



THE COWBOY AND THE BABY

Marie Ferrarella

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THE WRANGLER'S SPECIAL DELIVERY When the father of her baby bails, Devon Bennett finds herself in a difficult position. As in giving-birth-in-a-truck-on-the-side-of-a-road difficult. Devon's never felt more alone, until a hunky cowboy rides in to save the day. Deputy Cody McCullough can't shake the feeling that Devon and her baby still need him, and not just because they're staying at his ranch. It's obvious that the single mom's heart has been broken before and trusting this cowboy lawman doesn't come easily. But Cody will do whatever i

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It was too good to be true.

Devon ran her hand ever so lightly over the bassinet.

“This is wonderful,” she said in a small, halting voice, afraid to speak up because she thought her voice would crack. “Where did you get all this?”

“Miss Joan is very resourceful,” Cody told her matter-of-factly. “Technically,” he specified, “these are all on loan—except for the diapers, of course.”

“I don’t care if they’re on loan,” Devon told him. “The fact that I can use them even for a little while is just wonderful,” she added, tearing up completely.

Nothing made Cody feel more helpless than tears. “Oh, hey, you’re not going to cry, are you?”

“No,” she said, and then promptly had several fat tears go cascading down both of her cheeks.

At a loss, not knowing what else to do, Cody took her into his arms and just held her, saying nothing. He just wanted her to know that he was there for her, no matter what she needed.

The Cowboy and the Baby

Marie Ferrarella



www.millsandboon.co.uk

MARIE FERRARELLA is a USA TODAY bestselling and RITA® Award–winning author who has written more than two hundred and fifty books for Mills & Boon, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website, marieferrarella.com.

To

Dr. Steve Kang

For Giving Me Hope

That I Could

Wear High Heels Again

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[Prologue](#)

Cody McCullough didn't like being late.
Ever.

It was a work ethic his big brother Connor had instilled in all of them. Connor had insisted on it that first time he had gathered them all together to tell them that, despite the recent death of their father, they were still going to be a family, still go on living under one roof. Connor had just turned eighteen at the time. That ultimately meant that, as the oldest, Connor was willing to give up his dreams of going away to college in order to become their guardian.

There was no one else to turn to and, besides, Connor had never been one to believe in buck-passing.

Taking care of three younger siblings and a modest cattle ranch was a hell of a responsibility to take on for an eighteen-year-old, so the rest of them—Cody, Cole and Cassidy—figured that the least they could do was not give Connor a hard time about anything, including the rules he saw fit to set down and enforce.

Connor's Code, they had all come to agree, was there for their own good. If they were to survive in a world that could—all too easily—be rough and cruel, they had to pull together.

And in exchange for not giving Connor any grief, their older brother returned the favor. He backed them whenever he could and never made them feel as if they were victims of a cold fate. He taught them that they were the masters of their own destinies. They just had to fight a little harder to forge them.

Even so, when Cody had decided to do something different with his life—change his career path to become a deputy—he was certain that Connor would voice his objections, or at least display a degree of displeasure with his choice.

Instead, Connor had heard him out when he made his case. At the end, he had nodded, saying, "If that's what you want to do, do it. You change your mind, the ranch is always going to be here for you. But if you're going to be a deputy, I want you to be the best damn deputy you can be. I don't want to hear anyone telling me that the sheriff regrets the day he took you on as Alma's replacement."

And Cody had promised to give the job nothing less than his best—which had turned out to be a challenge.

Alma Rodriguez Tyler might have been a small woman, as well as the first female deputy that Forever, Texas, had ever had, but Cody would have been the first one to say that she had left some pretty big boots to fill.

Even so, he had taken to the job like the proverbial duck to water. Cody discovered that he really loved it. Loved putting on the uniform, the badge. Loved being a deputy the way he hadn't ever really loved being a rancher.

The only part of ranching that was near and dear to his heart was the horses. He loved riding, loved becoming one with the animal beneath him. While his other siblings gradually shifted over to getting around in the family truck or the second-hand Jeep they had all chipped in to buy, Cody loved riding. He had ever since he'd been a toddler and his late father, Josh, had picked him up and put him on the back of his first horse, a sleepy-eyed old mare named Libby.

Still, like any young man of twenty-five, Cody had given in to conformity and saved up to buy his own Jeep in the interest of the image he knew he had to project as one of Sheriff Rick Santiago's deputies.

Not that there was all that much for the sheriff's department to do. It wasn't as if Forever, population of a little over five hundred people these days, was exactly a hotbed of either criminal activity or underhanded dealings. There was the occasional argument that escalated to trading blows, and of course there was Miss Elizabeth, an eighty-nine-year-old widow who, from time to time, would be found wandering the streets of Forever, sleepwalking in her nightgown.

For the most part, theirs was a quiet little town. He and the two deputies, Joe Lone Wolf and Gabe Rodriguez, were seen more as friends than as lawmen.

But a man's word was his bond and Cody believed in being at his desk at the beginning of each workday because he was supposed to, not because he was waiting for some minor crime wave to break out so he could jump into action.

As fate would have it, his spirit might have been more than willing to arrive on time, but his Jeep's was not. For some reason, the vehicle had simply refused to turn over when he put his key in the ignition, despite the fact that the town's sole mechanic—thought to be a veritable wizard when it came to machinery—had overhauled it and pronounced it good as new.

