

A photograph of a man wearing a grey cowboy hat and a white t-shirt, sitting on a bed. He is holding two babies. The baby on the left is wearing a white onesie with pink hearts. The baby on the right is wearing a blue onesie with white polka dots. The man is looking down at the babies with a gentle expression.

36
HOURS

OOH BABY, BABY

DIANA K. WHITNEY

PART 2 OF 3

Diana Whitney

Ooh Baby, Baby Part 2

«HarperCollins»

Whitney D.

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36 Hours SerialAs a devastating summer storm hits Grand Springs, Colorado, the next thirty-six hours will change the town and its residents forever...Ooh, Baby, Baby Part 2In the middle of the raging storm the power goes out, mud washes onto the roads...and Peggy Saxon gives birth to twins in the back of Travis Stockwell's cab.Peggy's been handling things on her own since the end of her disastrous marriage. But she has to admit—things are a lot nicer with Travis around. She could get used to the feeling, if only she knew that it would last...Travis can't seem to stay away from the Saxon family. Those beautiful babies—and their mother—deserve the best of everything. But what if the best for them is the stable life he can't provide?The story concludes in Ooh Baby, Baby Part 3.

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The story concludes in Ooh Baby, Baby Part 3.

Dear Reader,

In the town of Grand Springs, Colorado, a devastating summer storm sets off a string of events that changes the lives of the residents forever....

Welcome to Mills & Boon exciting new digital serial, 36 Hours! In this thirty-six part serial share the stories of the residents of Grand Springs, Colorado, in the wake of a deadly storm.

With the power knocked out and mudslides washing over the roads, the town is plunged into darkness and the residents are forced to face their biggest fears—and find love against all odds.

Each week features a new story written by a variety of bestselling authors like Susan Mallery and Sharon Sala. The stories are published in three segments, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and the first segment of every three-part book is free, so you can get caught up in the mystery and drama of Grand Springs. And you can get to know a new set of characters every week. You can read just one, but as the lives and stories of each intertwine in surprising ways, you'll want to read them all!

Join Mills & Boon E every week as we bring you excitement, mystery, fun and romance in 36 Hours!

Happy reading!

About the Author

A three-time Romance Writers of America RITA® Award finalist, RT Reviewers' Choice Award nominee and finalist for Colorado Romance Writers' Award of Excellence, Diana has published thirty romance and romantic suspense novels since her first Silhouette title in 1989. Diana has conducted many writing workshops and has published several articles on the craft of fiction writing for various trade magazines and newsletters. She is a member of Authors Guild, Novelists, Inc., Published Authors Network and Romance Writers of America. She and her husband live in rural Northern California with a beloved menagerie of furred creatures, domestic and wild!

Ooh Baby, Baby Part 2

Diana Whitney



www.millsandboon.co.uk

After giving birth to her twins in the back of a taxi, in the middle of one of the worst rainstorms in Colorado history, and having some cowboy get to know her intimately as he delivered her babies, Peggy Saxon thought she'd seen it all—until she awoke to find a woman stealing her babies! But she wasn't about to let panic set in. There had to be a reasonable answer to why this strange woman was standing over the cribs in the middle of the night, when the house was locked. Forget reason, panic and anger were ready to take over! Her baby girl and boy were the best things in her life and she wasn't about to let them go. This stranger was about to meet this determined mother and she'd better have a damn good explanation ready. And if that cowboy Travis was involved, that destructive thunderstorm would seem minor to what Peggy would dish out. Hell hath no fury like a mother...scared.

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Chapter Five

The woman turned, tightening her grip on the tiny baby girl nested at her shoulder. Peggy's heart, jolted by shock, raced in fear. She stepped back, bumped into a large, warm body and spun around with a yelp.

Travis Stockwell reached out as if to steady her, eyed her raised fists and thought better of it. "I see you and Sue Anne have met," he said, nodding toward the brick of a woman who flashed a warm, vaguely familiar smile.

Bewildered and disoriented, Peggy Saxon dropped her arms, turned and stared at the dark-eyed, dark-haired person who was tenderly cuddling newborn Virginia in her mannish, muscular arms. "Sue Anne... your sister?"

"Guilty as charged," Sue Anne said cheerfully. "I've got to tell you, hon, these are two of the cutest babes I ever laid eyes on. Now I see where they got those adorable feathers of red hair. Whoa, sweetie!" She turned her face toward the blinking infant. "My, that was a big one. Betcha feel better now, hmm?"

