Even his baby swing didn't produce the usual tranquilizing effect.

She was exhausted. Now that Tucker had dropped into her life again, sending her on an emotional roller coaster with his proposition, the baby's crying put her on the verge of tears herself. It hadn't been this bad since Jason's first night home from the hospital.

"What's the matter, big boy?" she asked as he wailed into her ear.

He wasn't wet, hungry or sick. He didn't have a fever, she'd taken his temperature.

"Are you so tired you just can't sleep?" she asked, wishing he could tell her.

Should she put him down and let him cry it out? It tore at her heart to listen to him, but she didn't know what else to do. In his crib, she put him on his tummy and patted his bottom. His crying increased in volume and he lifted his head, leaned to the side and rolled over on his back. Wet with tears, his little face was blotchy and red.

"Sweetie, I don't know what you want. Is your tummy upset? What is it?"

The doorbell rang. Casey looked at her watch... 9:00 p.m. Who would stop by at this time of night? She glanced quickly at the sobbing baby, then ran to the front door.

When she opened it, she wasn't really surprised to see Tucker standing there. He glanced at the doorway where the wailing was coming from, took one look at her face and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Jason's been crying for an hour, and I can't get him to stop. I don't know what to do—" She put her fingertips to her mouth, stifling the sob that threatened.

"Let me look in on him," he said, frowning. He set something on the entry way floor and followed Casey through the condo to the baby's bedroom.

Tucker reached into the crib and picked Jason up, without any of the awkwardness he'd shown the first time. Putting the child up to his shoulder, he patted his back and walked around the room, speaking in a deep, soft, calm voice. Casey watched him, torn between gratitude that he was there to relieve her and guilt that she had nearly come apart under the stress.

After a few minutes the crying lessened to an occasional moist hiccup. Finally Jason was quiet, with his face nestled into Tucker's neck.

He looked at her and whispered, "What now?"

With hand motions, Casey indicated he should put Jason in his bed. He did, and the child stirred and snorted. Tucker, rubbed his back for a minute or two and finally he was sound asleep. Tenderly he pulled the light blanket over the baby, gently ran his knuckle over the little head, then they tiptoed out of the room.

Casey exhaled slowly and sat on the sofa. "I never knew how wonderful silence could sound."

"Yeah. I know what you mean."

She looked at him. "Don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see Jason."

She remembered he had set something down in the entryway, but she'd been too distraught to notice what it was. "What did you bring?" she asked.

He glanced in that direction. “I forgot all about that.” He walked over and picked up the object, and all she could tell was that it was made out of wood. When he brought it to her, she could see it was a rocking horse.

She couldn't help smiling. “That's really cute. You're aware, though, that it will be at least a year before he can ride it?”

“So?”

“So I have a feeling this is a symbolic gesture from a man of few words.”

“You mean my way of saying I want you and Jason to come to the ranch?”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.”

He shrugged. “Could be. I just saw it in a toy store and bought it. Since you brought the subject up, have you considered my proposition?”

Chapter Three

Casey shifted nervously on the sofa, noticing a similar air of tension in Tucker. He stood on the opposite side of the coffee table, waiting for her answer. Not trusting herself to look into his blue eyes and chance their effect on her, she glanced at the little rocking horse. The wooden toy didn't even reach his knee.

"I have considered the possibility of moving to the ranch," she said.

"What do you think?"

She sighed. "That it's a big decision."

"Believe me, I understand. But I want to know my son. I want him to know me," he said, touching his chest.

She had to try one more time to discourage him. "Be realistic, Tucker. You're on the rodeo circuit. You wouldn't be there. Why should I leave everything I'm familiar with to go to a place completely foreign to me, when you'll be on the road?"

"What if I take some time off? Would that make a difference?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but there's more to consider than you." She sighed. "Would you like some coffee? I could make a pot."

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd like that."

Casey went to the kitchen and Tucker followed. She busied herself with measuring water and coffee grounds into the automatic drip maker. When she finished, she turned back to him, where he leaned against the white tile countertop beside her matching refrigerator.

Tall, powerful, charismatic. She didn't have to look into his eyes to be affected by Tucker Smith. Even with her back to him, all the nerves in her body tingled with awareness. Looking up at every gorgeous six foot two inches of him was even more disconcerting.

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