Cody knew everything there was to know about horses and absolutely nothing when it came to car engines. After one more futile attempt to rouse the engine, he'd pocketed his key and thrown a saddle on Flint, a golden palomino he had raised from a colt.

A couple of minutes later, he was headed toward Forever at a quick gallop.

Entirely focused on not being late, Cody had almost missed seeing the beat-up pickup truck. The truck, which had definitely seen better days, was pulled over to the far side of the road. And even if he had seen it, it was in such poor condition, he would have just assumed it was abandoned.

Cody had already ridden past it when he thought he heard a scream.

Pulling up Flint's reins, he paused, cocked his head and listened again.

Nothing.

He was just about to chalk it up to either his imagination or the summer wind, which could, at times, make a mournful sound. Cody was on the verge of lightly kicking the palomino's flanks and resuming his journey when he heard it again.

This time there was no doubt in his mind. What he'd heard was definitely a scream. It was loud, full-bodied and strong enough to not just make his blond hair stand on end, but to send a hard shiver down his spine, as well.

Automatically putting his hand over his holster to assure himself that he had remembered to strap on his weapon before heading out, Cody turned his horse around and galloped right back toward the clearly not abandoned pickup truck. Excitement coursed through his body.

Someone was in trouble.

[Chapter One](#)

Oh God, this was such a bad idea. She shouldn't have driven out looking for him in her condition.

"Yeah, like you really had a choice," Devon Bennett mocked herself, sarcasm saturating each word.

Independent to a fault, accustomed to handling everything that came her way, Devon could never have resisted looking for Jack when she woke up to find him gone from the motel room.

At first, she'd thought he'd just gone out to get them breakfast—but he wouldn't have needed to take their suitcase for that. And it was missing, along with her credit cards and all the money out of her purse.

He did leave her the truck. But that wasn't because he'd had an attack of conscience, or even because she was carrying his baby and was due to deliver in about a week or so. Being coldly honest with herself, Devon knew that Jack hadn't taken the truck for one reason and one reason only. The truck was still there, parked right outside of the rundown motel, because Jack couldn't find the keys to it.

He wasn't able to find them because she'd had this uneasy feeling that Jack was having second thoughts about the plans they had laid out for their future. Not knowing what Jack might impulsively decide to do, she had tucked the keys to the truck under her pillow—smack in the center so that even if he did suspect they were there, he would have had to move her in such a way that she was certain to wake up.

Looking back now as she scanned the desolate area—weren't there supposed to be some people around this forsaken wilderness?—Devon couldn't have said exactly what had possessed her to hide the keys, but maybe, somewhere deep down, she didn't really trust Jack anymore. Oh, he'd smiled a lot and talked about these grand plans he had for the two of them, promising that everything would be wonderful once they got to Houston.

They'd left Taos, New Mexico, because Jack had come into their small apartment one morning telling her that he'd lined up another job—a much better job—and it was waiting for him in Houston. They'd been together for almost three years and they'd gotten engaged after four pregnancy tests had yielded the same answer: positive.

At the time, she'd thought that finding out she was pregnant would send Jack packing, but Jack surprised her. He stayed.

He'd even looked as if he was happy about it. The baby, the engagement, the promise of a new job—he made it sound as if all they needed was a new beginning to make everything work out.

She'd had no reason to doubt him.

No reason except perhaps the nagging, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach—something apart from morning sickness for a change—warning her that maybe, just maybe it was too good to be true.

And she had learned a long time ago that if something seemed too good to be true, then it usually wasn't.

“Usually? Always. It's always too good to be true,” Devon retorted, the realization all but tearing her up.

Tears began to gather in her eyes, threatening to fall, to make her come apart. Devon struggled to hold herself together. She didn't even know where she was going, other than just heading somewhere “due east” because that was the direction they'd been driving in when they'd pulled up to that sad little motel.

It hadn't been her first choice. She had located an actually decent hotel that was about ten miles up the road, but Jack had vetoed it, saying that hotel would eat into “their” capital.

The only capital Jack was acquainted with was the first letter to his name. The money was hers—or it had been before he'd taken it, along with the gold cross her mother, Amy, had left her and the earrings that might or might not have been worth something. Whatever actual dollar amount the jewelry was worth, both pieces had meant the world to her because they were all she had left from her mother.

But to Jack the jewelry was just something to be converted into cash at his first opportunity.

So he'd left her with her truck and taken everything else. Because she'd had no money to pay the desk clerk, she'd been forced to sneak out while dawn was still creeping in. She'd assuaged her conscience by promising herself that she'd find him, that no good, sweet-talking thief—not because

she wanted him back, but because she wanted to pay the motel clerk and, more than that, recover her mother's cross and earrings.

But where the hell could he have gotten to?

And where on earth was she?

When she'd tried to pinpoint her location on her smartphone's GPS, Devon could have sworn that if her phone had had actual hands, it would have been scratching its head.

She was in the middle of nowhere—and getting more deeply entrenched.

More tears stung her eyes.

“Serves me right for thinking that just once in my life, things were going to go WELLL! OMIGOD!”

