

A man with a beard and a brown cowboy hat is lying down, holding two babies. He is wearing a light pink t-shirt. 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. The background is a textured, light-colored surface.

36
HOURS

OOH BABY, BABY

DIANA K. WHITNEY

PART 3 OF 3

Diana Whitney

Ooh Baby, Baby Part 3

«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 3Peggy's been strong so far, but there are some things even she can't handle on her own. Fighting to protect her new family from her ex, confused by Travis's disappearance and now postnatal complications—it's tough to hold on.Travis is determined to do what's best for Peggy and the twins he helped bring into the world—even if it means staying away. It seems the effects of the storm that blew into Grand Springs that night will be felt long after the rains have stopped.Don't miss the next book in the series, For Her Eyes Only by Sharon Sala.

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Don't miss the next book in the series, *For Her Eyes Only* by Sharon Sala.

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 3

Diana Whitney



www.millsandboon.co.uk

Peggy Saxon was all prepared to give birth to her twins in the hospital, but when the massive storm knocked out power, closed roads and caused major mudslides throughout Grand Springs, her plans went astray. Enter Travis Stockwell, cowboy, taxi driver and baby deliveryman—the last one was not his choice. But Travis found himself falling for those twins and their mother, something a rodeo cowboy couldn't afford to do, so he hit the road before things got too complicated, leaving Peggy alone. Despite not feeling well and completely brokenhearted, Peggy focused on her little family—until everything went black and she fell to the kitchen floor, out cold. As she was falling Peggy called out Travis's name, but he wasn't close enough to hear it.

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Chapter Eleven

Travis Stockwell slouched over the counter and fiddled with a limp French fry, using it to draw designs in the ketchup that flooded one side of his plate. He remembered that Peggy didn't like ketchup on her French fries. She ate the danged things dry. A man just couldn't have serious feelings about a woman who didn't know how to eat French fries.

Worst part was that she'd probably raise those babies to eat French fries wrong, too. That'd be a real shame, especially for T.J. The little wrangler needed someone to teach him real-man stuff, like how to whack the ketchup bottle with a flat palm instead of a fist so the contents wouldn't glug out all at once. And then there was the fine art of chomping down a burger in four bites or less. None of this nibbling around the edge stuff. Girls nibbled. Men gobbled. Belching was optional.

It wasn't that Peggy wouldn't be a good mother to those babies. She was a wonderful mama. The best. Patient and tender, all cooey and kissy. And the bravest woman he'd ever met. Peggy had given birth to twins in the back of his taxi during one of the worst storms Colorado had ever experienced, and she never complained once. Travis didn't have a doubt in the world that those sweet babies would be well-loved and happy. It's just that there were girl manners and boy manners, and Travis hated the idea that T.J. would grow up not knowing the difference.

Travis pushed away his plate, eyeing his own half-eaten burger with disdain. It looked, well, it looked nibbled. Pitiful, just pitiful. Ordinarily he was a three-bite-man and proud of it. Tonight his stomach wasn't up to the challenge.

Maybe it was the peculiar sense of apprehension that had been plaguing him. He'd had trouble concentrating, had even missed a turnoff and found himself heading toward Nebraska. It had taken an extra hour to backtrack. Now he'd be lucky if he made it to Cheyenne by morning.

Travis took a final gulp of cold coffee, then tossed a two-buck tip on the counter and went to the diner's cash register to pay his bill. The cashier greeted him with a lukewarm smile, waiting while he eyed the array of gum and mints displayed in the glass counter case.

"Got any pumpkin seeds?" he asked, handing over a twenty.

She accepted the currency and gave the display a disinterested glance. "We've got sunflower seeds."

"I don't want sunflower seeds."

"We've got gum."

"I don't want gum. I want pumpkin seeds."

She plopped his change on the counter. "Well, cowboy, you can't have 'em if we don't got 'em. How about a breath mint?"

He narrowed his eyes. "How about some antacids?" he said loudly enough to startle some patrons that had just entered the establishment. "I could use 'em about now."