Peggy moistened her lips, fighting the urge to leap forward and rip her child out of the stranger's arms. "I'm pleased to meet you, but why— I mean, what—"

"What am I doing here?"

"That question did flash through my mind."

Chuckling, Sue Anne laid Ginny back into the crib, cooed once, tweaked the tiny little cheek and straightened, eyeing her brother with blatant amusement. "Tell her, Travis."

Peggy swung her gaze around, scraping him with a look. "Yes, Travis, if you wouldn't mind."

"Well, ma'am," he drawled, barely able to contain a smug smile, "looks to me like your in-home assistance finally got here."

"My what?"

"Guess I'll be moseying along." With that, Travis tucked his hands in his pockets and sauntered out, grinning like a cat with feathers in its teeth.

Peggy sagged against the wall for a moment, then hurried over to check each of her babies. T.J. was on his back, sound asleep. Virginia was awake, but yawning. Peggy inspected her daughter carefully, checking each and every baby appendage.

"Not that I wouldn't like to steal a couple of those sweet little toes," Sue Anne said with a knowing sparkle in her eyes. "But I figured the child might be needing them someday."

Peggy turned, propped her hip against the crib and regarded the woman, realizing that her smile had been familiar because it was very much like her brother's. The siblings shared the same whiskey-colored eyes and full, flashing grin, but the resemblance stopped there. Travis was lean and slender, with a tight, rounded rear that made blue jeans look like denim skin. Sue Anne Conway, who was wearing a plaid shirt and a pair of Levi's, was built like a tractor, squat and square, with shoulders broad enough for a man to envy. Peggy recalled that Jimmy Conway's shoulders were larger, but not by much.

Recognizing the blatant appraisal, Sue Anne laughed. "Believe it or not, I'm the spitting image of our mother. Travis takes after Pa. Except Travis isn't a wimpy, drunken fool."

"I see."

There was enough ice in the comment to make Sue Anne wince. "Guess he didn't mention that I'd be dropping by."

Peggy folded her arms. "It must have slipped his mind."

"Honey, nothing slips my brother's mind. He's got a reason for everything he does or doesn't do." She cocked her head, smiling kindly. "My guess is that he didn't want to be on the receiving end of the look you're giving me right now. Most men would rather be gut-gored than face off with an

angry woman, and Travis isn't any different. Except in his case, you can add babies to the list. He's scared to death of the little critters, which is why it's so comical he got stuck delivering yours in his taxi during the storm. First babies he's ever touched in his life, as far as I know. If he had his way, they'll be the last, too." Her eyes twinkled. "But somehow, I doubt he'll have his way on that. Thing is, he's a stubborn cuss, and he's been fretting about you."

"Why? He barely knows me."

"How much does a person have to know to recognize someone in need?"

"I am not in need—"

"Sh, now, don't get your dander up. Everyone can use a helping hand now and again. There's no shame in that."

Peggy sucked her lips between her teeth, feeling inadequate, fighting tears.

"Hormones," Sue Anne commented with a knowing gleam in her eye. "After my babes were born, I cried at detergent commercials."

Peggy sniffed. "I feel silly." Not to mention fat, bloated and besieged by postpartum uterine contractions that made her wonder if she was going back into labor. "Listen, Mrs. Conway—"

"Sue Anne."

"Sue Anne, I really do appreciate your concern, but it isn't necessary for you to take time away from your family on my account."

"It is to Travis." Sue Anne brightened. "Say, you must be neigh onto starving by now. I got a casserole in the oven."

A spicy aroma wafted down the hall, making Peggy's mouth water. "Casserole?" She wandered to the doorway, sniffing appreciatively. "As in real food?"

"Nothing fancy, just chicken and noodles, but I figured you'd be too tuckered to fix anything nourishing for yourself." Sue Anne scanned Peggy as if sizing up a prized hog. "Looks like you haven't been filling your plate for quite a spell. You're nothing but bones. But don't you worry, hon, we'll fatten you up in no time."

Peggy angled a morose glance down at the tummy pouch that threatened to pop the elastic on the only pair of prepregnancy slacks she could squeeze into. "Fattening is the last thing I need."

"Leftover flab, eh?" Sue Anne clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. "Well, don't worry about that, sugar. It'll tighten up. After Danny was born, my belly sagged so low I could squeeze it between my knees."

"Really?" Peggy felt her spirits lift. "I thought it was just, you know, me."