The pain, sudden and sharp and completely unexpected, had come leaping out at her from nowhere.

Devon had been upset and overwrought and paying attention to the road, not to the signals her body was sending her. In her defense, she'd been experiencing strange sensations and odd little pains off and on for a while now.

Scanning her memory bank now, she realized that her lower half had been feeling very, very strange, but then, that could have easily described the way her bottom had been feeling ever since she'd found that she was pregnant.

Focused on hunting Jack down, she'd had no reason to believe that this “strange” feeling was any different than all the other strange feelings she'd been experiencing all along.

Except that it was different.

She'd never quite had this pain before. Never felt like two giant hands had each taken hold of one of her legs and were now about to make a wish just before they pulled them apart in two opposite directions.

“Can't you wait, Michael?” she begged, addressing her very swollen abdomen by the name she had selected. Not that she knew the baby's gender. She'd just assumed that it was male because it had been giving her such a hard time from the moment she'd conceived him. “You're not supposed to be here yet and, in case you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of nowhere. I can't do this alone. Sorry to disappoint you, little boy, but I am not the pioneer type.

“There, you have had the worst of it,” she told her unborn son as the pain settled down a little. “Except that your father's a rat, but we'll talk about that later. Like in a week and a half,” she stressed. “Please wait a week and a half.”

She went on reasoning with the baby that seemed intent on kicking its way out now. “Please, please, PLEEEASE!” she shrieked, unable to contain the pain.

Sweat was pouring down from her brow and her tears were mingling with it, pooling along the hollow of her throat.

Devon couldn't believe that this was actually happening, that she was going to die in the middle of nowhere, giving birth.

“This is not happening now,” she yelled at her stomach. “Do you hear me? I'm your mother and I forbid you to come out!”

Another scream tore from her lips, taking a tremendous toll on her body. She was beginning to feel as if she was hallucinating.

“You're not going to listen, are you?” she asked weakly. A deep, frustrated sigh emerged from the center of her very core. “Not even born and you're already a typical male.”

The next wave of pain completely stole her breath away, making her pant.

Making her panic.

“No, no panicking. Panicking is bad,” she admonished herself, trying desperately to exercise some measure of control, putting mind over matter.

But it wasn't helping.

Nothing was helping. She was coming apart at the seams, literally, and nobody would ever know what had happened to her.

The word throbbed in her brain.

Nobody.

The few friends she had all thought that she'd run off with Jack to Texas. They'd never know that she died before she got to her destination.

And she had no family. An only child, she'd lost her father when she was seven and her mother when she was a senior in high school.

So there was no one to worry about her.

No one cared.

That was probably why she'd been such an easy target for Jack. She'd always thought of herself as an independent soul, but the truth of it was she was lonely. She'd wanted to matter to someone, just one someone. And Jack had pretended that she mattered to him.

Tall, dark and handsome with an easy grin, Jack had drifted into her life and then taken her along for the ride.

She'd been a total fool, Devon thought disparagingly.

Perspiration was beginning to soak through her clothing. She didn't know if the sun was hot, or if only she was. The end result was the same. Her clothes were damp.

"I thought your daddy loved me. Turns out he loved my meager little savings account. But we'll find him, you and I. We'll catch up to him and force him to give back all that money because you're going to need diapers—and food.

"Who am I kidding?" she said despondently. "We're not getting out of here alive. I'm sorry, Michael. Sorry to have done this to you. Sorry to have saddled you with a daddy who's a deadbeat. SORRYYYYY!"

The pain was so bad that she'd almost bitten right through her bottom lip this time around.

She was clutching and clawing at anything she could find within reach. The pain was growing stronger, threatening to swallow her up completely. As it was, she was on the verge of passing out.

This was more than she could endure.

This was—

"Ma'am?"

Devon screamed again, this time in fear. A moment ago, there'd been no one here, not even a prairie dog. Now someone—or more accurately, something—was leaning in through her rolled-down truck window, peering in and apparently talking to her.

"Oh God, now I'm seeing things," she cried, doing her best to disappear into the cracked seat cushion. "Talking horses. Maybe I've already died."

Belatedly, Cody realized that the woman in the cab of the truck was looking at Flint. She sounded as if she was delirious.

Dismounting, he tied the horse's reins to the back of the vehicle and returned to the open window. He looked in.

The woman was drenched and looked almost wild-eyed. "Are you alone?" Cody asked her.

"Not a horse, an angel," Devon realized out loud. The next moment, she closed her eyes tight as she felt yet another huge contraction coming. This one had all the signs of being even bigger than the last. "A hunky angel," she said to herself. "This is Texas, what did I EXPECCTTT?"

For a second, Cody could only stare at her in complete awe. Even wracked with pain, the dark-haired woman was beautiful. But he'd never seen a woman this pregnant before. She looked as if she was just about to pop at any moment.

"No disrespect, lady," he began politely, really wishing someone else was with him right now—Cassidy, for instance.

Women related to each other at a time like this. Or maybe Connor. Nothing rattled Connor. He could handle anything. Still, wishing didn't change anything. Cody was the only other human being out here and he was going to handle this.

He put a sympathetic expression on his face. "But what are you doing out here by yourself in your condition?"