The patrons did a U-turn and left.

Travis barely noticed, nor did he pay attention to the infuriated cashier's dark scowl. He was completely overwhelmed by a soft buzz in his skull and the chill skittering down his spine. He shifted, glanced over his shoulder, saw nothing but his own reflection in the diner's glass door.

Then he felt it again, a whispered uneasiness, unfocused but intensely compelling. His shoulder tingled as if touched. And he could have sworn he heard someone call his name.

* * *

"Why did you leave me, Daddy?"

"I had to."

"Didn't you love me anymore?"

"I loved you."

"Then why did you go away?"

“I thought you’d be better off.”

His face was blurred, features obscured by a cloudy vapor. But Peggy could hear his voice and knew without doubt who he was. “But I cried, Daddy, and so did Mommy. We were so sad without you.”

“I know.” The vapor grew thicker, more opaque. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry....”

“Daddy?” As Peggy reached out, empty mist swirled around her fingers. “Daddy, please come back. I’ll be a good girl, I promise. I promise, Daddy.”

A wail emanated from beyond the cloudy wall, a cranky, frightened sound that pierced her very soul. She clawed forward, only to find herself lost in the mist. The cry intensified, more desperate now, more terrified. She had to find the source. She had to.

She had to.

* * *

Travis pulled up to the curb, letting his truck idle a moment before turning off the ignition. He didn’t have a clue why he was here, or what he was going to do. All he knew is that he’d left the diner heading south, back toward Grand Springs. Now he was parked in front of Peggy’s duplex, wondering why the kitchen light was on at three o’clock in the morning.

At the risk of once again finding himself staring down the business end of a police revolver, he exited the truck and went to have a look-see. Of course, the twins couldn’t tell time, and he knew their hungry little bellies didn’t much care if the sun was up or not. Still, he couldn’t shake the sensation that he really ought to check things out.

He considered peeking in the back window, a notion quickly discarded when he remembered how frightened Peggy had been the last time he’d slunk around her house like some kind of perverted peeper. Instead, he strode up the front walk. By the time he reached the porch, he could hear the twins crying. He listened a moment, waiting for the change in pitch or intensity that confirmed they were being tended. The cries continued unabated, desperate, choking little wails that went straight through his heart.

“Peggy?” He tapped on the door, waited, then pounded it with his fist. “Peggy, it’s Travis. Open the door.”

Nothing. No lilting voice, no flurry of footsteps. Only silence.

A quick twist of the knob confirmed that the door was locked, so he sprinted around back, rushed through the gate and found the kitchen door locked, too. In a sickening rush of déjà vu, he took a step back, booted it open and dashed inside.

What he saw nearly stopped his heart. “Oh, God. Peggy.” He knelt beside her crumpled form, frantically massaging her chalky cheeks. “Peggy, honey, wake up. You’ve got to wake up, honey, you’ve got to.”

She moaned. He nearly wept with relief. At least she was alive.

“Babies,” she murmured, rolling her head. “My babies.”

“They’re fine, honey, just fine.” At least, he hoped they were. “I’ll, ah, be right back.”

Travis sprinted down the hallway, into the nursery where both babies were still wailing. He skidded to Ginny’s crib. The pathetic little thing was beet red, flailing her hands and kicking madly. A wet stain on the mattress hinted to at least one of her problems.

Travis awkwardly patted her rigid tummy. “There, there, darling.” She sucked a startled sob, blinked expectantly up at him, then screwed up her face and wailed even louder. Travis wrung his hands, muttering. He grabbed the pink pacifier at the foot of the crib and wiggled it inside the baby’s open mouth. Instantly, she clamped her gums together and startled to suckle.

“One down,” he mumbled, then headed toward T.J., who was just as red-faced as his sister and twice as loud. Frantic, Travis searched the crib for the blue pacifier, finally spotting it on the floor by the dresser. He scooped up the precious piece of plastic, sprinted into the bathroom to scrub it off

with hot, soapy water. By the time he'd managed to dash back and pop the clean pacifier into T.J.'s greedy little mouth, Ginny was crying again.