Sue Anne's laugh was deep, resonant and warming. "Heck, no hon, we're all sisters when it comes to the pains of womanhood. There's nothing happening with you that hasn't happened to most all of us at one time or another."

For some odd reason, Peggy found that immensely reassuring. "What about, well..." Embarrassed, she made little scratching gestures at the sides of her abdomen.

"Stretch marks?" At Peggy's miserable nod, Sue Anne's eyes warmed with sympathy. "They'll fade some."

"They won't go away?"

"Think of them as a merit badge, the purple heart of motherhood." She tossed a sisterly arm around her. "Are your stitches giving you grief?"

Peggy rolled her eyes and nodded.

"A real pain in the butt, hmm?" Sue Anne grinned at her own joke and gave the new mommy's shoulders a squeeze. "And speaking of pain, let's talk breast-feeding. Just wait until your little sharks get teeth."

* * *

For the next few hours, Peggy's fear and loneliness dissipated in a rush of giggles and girl talk. With twenty years of mothering experience under her ample belt, Sue Anne anticipated and answered

all of Peggy's questions, and shared tips on caring for babies—tips that hadn't even been hinted at in the parenting books Peggy had read. Sue Anne even helped give the twins their first bath, which was more a damp mop job than the full submersion wash, which she suggested could wait until their little umbilical cords had healed.

After the sponge bath, when the twins were clean and comfortable, Peggy was flushed with exhilaration along with more self-confidence than she'd felt in a very long time.

Then, with T.J. cradled in Peggy's arms and little Ginny nestled in Sue Anne's, they spent hours talking—about nothing and everything, about midnight feedings and the horrors of breast pumps, about diaper rash and maternal insecurity, and about the very real pressure of just being a woman.

Sue Anne was able to expose Peggy's fears without exploiting them, to rationalize seemingly irrational emotions, and to offer valuable reassurances. By evening's end, she'd become the confidante Peggy so desperately wanted, the sister she'd never had, and the mother she'd lost—all rolled up into one wisecracking bundle of effervescent energy.

Even more important, Sue Anne became exactly what Peggy needed more than anything in the entire world. She became a friend. Which was, Peggy suspected, exactly what Travis Stockwell had in mind.

* * *

“You mean you just left her alone?”

Sue Anne hiked a brow and flopped on the sofa, balancing a bowl of buttered popcorn in her lap. “What did you expect me to do, roll out a sleeping bag on her living room floor?”

Travis slapped his hat on his thigh and muttered an oath. “Yes, dadgummit, if that's what it took. Peggy just had those babies Saturday. It's not right, her being left to fend for herself and all.”

“She's just fine. Ted, hand me that flipper.” Sue Anne tossed a few kernels into her mouth while her oldest son, who was hunched cross-legged on the floor, felt around the carpet for the television remote. He found it and handed it over without taking his glassy eyes from a babes-in-bikinis beer commercial flickering across the screen.

Standing behind the sofa, Travis tossed his hat on a table, planted a hand on each side of his sister's shoulders and shouted at the top of her head. “What if something happens? What if one of those babies gets sick?”

Sue Anne tipped her face back, grazing her frustrated brother with a bland stare. “Peggy Saxon's a bright woman, Travis, and she's good with those babies. A natural mommy. She'll deal with whatever comes.” She refocused on the screen, aiming the remote. Her thumb jerked.

Ted spun around. “Hey!”

“I wanna watch the news,” she mumbled, continuing to flip channels as Jimmy ambled in from the kitchen with a half-eaten sandwich in his hand. Sue Anne spared him a glance. “Is Danny still handling dispatch?”

“Nah.” Jimmy smacked his lips and dropped into a worn recliner. “There ain't been no calls for a couple of hours, so he flipped the switch to speaker and went on to bed.”

Since there was only one cab on duty during the slow overnight shift, the switch in question would sound an audible alarm throughout the house if a call came through dispatch. Most nights were quiet enough, which allowed the Conways to sleep undisturbed while the bored night cabbie snoozed through his shift parked by a quiet curb somewhere in town.

Jimmy finished his sandwich and eyed the bowl on his wife's lap. “That popcorn?”

“Roasted maggots,” Sue Anne replied, tossing the remote aside and settling back to watch the news. “Want some?”

Jimmy leaned over and scooped up a handful. “Hmm, hot buttered maggots. Yum.”

Clearly revolted, Ted, who'd been known to lose his lunch at the sight of a kitchen ant invasion, left the room, muttering. A moment later, his bedroom door slammed.