She had no idea what possessed her. She didn't even remember doing it, but, suddenly, Devon found herself grabbing the front of the inquisitive angel's shirt and yanking on it with all the strength she had. She yanked on it so hard that she almost dragged him right in through the window.

"DYING!" she yelled back.

"So you are having contractions?" the cowboy asked.

Great, a Rhodes scholar. "What...gave it...away?" she panted, desperately trying to get away from the pain or at least ahead of it. She failed. It insisted on following her.

Cody ignored the woman's sarcastic comeback. "How far apart are your contractions?" he asked.

Devon was arching in her seat. No one had ever said it was going to hurt this badly. "Not...far...ENOUGH!"

Cody looked out into the horizon, in the direction he'd been riding when he'd heard her screams. Forever was about five, maybe seven, miles away.

"There's a clinic in town," he told her. "I can get you there fast."

But all she could do was shake her head—violently—from side to side. He'd never get her there in time. Besides, the idea of movement made everything worse.

"No...time," she panted. "Baby...coming... NOOOWWW!"

That was what he was afraid of.

Mentally, Cody rolled up his sleeves. Connor always insisted that they face all their challenges head-on, not hide behind excuses or shirk their responsibilities. This woman obviously needed him.

Whether he liked it or not, it was just as simple as that. He took a deep, fortifying breath.

"Okay, then," Cody told her. "Let's do this."

Maybe he was better than an angel, Devon thought. "You're...a...doctor?" she asked, digging her nails in the cab's seat again, bracing herself for what she now knew was coming.

"No," Cody answered honestly, "but I helped birth a few calves on the ranch before I became a sheriff's deputy."

Terrific, he was a cowboy. Just her luck. "I'm...having...a...BABYYY," she cried, arching again, "not...a...CAAALF!"

Cody did his best to give her a confident smile. "Same difference," he assured her.

No, it wasn't, she thought. Not by a long shot. "I...am...in...so...much...TROUBLE!" Devon screamed, all but biting a hole in her lip.

"I know this is scary," he told her.

"You...don't...know...the...HALF...OF...IT!" she retorted, trying her best not to give way to hysteria as she dug her nails into his forearm.

He did what he could to comfort her. "I think I can guess," he told her, then began to introduce himself. "My name is Cody, and I'll be delivering your baby today," he ended with a warm smile.

At this point, Devon was no longer worrying about whether or not she was hallucinating. If this hallucination could help her get rid of this incredible piercing pain she was experiencing through her lower half, then she was all for it.

"PLEEEEEASE!" she all but begged.

"What's your name?" Cody asked as he carefully climbed into the truck's cab, coming in from the passenger side. He gently shifted her so that she wasn't behind the steering wheel anymore.

What difference did her name make? "Are...you...filling...out...a...form?" Devon cried in disbelief.

“Just thought it’d be easier for both of us if I knew your name before I got personal,” he replied. She’d thought that she was way past embarrassment. This was another low. Devon closed her eyes. “Oh...Lord...”

But the pain ramped up, becoming so intense that she was quickly at the point where she would do anything to get beyond it. “DEVON! MY NAME’S DEVON!”

“Nice to meet you, Devon.” He braced himself for what he was about to say and do. “I’m going to have to have to lift up your skirt.”

She knew that. He didn’t have to narrate his actions, she thought in mounting agitation. She just wanted this to be over. If this baby wasn’t coming out soon, Devon was certain that she was going to die out here in the middle of nowhere.

“Say...that...to...all...the...girls?” she managed to get out without screaming at him.

“Just the pregnant ones I find in abandoned trucks on the side of the road,” he said dryly.

Feeling somewhat awkward about it, Cody slipped the woman’s underwear off, all the while telling himself that this was nothing personal, that he had to do it in order to help her bring this baby into the world.

As he drew the material off her legs, he glanced at the hand that was clutching at him. It was the woman’s left hand and he saw that there was a ring on it. Not a wedding ring, but a rather tiny engagement ring. At least, he assumed that’s what it was. The stone at the center was missing.

He couldn’t help wondering if the baby’s father was just temporarily missing from this scene—or if there was more to the story than that.

It was a story that was going to have to wait for another day, Cody told himself. From what he saw, Devon appeared to be completely dilated and ready to become a mother.

“You’re going to have to bear down and start pushing now,” he told her.

She didn’t answer him. And then he realized why. As he saw the perspiration popping out all along her brow, she ground out a bloodcurdling noise.

Cody saw that she was already complying with his instructions.

[Chapter Two](#)

Devon’s face had turned a bright shade of red. In Cody’s estimation, she was pushing too hard and too long. She had to take a break. Otherwise he had a feeling that she was going to rupture something.

“Okay, now rest,” he told her. She didn’t seem to hear him. Her eyes were screwed shut and her face was growing even redder. “Stop pushing!” Cody ordered more loudly.

Worn-out, Devon fell back against the seat, her hair damp and plastered against her brow. She was panting really hard.

“You...tell...the...cow...that...too?” she gasped.

Devon couldn’t remember ever feeling this exhausted. She’d pushed so hard, she was seeing spots dancing before her eyes.