He ran to her crib, retrieved the pink pacifier, which had slipped away and fallen under her ear. When he tried to reinsert the rubbery nipple, she turned her face away, yowling in protest. "I know it's not exactly what you had in mind, but it's the best I can do. Make believe it's Mommy, okay, darling?"

Ginny stared up, heaved a resigned shudder and accepted the pacifier.

Travis exhaled all at once. "That's my girl."

With his heart pounding, he retrieved a wet washcloth from the bathroom, then lurched back down the hall and knelt to sponge Peggy's pale face.

She moaned again. "You do love me," she whispered without opening her eyes. "I knew you did. I knew it."

A lump the size of Wyoming wedged in Travis's throat. He wanted to speak, hell, he wanted to holler that yes, yes, he loved her. But those words had never touched his tongue before, and he couldn't form them now.

Her lips moved. "I love you, too, Daddy."

Every drop of moisture instantly evaporated from Travis's mouth. Peggy didn't love him. Hell, she didn't even know who he was. She was delirious, dangerously sick and out of her mind with fever. There was only one thing to do.

So Travis did it.

* * *

The first awareness Peggy had was of an uncomfortable tightness pressing the bridge of her nose and the hiss of oxygen being fed into the mask. She blinked at the light, squinted at the blurred form leaning over her. It was a woman with short blond hair and a gentle smile. "Easy, now. You're going to be fine."

"Where am I?" The question came out slurred, muffled by the mask, but the female EMT didn't seem to notice.

"In an ambulance," she replied.

An ambulance? The answer was confirmed by a jarring bounce as the vehicle sped along a bumpy road. Peggy lifted a weak hand and grasped the female medic's wrist. "My babies..."

"Your babies are fine," the woman said, loosely grasping Peggy's wrist and pressing a thumb against the pulsing vein. "Your friend is taking care of them."

"My friend?"

"Umm." The medic studied her watch, then smiled and placed Peggy's hand back onto the cot. "You had us worried for a while, but your pulse is much stronger and your blood pressure has stabilized."

"I don't have any friends," Peggy blurted.

"Well, you certainly have one. He probably saved your life."

"He?" Disoriented as she was, Peggy took a moment to clear her fuzzy mind.

The medic chuckled. "Very much a 'he.' Big brown eyes, shoulders to die for, and hips that look so good in jeans it ought to be illegal."

Peggy moaned. "Oh, God. Travis." She yanked at the mask, tried to sit up, fought the medic's attempt to calm her. "Please, I have to get back, I have to go home."

"Sh, you're going to be fine."

"You don't understand. Travis can't take care of the twins. He doesn't know how, he's even afraid to pick them up." Peggy fought against the woman's restraining hands. "Please, you have to take me back...aah!" A burning sensation shifted Peggy's attention, and she stared in horror at the tube jutting from her taped arm. A fluid bag was suspended above her head, dripping clear liquid into the tube.

Memories slid through her mind, fuzzy images of the lighted kitchen, the tilting tunnel door. She remembered the feel of rough carpet against her cheek, the desperate cries of her babies. How long had she been unconscious? How long had her babies lain there, crying with hunger, with fear?

Reality hit like a sledge. If Travis hadn't come back, it might have been days before anyone found them.

But he had come back, and he'd saved their lives. Again.

* * *

"You've got to come over," Travis shouted into the telephone. "Ginny's all wet and T.J.'s crying, and they're both hungry as vultures, and I've got to get to the hospital to see about Peggy, and—"

"Peggy's in the ER," Sue Anne said. "I just called. She's awake and alert, and the doctors are examining her now."

"I've got to get there," Travis insisted.

"What you've got to do is take care of those babies."

"Me? I don't know anything about babies."

"You've spent every spare minute with them for the past eight weeks. I figure you've picked up a tip or two."