“More for us,” Sue Anne said, grinning broadly to indicate that had been her plan in the first place. Jimmy concurred with a grunt, then dug another huge handful out of the bowl.

Travis was about to bust. “Forget the dangd popcorn. What about Peggy?”

Jimmy looked up, his cheeks bulging. “Wha’ about her?”

“Don’t talk and chew at the same time,” Sue Anne growled. “Didn’t your mama teach you no manners?”

Properly chastised, Jimmy swallowed. “Yes, honey pot.” He heaved sideways in the chair, turning his attention back to Travis. “So, what’s wrong with Ms. Saxon?”

“Sue Anne left her alone, that’s what. Alone.” He shot an accusatory stare at the back of his sister’s head, which responded by jerking around as if it had been physically poked.

She glared at him. “Dang it, Travis, she’s a grown woman, and she don’t need no baby-sitter. If she wants help, she can pick up the phone.”

“And how long would she have to wait before help arrives?”

“Oh, sorry, Travis—”

“She’s miles out of town. Why, a person could choke to death before an ambulance could even get out of the downtown garage.”

Jimmy nodded. “That’s true.”

Sue Anne cowed him with a look. “No one is going to choke to death, or bleed to death, or die in their dadgummed sleep. Peggy and the babies are just fine.” She swiveled on the sofa and fixed her brother with a killing stare. “Got that, Mr. Always-Looking-For-Trouble? Nobody is sick, and nobody is going to get sick.”

“Wouldn’t dare,” Jimmy mumbled, feigning interest in the televised news program while his wife glowered.

Travis puffed his cheeks and blew out a breath. Part of him understood that his fear for Peggy went far beyond normal concern for a fellow human being, but he couldn’t help himself. He was consumed by thoughts of her, by memories of her vulnerable eyes, and the way her lips tightened when she was trying to be brave.

Travis Stockwell knew what it felt like to be alone and afraid. That’s how he’d spent his entire childhood—alone, afraid, waiting for his father to stumble home from the bar, terrified that he wouldn’t make it; terrified that he would. Sober, Silas Stockwell had been frightened by his own shadow. Drunk, he’d feared nothing, not even God. Why should he? Whiskey had made him omnipotent. And it had made him mean.

Travis had always feared his father would die in a bar fight, crumpled in a pool of his own blood. Instead, Silas had expired in his own foul bed, a skeleton of a man ravished by the cancer that had eaten a vicious path from his liver to his brain. Sixteen-year-old Travis had watched helplessly and been filled with unbearable despair.

Despite having endured years of cruelty and beatings and drunken rage, in the end Travis had cried for his father, for the man he could have been, for the man he’d become, and for the legacy of disillusionment he’d bequeathed his only son.

“Oh, almost forgot.” Sue Anne’s voice popped the sad bubble of his thoughts. “You got mail today, something from the pro rodeo association. Looks like a flyer.”

At the moment, Travis couldn’t have cared less. “Shouldn’t have left her alone,” he mumbled to no one in particular.

Sue Anne heaved an exasperated sigh. “Oh, for corn’s sake. Quit that dadgummed pacing and come sit down.”

“I don’t want to sit down.”

“Then go jog around the block or something. You’re driving me nuts—”

“Hush,” Jimmy said suddenly, pointing at the screen. “They’re talking about the mayor.”

Frowning, Sue Anne fumbled for the remote and hiked up the volume.

“Collapsing at her home before her son’s wedding...” The bespectacled anchorman shifted and stared into the camera. “Mayor Stuart was transported to Vanderbilt Memorial, where she later died. Sources confirm that the mayor’s final word, ‘coal,’ may have been a reference to the zoning vote on a strip mining operation that had politically pitted Mayor Stuart against her son, Councillor Hal Stuart, who favors the development. In other news—” the photograph of a man Travis vaguely remembered seeing at the hospital flashed across the screen “—police are requesting citizen assistance in identifying an apparent amnesia victim. The man, who calls himself Martin Smith, was first spotted by the occupants of a vehicle trapped by a mud slide....”

The newsman continued his report, but Travis was distracted when Sue Anne suddenly lowered the volume. “Terrible thing about the mayor,” she murmured, hitching her arm over the sofa back and swiveling around to meet her brother’s gaze. “I met her once, over at Higgen’s Five and Dime. Seemed like a real nice lady.”

“Good tipper,” Jimmy added, reaching for his wife’s can of soda. “Gave me ten for a two-dollar fare.”