“No. I saw this on a medical drama on TV,” he confessed. It was the summer he’d broken his leg and was laid up with nothing else to do. He’d picked up a lot of miscellaneous information that came in handy at the oddest times. Like now.

“Better...and...better,” Devon retorted. This would have been funny if she wasn’t so scared and in so much pain.

The next second, she went rigid again as another scream pierced the air. Without waiting for him to say anything, she began to bear down again.

Cody knew better than to interfere unless it was absolutely necessary, so he counted the seconds off out loud.

When she’d gone past the limit, he ordered, “Stop!”

This creature inside her—she’d ceased thinking of it as a baby—had taken charge of her body and she couldn’t control the urge to push it out.

“I...CAN’T!”

“Breathe through your mouth.” When she didn’t seem to hear him, Cody put his hands on either side of her face and made her look at him. “Listen to me, unless you want to start possibly hemorrhaging, breathe through your mouth!” he ordered. “Like this.”

And he proceeded to show her, recalling what he’d seen on that program he’d watched during his summer of forced confinement.

He could only pray he got it right.

Cody saw anger in the woman’s eyes. Anger mingled with fear, but then she began to do what he’d told her. Blowing air out of her mouth, she stopped pushing for a moment.

And then he felt her growing rigid again. Her whole body looked as if it was in the throes of another contraction.

“Another one?” he asked.

It was a rhetorical question, but she answered anyway. “YES!” she hissed as she dug deep into her core to find the energy to expel this child out of her body once and for all.

“I see the head!” Cody declared in wonder as he tried his best to encourage her.

“Isn’t...there...any...more?” she cried sharply.

She was going to die like this, she was certain of it. She could feel herself growing weaker and weaker as she seemed to float in and out of her head.

“There’s more,” he assured her. “There’s more!” This time he said it because she was pushing again. Pushing and screaming. “You’re almost there,” he encouraged.

“AAAARRRGGGHHH!”

The word shattered the atmosphere as it accompanied the emergence of the infant who was sliding out of her body.

Euphoric, exhausted and close to delirious, Devon panted hard, trying to regain her breath. Trying to hear something beyond the sound of her heart, which was pounding like mad.

“He’s not...crying,” Devon said, panicking. “Why isn’t...my...baby...crying?”

Cody didn’t answer her. He was too busy trying to get the tiny human being he was holding in his arms to do just that.

Turning the infant over so that it was facing the ground, Cody patted the baby’s back, then turned it over again to check its airway.

Quickly clearing it with his forefinger, he held the baby in one arm while unbuttoning his shirt with the other.

Devon attempted to use her elbows to prop herself up so she could see what was going on. She didn’t have enough strength left to manage it.

“What—what are you doing?” Devon demanded weakly. Why was this man getting undressed? Fresh fear vibrated through her.

Parting the tan deputy shirt, Cody pressed the baby against his bare skin, all the while still massaging the tiny back.

A tiny whimper just barely creased the air. And then there was a cry. An indignant, lusty cry, followed by another one.

Cody breathed a sigh of relief. His own heart was racing in triumph and elation.

“She’s going to be all right!” he declared.

Confusion slipped over Devon’s face. “She?” Devon questioned, unable to process the deputy’s words for a moment.

Shrugging out of his shirt one sleeve at a time, he passed the infant from one arm to the other as he did it. Once he had the shirt off, he wrapped the material around the newborn.

“Your baby’s a girl,” he told Devon. She was also the first infant he’d delivered and he was filled with a warm glow he couldn’t begin to describe.

“Michael’s a girl?” Devon asked, confused and happy at the same time. It was over. The baby was out and it was over! She realized that she was crying again.

“You might want to think about changing that name,” Cody advised. Looking down at the infant, he smiled. “This is your mama,” he told the baby as he transferred her into Devon’s arms.

Her head spinning, feeling like someone in a dream, Devon carefully accepted the swaddled infant into her arms. She felt completely drained as she held the infant against her.

She did her best to smile at her daughter. “Hi, baby.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Devon thought she saw the man who had come to her rescue pull a knife out of the sheath within his boot. A wave of new fear shimmied through her.

“What are you going to do?” she asked in a horrified whisper, unable to gather the strength for anything louder.

Having struck a match—he always kept a book of matches in his pocket, although he rarely used them—Cody was passing the blade of his knife back and forth over the flame.

“The umbilical cord is still attached,” he told her with an easy smile. “I figure it might get in the way after a bit.”

Even though it was hard for her to focus, Devon was watching his every move. Her arms weakly tightened around the baby. “Will it hurt?”

“Can’t really say for sure,” Cody told her honestly, “but I don’t think so.” He looked up at her. “Got any alcohol in the glove compartment?”

Was he looking to toast the successful birth? Now? Had she not felt so exhausted, she might have seriously considered trying to get out of the truck with her baby.

“No,” she cried.

“Too bad.” He carefully lifted the umbilical cord at the baby’s end. “It might have been good to disinfect the area, but this should be okay for now.”

And then, just like that, before she could ask Cody when he was going to do it—he’d separated the infant from the cord. She felt the remainder, no longer of any use, being expelled out of her own body.

Sweating profusely, Devon didn’t realize that she had taken in a sharp breath until she released it.

“That’s it?” she asked.

Cody nodded. “As far as I know.”