"That's different." Travis raked his hair, dragging the telephone toward the hallway until the cord went taut. He swore.

"Humph, nice language in front of those babes."

"The twins are in the nursery. I'm in the living room. The blasted cord is too short." He spun around, clutching the phone in one hand and the receiver in the other. "Sue Anne, please, I'm begging you. I'll wash every cab in the fleet with a cotton swab and drive night shift for a year. Hell, I'll even do your laundry. Just come over!"

She was silent a moment. "Does that include ironing?"

"Sue Anne!"

A chuckle filtered through the line. "Sorry, kid, much as I love to take advantage of panic-based generosity, I can't leave the dispatch center."

"Danny can take over."

"He'll be in Denver for the rest of the week. College registration—" A telephone rang on Sue Anne's end of the line. "Hold on," she muttered to Travis, then answered what he presumed to be the dispatch center's call-out phone, which was a separate line for Conway Cab customers. He heard his sister speak briefly, repeat an address on the west side of town. There was a ripping noise, as if she'd torn a sheet of paper from a pad. A moment later, he heard her on the two-way radio, relaying the information.

Travis checked his watch and groaned. It was 6:00 a.m., and the day shift was just pulling out. Where had the time gone? The three hours since he'd first arrived had flown by in chaos, and Lord only knew how long it had been since those poor babies had anything to eat. They'd dozed off for a spell after he'd given them the pacifiers, but they were awake now and sounded hungry enough to suck off the wallpaper.

"Travis?"

He tightened his grip on the receiver. "Yeah?"

"Things are getting busy here. Grab your cell and put me on speaker phone."

"I can't. I forgot to charge it."

"Listen, do you still carry that portable two-way in your truck?"

"Sure, but why...?"

"If you use it to patch into the dispatch center, I might be able to give you a few pointers while you're caring for the kids."

"Oh. Yeah. Great." Travis dashed toward the front door, and would have made it if he hadn't been carrying the telephone. The cord tightened, yanking the phone body out of his hand. The

instrument bounced across the floor. He dove for it, retrieved the phone and lost the receiver, which skidded under the sofa.

Frantic now, Travis grabbed the curly cord and dragged it out hand over fist, hollering, “Sue Anne, Sue Anne? I can’t get through the front door. The cord’s not long enough—”

“Hang up, Travis.”

“Huh?”

A long-suffering sigh made him wince. “Hang up the telephone, brilliant brother of mine, then go get the two-way out of your truck and use it to contact the dispatch center.”

He frowned and rubbed his forehead, feeling like a damned fool. “I knew that.”

Sue Anne chuckled. “Sure you did.”

There was a click. The line went dead. Sue Anne had broken the connection, leaving Travis utterly alone with two hungry infants and a heart full of fear.

* * *

“Am I going to die?”

Dr. Amanda Jennings smiled and patted Peggy’s hand. “Of course not. We’re going to take very good care of you.”

“But you don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Not yet,” she conceded. “But we’ll run some blood tests, take a couple of X rays—”

“X rays?”

“You’ve got a nasty lump on your head. The paramedic report indicates that you probably struck the kitchen table when you fainted.”

Peggy bit her lip and turned away so the doctor wouldn’t see the tears form. For the first time, she realized how vulnerable her babies were. If anything happened to her, they’d be raised by strangers, alone and unloved. The thought made her nauseous. That couldn’t happen. She wouldn’t let it happen. “Could someone please call my ex-husband? I have an emergency number.”

“I’ll see to it myself,” Dr. Jennings replied kindly. She jotted the number on a blue scratch pad on the bed table, tore off the sheet and clipped it on Peggy’s chart. Then she gave Peggy a reassuring pat and disappeared between the folds of the drawn bed drape.

Peggy lay there, watching life-giving fluid drip into her veins and feeling more terrified than she had since the day she’d watched her father walk out of her life. At least she’d still had a mother to love and nurture her. One parent wasn’t enough, but it was better than none, which is exactly what her beloved babies would face if they lost their mother.