Sue Anne tucked her legs up and scratched her choppy hair. “This sure has been a weird week. The storm, the blackout, the biggest social event of the season going to hell in a bucket when the bride takes a powder, then the groom’s mother meets her Maker worrying about fossil fuel....”

She paused, clicked her tongue and had just shifted her monologue into general political commentary about the ills of society when Travis jerked to a stop, staring at the television. “Turn it up.” Sue Anne tossed him an annoyed glance, but complied.

“Third rape in the area since May... Although a police spokesman denies that the incidents are related, a reliable source confirms that the possibility of a serial rapist is being investigated.”

When a map flashed on the screen, superimposed with large red Xs, Travis gripped the back of the sofa. “My God, that’s just a few blocks from where Peggy lives.”

Sue Anne drew her brows together in a worried frown. “Now, Travis, don’t go getting your shorts in a twist—”

But Travis wasn’t listening. He’d already grabbed his hat and hit the door running.

* * *

The cranky sound floated into Peggy’s slumber, disrupting the most marvelous dream about a moonlit night and a romantic cowboy who bore a striking resemblance to Travis Stockwell.

She issued a disappointed sigh as the dream dissipated, and the fussy little noise became more demanding. She sat up, rubbing her eyes, and automatically whipped off the covers. A moment later she was padding toward the nursery, stifling a yawn.

She turned on the hall light to illuminate the twins’ room without flooding it with blinding brilliance, and went directly toward T.J.’s crib. His little face was screwed into a purple mask of pure displeasure.

“There, there,” she murmured, scooping the firm baby body into her arms. “Mommy’s here.”

T.J. shuddered, then emitted a startled wail that roused his sister, who was clearly irritated by the interruption. With her cranky son nested against her shoulder, Peggy moved to her daughter’s crib.

“I know,” she whispered softly, laying T.J. beside his sister so she could tend them both. “Your brother is a noisy roommate, isn’t her?” Ginny blinked up, her tiny chin puckered and quivering.

It was, Peggy realized, a miniature duplicate of Clyde’s chin. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed that before. Scrutinizing her daughter’s adorable little face, she also saw that Virginia’s nose tweaked upward like her father’s.

Her father.

A venomous anger hit Peggy like a body blow. Clyde Saxon didn’t deserve the title of father. He was a coward and a cad, and Peggy was irrationally infuriated that his blood ran in the veins of her beautiful babies. It was her fault, of course. If she hadn’t been so gullibly naive, she’d have recognized the selfish serpent beneath the superficial charm. She never would have married him.

But as much as it galled her to admit it, she was secretly grateful to Clyde. If not for him, she wouldn't have been blessed with her precious children. They were everything to her. They were her life.

Suddenly, her heart filled to overflowing as she gazed at her beloved infants laying side by side, rigid and wailing, united in baby outrage. Yes, she decided, Clyde did have one redeeming characteristic. From his gene pool this extraordinary life had sprung.

Peggy's anger dissipated as suddenly as it had evolved. She smiled down at her children and lifted T.J. into her arms. "I think," she murmured to both of them, "that dry diapers and a midnight snack will make you feel much better."

Unconvinced, Virginia continued to fuss and flail her tiny fists while Peggy tended her brother. The changing process went efficiently, if not expertly. Still, Peggy was pleased. After all, she'd never changed a diaper in her life until this morning. Or was it yesterday morning? She glanced at her watch. Well after midnight, so technically it was Tuesday. She'd lost track of time.

She was a mother. Peggy could still hardly believe it.

"In less than twelve hours, you'll be exactly three days old," She told T.J., who didn't seem impressed by the revelation. She tidied his gown, then repeated the changing process for his sister, who was immediately calmed by her mother's touch. Peggy took a deep breath, smiling down at her precious babies. "There. Not bad for a rookie, hmm?"

The question so excited T.J. that he flung his fists, hit himself in the nose and let out a wail that was instantly matched by the howl of his startled sister.

Peggy's confidence crumbled. "Sh, it's all right, sweeties, Mommy's here. Mommy's—" she winced as they hiked up the volume "—here," she finished lamely.

Clearly, the situation called for considerably more than her esteemed presence in the room. They were hungry. Both of them. At the same time.

Responding to her infants' cries, Peggy's breasts became engorged, painful. Two breasts. Two hungry babes. Fortuitous enough, but the thought of simultaneously juggling two feeding infants made her break out in a cold sweat.