The reality of the situation and what he had just miraculously been a part of finally hit him. It took Cody a moment to get his breath back. The tiny infant nestled in the crook of Devon’s arm looked at peace, as if she had always been a part of the scene rather than just newly arrived.

“How are you feeling?” Cody asked Devon, concerned. The color seemed to be draining out of her.

“Woozy,” she answered. “Wonderful, but really, really light-headed.”

“Well, you did good,” he told her. Very carefully, he reached out and, ever so lightly, stroked the baby’s downy head. “Feels like peach fuzz,” he commented quietly with a warm smile.

“It’ll grow,” Devon told him, struggling not to slur. “My mom said... I was bald until I...was one, now it grows like...crazy.”

She sounded exhausted. He didn’t blame her. He was feeling a little depleted himself. He just had one more question for her. “What are you going to call her?” he asked.

She barely heard him at first, and then his words replayed themselves in his head.

“I don’t know,” Devon answered honestly. “I was...really sure I was having...a boy, so all I have...are...boys’ names.”

A thought hit him. It seemed almost like fate, he thought. “My mom’s name was Layla. I always thought that was a pretty name.”

“Layla,” Devon repeated weakly. “You’re...right... It...is...pretty.” She looked down at the baby in her arms. Her daughter was looking up at her with wide, wide blue eyes. A peacefulness was

descending over Devon. Her mind began to drift, but she did her best to focus. “Layla,” she repeated again to see if the name fit. It seemed to.

“You like that?” The infant made a tiny noise. It wasn’t in response, but Devon took it that way. She glanced up at the man who had been there for her when he could have just kept going. “Looks...like it’s...unanimous.”

“What were you doing out here by yourself?” he asked. If he’d been in her place, he wouldn’t have been driving around in the middle of nowhere. Where was the man who belonged to that ring? To that baby?

“Looking...for a cowboy...to deliver...my baby,” she told him weakly.

She wasn’t going to tell him, he thought. Well, that was her business, he supposed. He could respect that. Cody was just glad that he had been running late this morning. If his Jeep hadn’t decided to die, who knew what might have happened to the pregnant woman?

He glanced at her face. She appeared frighteningly pale. “You need to be checked out by a doctor,” he told her. He would have suggested it even if she looked fine, but, at the moment, she didn’t.

“You have...one of those...with you, too? In...your...pocket?” He was so resourceful, she thought, she wouldn’t have put it past him. But he’d have to have big pockets...

“Not with me,” he said wryly. “But in town, we do. We’ve got two of them, actually. They’re both at the clinic,” he told her. “Along with a couple of nurses. All really top-notch. They’re certainly not in it for the money.” He glanced over to the backseat. “Why don’t I make you and Layla more comfortable in the backseat? There’s more room to lie down there. And then I’ll drive your truck into town.”

Even if she’d wanted to protest, she didn’t have the strength to do so. Devon felt way too tired.

“Whatever...you...say.”

It was the last thing she recalled saying to the man who had come to her aid. In the next moment, everything suddenly and dramatically turned pitch-black.

She lost her hold on the world.

“Ma’am?” Cody asked uncertainly when he saw that she had shut her eyes. He got no response. “Devon?” he questioned more urgently, seeing her head nod to one side.

The next second, he quickly took the baby from her. Devon’s hold had gone lax. The baby would have fallen if he hadn’t moved fast.

“Damn,” he mumbled. “New plan, Layla. We buckle your mom in where she is in the front seat and I drive into town, holding you in one arm. That okay with you?” He added under his breath, “Good thing Connor was always on us to multitask.”

Getting out of the cab with the baby in his arms, Cody came around to the other side of the passenger seat to secure the seat belt as best he could around the unconscious woman.

He continued to talk to the baby, keeping his voice at a soothing level, the way he did when he worked with spooked horses or cattle.

“Connor’s my big brother. You’d like him. He’s kind of bossy, but he had to be. He stuck around to raise my brother and sister and me when our dad died. Our mom died some years before that. Old Connor, he always came through.” As he talked, he found that the sound of his voice was not just keeping the baby calm, but it was helping to do the same for him.

This wasn’t exactly something that was covered in his deputy’s manual. He was fairly certain that as far as his duties went, this was all brand-new ground he was crossing.

Slipping the metal tongue into the seat belt receptacle, he secured it. When he looked to make sure it would hold, that was when he became aware of the blood. There was a great deal more of it than there had been just a few minutes ago when Devon was struggling to push out her daughter.

Adrenaline spiked all through his veins. This was serious. Really serious.

He had to get this woman a doctor and fast or the baby in his arms was going to be an orphan before the sun set.

It took him a split second to make another decision. Running around to the rear of the truck, still holding the baby, Cody untied his horse. If he drove into town at a normal pace, the horse could easily keep up. But this was now a race for time. He intended to go as fast as he could. If still attached, the horse would be dragged in the truck's wake.

He spared the stallion one look and shouted a command. "Follow the truck, Flint. Follow the truck! Town, Flint. Town."

Telling his stallion the destination—a command he'd given often enough, except then it had been from the vantage point of a saddle astride the horse's back—he raced around to the driver's side and got in.