With her fingers tangled in the bedclothes she fought panic, reminding herself that even if the worst happened to her the twins still had a father. Clyde wouldn’t abandon his children to foster care. He’d come through for them. She knew he would.

She knew it.

* * *

“Oh, Lord.” Travis grabbed a towel, flapping it at the billowing white cloud.

The radio strapped to his belt crackled. “What’s going on?”

Travis continued flapping with one hand and poked the send button with the other. “A mite too much powder,” he muttered. “Got it under control.”

T.J. sneezed and whacked his little fists. The poor, redheaded little thing looked like a sugar-dusted carrot cake. Travis used a corner of the towel to clear white powder from the baby’s face, but his fuzzy little scalp was coated with the stuff. A problem for later, Travis decided. He tossed the towel aside, fastened the diaper’s sticky tabs, anchored the tiny pajama snaps and heaved a relieved sigh. Behind him, Ginny, who’d already been changed and diapered, had given up trying to get milk out of the pacifier and was wailing her little heart out.

Travis brushed his palms together and hit the radio switch. “They’re both clean and dry,” he announced. “Now what?”

“Well, what’s the first thing you want when you step out of your morning shower?”

His heart sank. “I don’t suppose you’re talking about a cup of strong, black coffee.”

“Not unless you suck it through a nipple.”

“Oh, for crying out loud—”

“Which is possible, I suppose, considering how many times I dropped you on your head when you were little. Accidentally, of course, even if you were a whiny little twerp who made my life miserable.”

“Dang it, Sue Anne, quit giving me grief and tell me what the devil I’m supposed to do here.”

“Does the word formula ring any bells?”

The image of Danny feeding T.J. white stuff out of a bottle came to mind. Travis sighed. “I don’t know how to make it.”

“Check the fridge,” Sue Anne suggested cheerfully. “My guess is that Peggy has a few bottles already made up and waiting.”

The mere thought gave him hope. He spun on his heel, dashed to the kitchen and yanked open the refrigerator. Relief made him limp. “Oh, yeah. Oh, thank you, Lord.”

“Travis?”

“Umm?” He poked the radio send button, steadied his voice. “There’s four bottles in here.” A distressed wail floated from the nursery. “Geez, Sue Anne, the babies are getting all perturbed.”

“Warm the bottles.”

“Okay.” He snatched up two of the bottles, kicked the fridge door shut, then looked frantically around the room. “How?”

The radio remained stubbornly silent.

“How?” Travis shouted at thin air. “There isn’t a microwave. Do I put them in the oven, tuck them under my armpits, what?”

The radio crackled. “Okay, I assume that by now you’ve got a bottle in each hand and are too rattled to hit the send button, which suits me fine because hearing a grown man snivel makes my teeth itch. So just keep your mouth shut and listen. First, put a couple inches of water in a saucepan.”

Travis’s frenzied gaze swept the room and settled on the cabinet where he thought Peggy kept her cookware. He dashed over, clunking a bottle against the knob.

“Put the bottles down, Travis, then open the cupboard.”

He straightened, staring down at the radio.

His sister’s amused voice floated from black plastic. “No, there’s not a camera in there, m’dear. I just know you. Now, get your fanny in gear and heat up that dadgummed water before those poor babes are old enough to climb out of their cribs and do it themselves.”

Muttering, he set the bottles on the counter, retrieved a saucepan and continued to follow his sister’s eerily clairvoyant instructions until the bottles had been warmed. At Sue Anne’s insistence, he tested the contents on his wrist, howled in pain, then held his wrist and both bottles under the faucet to cool them.

When the formula was as close to lukewarm as Travis could manage, he hurried back to the nursery, where he stood in the center of the room, clutching the precious bottles and staring from one wailing infant to the other. “Which one do I feed first?”

The radio was silent. Frustrated, he shifted both bottles to one hand and reached for the button at his hip. “They’re both screaming, Sue Anne.”