She sighed, scooping up T.J. while Virginia thrashed with righteous indignation and struggled to focus newborn eyes. "Sorry, sweetie," she murmured to her wailing daughter. "You'll have to wait a few minutes. Your brother asked first."

* * *

By a quarter of two, both infants had drifted into a satisfied slumber, and their exhausted mother returned to the sanctuary of her own tiny room. Peggy's shoulders ached. Her head throbbed, and she was so tired she wobbled when she walked.

Her bed, invitingly tousled by her abrupt departure, beckoned like a lover. She sighed, crossed the room and glanced out the window. Something struck her as odd. She stopped, lifted a blind slat for a better look and saw a strange vehicle parked at the front curb behind her car.

A nervous skitter slipped down her spine. The full moon splashed the vehicle's hood, providing enough illumination to confirm that Peggy had never seen it before, and she was certain it had no legitimate reason to be there.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow duck around the side of the duplex. A large shadow. A man's shadow. Someone was out there, a sinister presence creeping beneath her bedroom window. Peggy had never been more terrified in her life.

Chapter Six

The cat's eyes gleamed feral in the moonlight. Back arched, the animal froze for a split second, then shot past the fence into the shadowed safety of the woods.

Crouched beside the porch, Travis flipped off his trusty penlight, blew on the lens, then spun it like a bone-handled revolver and tucked it into his jeans pocket. He sat back on his boot heels, rubbing his stiff neck. The startled cat was the third varmint he'd chased off since midnight, none of them two-legged.

Which suited Travis fine. A puny penlight was enough to frighten off raccoons and pussycats, but it wouldn't provide much protection against an armed felon. If it came to that, Travis would rely on the element of surprise. The way he figured it, criminals were gutless cowards who preyed on the weak and would wet themselves if confronted by someone their own size.

At least, that was his fervent hope. Heroism wasn't really Travis's thing. He much preferred leaving valor to those whose palms didn't sweat at swaying tree shadows. But a cowboy's got to do what a cowboy's got to do.

He stood slowly, bones creaking as he stifled a yawn. When he turned toward the street, light erupted all around him, a blinding brilliance that made his eyes water.

"Freeze. Police!" The command boomed from the core of the radiance. "Get down! Down on the ground. Get down now!"

Startled and confused, Travis raised a forearm to shade his eyes. Something leapt out of the light, grabbed his wrist and twisted him around.

It was a chaos of grasping hands, bellowing voices, an unintelligible din of pandemonium. Before he could take a second breath, he'd been flipped over the freshly chopped tree stump, bounced off the newly stacked woodpile and was sprawled on the ground, sucking dirt. His sore ribs shrieked at the indignity. Someone yanked an arm behind his back, shoved his wrist up to his shoulder blades. A knee bludgeoned his spine. A rock bit into his cheek. Rough hands dug through his pockets, emptied them. Cold metal wrapped his wrists, clicked tight.

Then, as quickly as the swarm had descended, it rose up, leaving Travis flat on his belly, winded, bulldogged and tethered like a thrown steer.

"Find a gun?"

"Nah, just his wallet and this."

Twisting his head, Travis saw a uniformed police officer displaying the penlight to someone beyond his view. He felt the vibration of feet around his prone form, saw several pairs of shoes and estimated that he was surrounded by at least three, possibly four officers.

A moment later, two of the cops flanked him and hauled him to his feet. He swayed there, spitting grass, and cast a woeful glance at his beloved Stetson, which lay on the ground dangerously close to a pair of tromping feet. "My hat," he managed to mutter. "Don't step on my danged hat."

The officer on his right gave his manacled arm a jarring jerk. "You won't be needing it, pal."

Not need his hat? Travis blinked up, alarmed by the heresy. Why, a cowboy without his hat was like, well, like a cop without a badge. He cleared his throat, tried to speak rationally despite a distracting film of wet grit on his tongue. "I'm pretty sure I wasn't doing whatever it is you think I was doing."

The policeman who was grasping his shackled wrist shot him a cynical stare.

Travis tried again, more succinctly this time. "You're making a mistake."

"Sure, buddy, sure." Clearly unimpressed, the policeman squinted toward the front porch, then turned toward a fellow officer who was using a massive flashlight to search the yard, presumably for evidence. "Hey, Charlie. Is that the RP?"

Charlie glanced toward the duplex. “Yeah, I imagine. Dispatch said the prowler report came directly from the resident.”