He didn't expect Flint to keep up, but, with luck, the horse would follow and reach town sometime after he did. If the horse didn't reach town by the time Cody would be able to look around for him, at least he knew that Flint wouldn't just run off aimlessly. Cody had spent long hours training the stallion. He was completely confident that, since the terrain was familiar to both of them, the horse would eventually find its way to Forever.

Climbing into the cab, still holding on to the baby who was now whimpering, Cody awkwardly buckled himself in. A quick check told him that, mercifully, Devon had left the keys in the ignition.

He started the truck, stepped on the gas and they were off.

Driving with one hand while holding the baby against him with his free arm proved to be tricky and definitely not something Cody had ever even remotely prepared for. But he didn't have the luxury of doubting that he was up to it or of looking around for an alternative method. There was no time for any of that. A woman's life—Layla's mother's life—depended on him being able to handle both the emergency and the baby.

Cody felt like he was running out of time.

He spared Devon an apprehensive glance. She was still unconscious, but he did see her chest rising and falling. At least she was still breathing.

"You hang in there, you hear me?" he ordered Devon. How could he have missed that she was still bleeding? How could he not have seen all that blood soaking through her dress? he upbraided himself. "I've never lost a mother after she gave birth to her calf and I sure as hell don't intend to start with you."

Cody stepped down harder on the gas. He could see Flint trying to keep up in the rearview mirror, but the stallion was falling behind.

"I've got a feeling that you're all this little girl has, so don't even think of checking out. You're going to live, you understand? You're going to live! We're almost there," he told her, saying anything and everything that came into his head.

If he stopped talking, he was sure he was going to lose Devon.

"The town's just over that hill. It's not all that much to look at, but Forever's got really good people. People who take you in and look out for you. They don't care what your story is—although Miss Joan'll ask. Miss Joan, that's the woman who runs the diner. She's like a mother to all of us. Acts all grumpy, but she's got a heart as big as the state. She'll make sure you're warm and fed—she did with the four of us after our dad died. Did it so that it didn't seem like charity because Connor, he wouldn't have accepted any charity. Ever," Cody said. "He's way too proud. But Miss Joan, she always found a way to get around that. She'll just melt when she sees this baby of yours, even if she tries not to show it. And she'll give you advice you'll think you don't need—but you will."

The road ahead was wide open and empty. One hand clutching the steering wheel, he allowed himself to look in Devon's direction.

She was still unconscious. Her head was moving ever so slightly because of the vibrations caused by the increased speed.

Fear clawed at him. Fear that he wasn't going to make it to the clinic in time.

“You’re not going to die, you hear me?” he told her. “I’ve never filled out a death report because of someone dying on my watch and I’m not going to start now. They’re too long. They’ve got to be at least nine, ten pages long. You can’t put me through that after I helped to deliver your baby, you hear me?”

Pushing down on the accelerator as hard as he could, he saw the outskirts of Forever rushing closer to him. It was just up ahead, within reach.

And then he breeched the city limits.

Keeping an eye out for any pedestrians and other cars, both of which were scarce, Cody tore straight through the center of Forever. The next moment, he was passing the town square, where the annual Christmas tree was always displayed.

Veering to the right and then to left, he didn’t slow down until he reached his destination.

He practically put his foot through the floor as he pushed down on the brake as hard as he could.

The tires screeched in high-pitched protest as they came to a halt inches away from the front of the clinic.

Chapter Three

As usual, the waiting room of Forever’s lone medical clinic was very close to filled. It was the only available medical facility for fifty miles and the people of Forever were grateful for that. It wasn’t all that long ago that the clinic had stood empty, its last physician having moved away thirty years ago. There was something comforting about having someone to turn to because they felt ill, or just because a husband or wife had nagged them into availing themselves of an annual—or bi-annual—exam.

Startled by the combined, unnerving sound of screeching tires and squealing brakes, everyone in the clinic’s waiting room turned in unison toward the noise. As a rule, Forever was thought of by its residents as a sleepy little town that no one outside of the area ever really noticed and where nothing of consequence ever happened.

That meant that no one, either out of boredom or a sense of competitiveness, engaged in car races or harrowing displays of one-upmanship.

So when the teeth-jarring noise pierced the morning air, every patient within the waiting room, as well as the one nurse manning the desk, Debi White Eagle, instantly glanced in the direction of the bay window. The window looked out toward the front of the clinic.

“What the hell was that?”

Rancher Steven Hollis jumped to his feet, verbalizing what everyone else in the room was thinking.

The question didn’t go unanswered for more than a couple of quick beats. Almost immediately thereafter, the roomful of patients witnessed what all would have readily agreed was a very unlikely sight: a bare-chested Deputy Cody McCullough bursting into the clinic with what appeared to be a newborn baby in his arms. The baby was wrapped in his uniform shirt.

Debi, a surgical nurse by vocation as well as one of the most recent additions to Forever’s population, vacated her desk and rushed over to Cody.

“What happened?” she asked.

Cody quickly transferred Layla into her arms. “The baby’s mother is in the truck. She’s lost a lot of blood and I need help.”

“Holly!” Debi yelled over her shoulder toward the rear of the clinic. “We need a doctor out here, STAT!”