She sighed. “You’ve got two hands, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but I can’t reach both cribs at the same time. My arms aren’t long enough.”

“Then, I guess you’ll have to move one of them, won’t you?”

His heart plummeted toward his boots. “You mean...?” His frantic gaze spun from one cranky infant to the other. “Oh, Lordy, I can’t, Sue Anne, I just can’t. They’re squirming and squawking, wiggling like a pair of hooked worms. I’ll drop them for sure.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Travis, get a grip. You can flatten a thousand-pound steer with your bare hands. I figure you can handle a tiny baby that doesn’t weigh more than a bag of flour.”

“A bag of flour doesn’t wiggle!”

The radio buzzed, crackled. “Okay, let’s try this. Picture the look on Peggy’s face when she finds out you let those babies starve because you were too chicken to pick ’em up.”

Travis felt the blood drain to his toes. “Right.”

He set the bottles on the dresser, flexed his fingers, then slipped his hands beneath T.J.’s warm little body and lifted.

* * *

Peggy tried to shift up on an elbow, but dizziness forced her to lie back, helpless in the hands of the efficient technicians who were cheerfully guiding the gurney down the hall. “Where are you taking me?”

“X ray,” replied the male nurse, angling a flippant grin. “We’re going to make sure that thunk on your noggin didn’t shake anything loose.”

Peggy closed her eyes a moment, frustrated and feeling lost. “My head is fine,” she muttered. “It’s everything else that’s spinning. What’s wrong with me, anyway?”

“We won’t know until the blood tests come back, but you certainly look a lot perkier than you did a few hours ago.”

“Only if your definition of perky includes the sensation of having been wrung out like a wet rag. I don’t feel quite as weak, though.” She eyed the bag of dripping liquid that had been her constant companion since the ambulance trip. “What’s in there, anyway?”

The male nurse winked. “All kinds of magic stuff.”

The female nurse gave her colleague a withering look. “She’s a patient, not a fool.” Ignoring the man’s embarrassed flush, she patted Peggy’s hand. “Forgive him, dear. He tends to treat all patients as if they were recalcitrant children. The bag contains a saline fluid solution. You were extremely dehydrated.”

“Oh.” Peggy would have asked more questions had her attention not been captured by the large glass window they were passing. “Wait...please.”

The gurney slowed, then stopped in front of the hospital nursery. Peggy focused on two Plexiglas bassinets in the front row. They were empty now, but almost nine weeks ago, they’d cradled her own precious babies. The memory made her ache with loneliness. She missed them so. She told herself that they were all right, that Travis had probably called Sue Anne over to care for them.

They’d be fine, just fine.

So why was she crying?

As she turned away, movement caught her eye, and she focused on the incubator at the far side of the room. She twisted to her side as the gurney began to move. “That baby in the incubator, isn’t it the same one that was here during the blackout?”

The female nurse followed her gaze and heaved a sad sigh. “Yes, that’s Christopher. The good news is that he’s doing splendidly and will be ready to go home soon. The bad news is that he has no home. His mother still hasn’t been found.”

Peggy was horrified. “You mean that poor child has no one to care for him?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that. In fact, I doubt there’s a baby on the face of the earth who has more care than our Christopher. We all adore him.” She leaned down and whispered, “To tell you the truth, the staff has grown so attached to him that I’m not sure they’ll ever let the little guy leave. He certainly doesn’t lack love and attention.”

It wasn’t enough, Peggy thought as the gurney was rolled toward the elevator. Little Christopher deserved a mother’s nurturing love. All babies deserved that, just as they deserved fathers to provide role models of a strong, caring male.

But her babies didn’t have a caring father. They had only Clyde.

Still, Peggy was hopeful. She knew Dr. Jennings would explain the situation to Clyde and inform him that if anything happened to Peggy, the twins would be shuttled off to foster care unless he returned to Grand Springs and exercised his parental responsibility.