Travis frowned, followed the policeman’s gaze and saw Peggy Saxon’s horrified face peering out the front window. His heart sank halfway to his boots.

A moment later, the porch light flashed on and she dashed out, clutching her robe at the throat. “Travis?” Her eyes were huge. “Ohmigosh, Travis, is that you?”

He tried to smile, but his lips stuck to his teeth. “You oughtn’t be out here, ma’am. You’ll catch a chill.”

Peggy’s jaw drooped like a gate with a broken hinge.

Officer Charlie stepped forward. “Mrs. Saxon?” She closed her mouth, managing to nod. “You know this fellow?”

For a moment, she simply stared at Travis, stunned. Then her eyes narrowed into mean green slits. “It would serve you right if I told them that I’d never seen you before in my life,” she snapped.

Travis hung his head. “Yes’m.”

“What in the world are you doing here?”

“Well, thing is...” He paused, opting for a diversionary tactic and flashed his trademark grin. “So, how’d you and Sue Anne get on? She said those babies were cuter than a pair of big-eyed calves —”

“Cut the bull, Stockwell.” She folded her arms, glaring at him. “You were spying on me, and I want to know why.”

“Spying? Why, no, ma’am, I wouldn’t do any such thing. I was just, well, passing by and, ah...” Alerted by her furrowed frown, Travis realized that Peggy Saxon wasn’t the least bit fooled, and had no intention of buying a load of hoey, no matter how tempting the price. She wanted the truth, and if the angry wrinkle of her darling amber brows was any clue, she wanted it now.

But danged if she wasn’t pretty when she was mad. Those green eyes flashing, and that pert little nose all scrunched up—Peggy tapped an impatient foot.

Travis rolled his shoulders forward and sighed. “It just didn’t seem right, you being alone your first night home with those babies. And when I heard that there’d been, ah, some trouble around here, I figured I could catch a few winks in my truck so I’d be close by in case—”

“Trouble?” Peggy blinked once and spun toward the squat, ruddy-faced policeman who had a death grip on Travis’s left bicep. “What kind of trouble?”

Startled, the officer tipped his hat, his gaze darting to Travis, then back to Peggy. “There’ve been a few incidents, ma’am,” he admitted. “Some women have been, uh, assaulted.”

Even in the pale moonlight, Travis saw the color drain from her face. “Oh.”

An older officer with a bushy mustache loped back from the street clutching Travis’s wallet and the portable two-way radio he kept in his pickup truck. “The truck checks out,” the officer told Officer Charlie. “No wants, no warrants registered to Travis J. Stockwell. He’s clean, too,” he added, nodding at Travis.

The ruddy-faced policeman seemed disappointed. “Maybe he’s been using that scanner to keep tabs on the police.”

“It’s not a scanner,” the mustached officer replied. “It’s just a CB radio.” He glanced up at Peggy. “We can still take him in for trespassing, if you want, ma’am.”

To Travis’s horror, she pursed her lips as if considering the option. “Trespassing? Oh, no, Peggy, ma’am, I wasn’t trespassing.” He straightened, shaking his head so violently he could feel his hair vibrate. Words rushed out, nervousness accentuating his Texas twang until it was thick enough to hang a hat on. “Something was moving out yonder in those woods, heading straight for your backyard. I couldn’t rightly tell what it was, so I just moseyed over for a quick look-see—”

Peggy interrupted. “What was it?”

“Ma’am?”

“The ‘something’ that came out of the woods. What was it?”

“Oh.” He coughed and studied his boots. “It was, umm, well, a cat.”

Officer Charlie chuckled. The ruddy-faced officer snorted in disbelief.

“What color was it?”

Travis looked up, perplexed. “The cat, ma’am?” She gave an irritated nod. “It was orange, I think, and kind of striped.”

Peggy turned away, but not before Travis saw the telltale quirk of that sweet little dimple. At that point, he realized that she had no intention of having him arrested.

He exhaled all at once, then managed a reproachful stare. “Why, ma’am, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear you were just funning with me. `Course that can’t be true, on account of a fine lady such as yourself being too well bred to enjoy watching a man sweat like a pig in a butcher’s kitchen.”

“You’re mistaken, Mr. Stockwell. I’m enjoying it very much.” Peggy unfolded her arms and fiddled with the lapels of a robe that Travis now noticed was worn through at the elbows. “You took ten years off my life,” she muttered. “I ought to let them have you.”

He let his head droop forward, then rolled his eyes up and widened them, using the same whipped-puppy expression that used to melt Sue Anne’s heart whenever she got perturbed at him. “Yes’m, Peggy, ma’am. I’m real sorry.”

A smile twitched the corner of her mouth. “Nice try, cowboy.”

“Excuse me?”

“I learned a long time ago that you can avoid stepping in it if you recognize the smell.” She heaved a sigh, shoved back a tangle of fiery hair. “Lucky for you, I’ve been feeding a little orange-striped stray. There’s a food bowl on the back porch.” She turned to Officer Charlie. “I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience, Officer, but apparently there’s been a misunderstanding. I won’t be pressing charges. You can let him go.”

“You sure, ma’am?” When she nodded, albeit reluctantly, Officer Charlie moved around to remove the handcuffs.

Travis rubbed his wrists, retrieved his wallet, CB radio and hat, and cast Peggy a woeful look as the ruddy-faced policeman hauled him aside to give him what appeared from Peggy’s vantage point to be a stern lecture.

Peggy sagged against the porch rail, drained and oddly disoriented. She wanted to be angry. Dammit, she was angry. When she’d seen that slinking male shadow outside her window, she’d nearly fainted in terror. Her hands were still shaking.

If Travis Stockwell could be believed, he’d been trying to protect her, a concept that boggled her skeptical, independent mind. No man had ever put himself out for Peggy before, not her husband, not her father, not even the hormone-pickled, adolescent dog who’d escorted her to the prom, then abandoned her for a tipsy blond cheerleader rumored to be taking all comers behind the high school gym.

That had been a hard lesson, one of many that had taught Peggy not to expect much from the male of the species. Men, even relatively young ones, were transitory at best. At worst, they were deceitful, selfish and downright cruel.

Clearly, Travis Stockwell did not represent the worst of his kind, which to Peggy’s mind meant that he was basically amicable, probably decent, a person who would treat others with respect for however long he chose to hang around.

Naturally, Peggy didn’t hold Travis personally responsible for the emotional wanderlust afflicting his gender. She was, however, acutely aware of his maleness. From the brim of his Stetson to the scuffed toes of his stamped leather boots, Travis Stockwell was pure, unadulterated man. That kept her wary. It also affected her in deeper, more disturbing ways.

The rev of a car engine broke into her thoughts. As she glanced up, one squad car was pulling away from the curb. The other had already hung a U-turn and was speeding into the night.

Travis stood awkwardly at the foot of the porch steps, hat in his hands, shifting from foot to foot like a scolded child. “I’m real sorry to have upset you, Peggy. It was the last thing on this earth I meant to do.”

“I know that, Travis.” The fact that he’d finally dropped the formality of calling her “ma’am” didn’t escape Peggy’s notice. It made them seem closer, somehow. More like friends. She smiled, fidgeted with a loose thread on the cuff of her robe and was suddenly embarrassed by her shabby attire. “Your intentions were honorable enough, but I wish you’d have let me know what you were up to.”

“I figured you’d just say you didn’t need watching out for and send me packing.”

“You figured right. Still, it was a kind gesture and I appreciate it.”

The porch light illuminated his strained expression as he glanced over at his truck and back again. “So, have the babies been keeping you up tonight?”

“Among other things.”

He actually blushed. “You should go on inside, then, try to get some rest. G’night, Peggy.”

For some reason, she felt a small surge of panic as he turned to leave. “Wait! I mean...” Her voice trailed off as he glanced expectantly over his shoulder. “Can I, ah, get you anything?”

“Ma’am?”

“A glass of water, something to eat. I could make coffee.”

“It’s three in the morning.”

“Ah, yes, so it is.” She tangled her fingers together, locked them at her waist, but made no move to reenter the house.

Travis shuffled his feet and peeked up in that endearing manner that, although clearly manipulative, was nonetheless appealing. “You can sleep easy, Peggy. If you need me, I’ll be right outside.”

“I won’t need you, Mr. Stockwell.”

“Now, don’t go getting your back up.”

“My back is perfectly fine, thank you.”

“Yes, ma’am, it sure is.” He smiled, a brilliant flash that lit up the night and melted her heart.

Then a strange thing happened. Their eyes met and held. Travis’s smile faded into an expression of awed confusion. Peggy stood there, frozen, transfixed by a peculiar radiance emanating from his mystified gaze. He was looking at her as if he’d never seen her before, never seen any woman before. There was a reverence in his eyes that took her breath away, and a sensual promise that sent her heart into frantic palpitations.

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