But later that morning, after the X ray's had been completed and Peggy had been returned to her room, she awoke to find Dr. Jennings standing beside her bed with a blue scratch sheet in her hand, pity in her eyes. Peggy knew then that Clyde had refused.

Chapter Twelve

Travis bent like a human safety pin, his aching elbows levered over the crib's lowered side slat. At the business end of the bottles he held were two sticky, sucking, milk-splattered infants, lying side by side in Ginny's crib. Rubber nipples, Travis had discovered, tended to squirt uncontrollably when tipped toward greedy, biting little mouths.

Initially, he'd withdrawn the bottles, launched into a face-wiping frenzy that had the twins shrieking and whipping their heads in a desperate attempt to recapture the delivering mechanism of their much-needed meal.

Eventually, Travis had given up his quest for cleanliness, wishing nothing more than to simply survive the sloppy process before his stooped spine cracked under the strain. It may not be the most practical posture from which to play Mr. Mom, but since the formula was nearly gone, it had clearly worked well enough to resolve the basic crisis.

In fact, T.J.'s bottle was empty. The baby continued to suck happily, which didn't bother Travis one whit. Ginny still had some formula left, so he didn't see any need to take her brother's bottle away. After all, the little guy was enjoying himself, and it didn't seem fair to penalize T.J. just because the masculine milk-sucking apparatus was just naturally more powerful than the puny pucker of a baby girl.

Of course, Travis had expected Virginia to feed more demurely than her brother. She was a nibbler, after all, sweet and delicate and ultimately feminine, just like her mama. That's how it was supposed to be.

But T.J. was a rough-and-tumble boy child, a no-nonsense gulping gobbler. There wasn't a doubt in Travis's mind that his namesake was destined to be a three-bite burger man.

Travis couldn't have been prouder.

The radio on his belt crackled. "What's going on?" Sue Anne asked. "Are they still eating?"

Travis rested the empty bottle on T.J.'s tummy and reached for the transmission switch. "Ginny's almost done," Travis told his sister, then couldn't resist adding, "T.J. finished up a few minutes ago."

"Good." Sue Anne paused. "By the way, you do know enough to take the bottle away as soon as it's empty so they don't get air in their tummies, right?"

"Uh, sure, everyone knows that." Horrified, Travis realized that T.J. had probably siphoned enough air to float a blimp. As he snatched the bottle away, the nipple snapped from startled infant's mouth with a noisy pop. "Okay, Ginny's done, too," he muttered, setting both bottles on the dresser. "Breakfast is officially over."

"Don't forget to burp them."

Travis glared at the radio. "I'm not a complete idiot. I know what to do."

Actually, he didn't, but the thinly veiled amusement in Sue Anne's voice was beginning to grate on his nerves. He rubbed his forehead, tried to jog his memory. Peggy always breast-fed the babies in private, so Travis hadn't actually witnessed the post-meal burping process. He had, however, seen a similar activity that consisted of holding the infant upright at the shoulder and patting the baby's back until the anticipated result was obtained. It seemed easy enough when Peggy did it.

But the mere thought of holding a fragile infant against his big, bony chest gave Travis palpitations. What if he patted too hard and broke something? What if a bobbling little head flopped backward? What if...?

T.J. let out a massive wail. Travis wrung his hands, then gently touched the baby's tummy. It was rock hard and swollen like a balloon. There was no choice now.

Mumbling to himself, Travis slipped one rigid hand under T.J.'s sticky, powder-gummed little head, and the other hand beneath his diapered, pajama-clad bottom, then took a deep breath and lifted.

The baby stopped crying, bobbed his little head around and stared at Travis as if he was also shocked by this unexpected development. "Okay, partner." Travis shifted awkwardly, managing a couple of tentative pats between the tiny shoulders. "Do your stuff."

T. J. gurgled, kind of grinned. They smiled a lot now, and not a gassy-type grimace, either. They'd plumped up real pretty over the past couple of months and had learned to sprout honest-to-goodness life-is-swell, happy-to-see-you grins. Travis loved the little critters so much it hurt.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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