It was an order she was accustomed to issuing when she worked at the hospital in Chicago. Here, however, the word left more than one of the patients looking at the others in bewilderment.

Grabbing the fresh lab coat she’d brought in for one of the doctors, Debi quickly removed Cody’s shirt from around the tiny body and rewrapped the newborn in the lab coat. Acting in the interest of practicality, not to mention cleanliness, she figured the doctor would forgive her.

“Here,” she said, giving Cody back his shirt. “You don’t want to be out of uniform, Deputy.”

With that, Debi immediately turned toward the most maternal patient available to her, Anita Moretti, who had five children and a brood of grandchildren of her own. “Anita, hold the baby,” she requested, then looked at Cody. “Where’s the mother?”

“Out here.” He threw the words over his shoulder as, shrugging back into his shirt, he ran outside, secretly almost afraid of what he would see once he opened the truck’s passenger door.

“Where is she?”

The question came from Dan Davenport, the doctor who had initially reopened the clinic and who was currently in charge of it as well as the care of the citizens of Forever.

Cody was already at the truck. He threw open the passenger door and unbuckled the seat belt that was the only thing holding Devon in place and semiupright.

As carefully as he could, he lifted Devon out of the vehicle. The lower half of her dress was soaked with her blood.

Dan attempted to take the unconscious woman from him, but Cody shook his head. He wasn’t about to let her go. “No, I’ve got her.”

“This way,” Dan said needlessly as he and Debi went back into the clinic ahead of Cody. “What happened?” Dan asked. “Did you find her this way?”

More than a dozen set of eyes looked in their direction as Cody carried the woman in.

“No, she was conscious and screaming when I found her,” Cody answered, giving no indication that he even saw the other people in the room.

“Was she still in labor or had she given birth already?” Dan asked, leading the way to the room where he and his partner, Dr. Alisha Cordell-Murphy, performed both the simple surgeries and the ones that were classified as emergencies.

“As far as I could see, she had just started,” Cody told him, aware that every word was being greedily absorbed by all the people in the waiting room. “I tried to help her. When she gave birth, I thought she’d be okay,” Cody went on. “I didn’t realize...” His voice drifted off helplessly.

It was clear to Dan by Cody’s tone that he felt guilty that the situation had somehow devolved to this point.

“Not your fault,” Dan told him, indicating the freshly prepared gurney in the room. “People don’t realize that there are a lot of unforeseeable elements that can go wrong as a baby’s being born.”

“What have we got here?” Alisha Cordell-Murphy asked, peering into the room in response to Holly’s summons. Her eyes widened when she saw the unconscious woman. “Omgod, who is she?” she asked, looking from Dan to the man who was covered in the woman’s blood. She had only been in Forever a little over a year now, but she was acquainted—at least by sight—with everyone who lived within the area. This one was definitely not anyone she knew.

“Cody found her and brought her in,” Dan answered.

Cody gave her the highlights. “Her truck was pulled over on the side of the road. I wouldn’t have even seen it if she hadn’t screamed,” he confessed.

“I need plasma,” Dan declared. “It looks like she’s lost more blood than she can afford to.”

Debi, who had come into the room with them, was cutting away the woman’s clothing, preparing to put a sterile gown on her. Holly, who had already brought in the plasma, was now wordlessly preparing what she assumed the doctors were going to need to stop the hemorrhaging as well as to get a transfusion going.

Cody took a step back, and then another, giving everyone else there room to work. He felt as if he was just in the way.

“I’ll just wait outside,” he said to no one in particular as he took another step back.

Dan looked up, sparing him a fraction of a moment. “Don’t go too far away. I’ve got a few more questions you might be able to answer.”

“I don’t know more than I just told you, but sure, I’ll just be in the waiting room,” Cody told the doctor, but he knew he was talking to himself. Everyone else in the room was busy, doing their best to try to save the woman’s life.

Concerned and more than a little agitated, Cody slipped out.

The minute he was back in the waiting room, a barrage of questions rose all around him, coming from all different directions.

“You know her?”

“Where’d you find her?”

“Is this her baby?”

“Where’s the father?”

There were more, all mingling with one another until it was just a huge wall of sound.

“Everyone, hush,” Anita Moretti scolded, raising her voice to be heard above the rest. She was still holding the baby and rocking her as she patted the baby’s bottom, doing her best to soothe the infant the way she had with each one of her children and grandchildren in turn. “Can’t you people see that he’s been through a lot, too?” Turning toward Cody, Mrs. Moretti smiled at him, the perennial, protective mother. “Don’t pay them any mind, Cody. They’re just looking for something exciting to talk about over dinner tonight. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.”

“There’s not much to talk about,” Cody told her, taking a seat and glancing around at the others. He was grateful for the woman’s concern, but he was also very familiar with and understood a small-town mentality, especially since he’d become one of Sheriff Rick Santiago’s deputies. “I was running late and only noticed the truck on the side of the road when I heard screams coming from it.”

“She was on the side of the road?” Wade Hollister, one of the patients, asked.

Cody humored the man, despite the fact that he felt the answer was self-evident. “Well, she was in labor so I don’t think she really felt like she was able to do any driving.”

Rusty Saunders scratched his head. “Hell, what was she doing out there in her condition, anyway?”

Cody laughed quietly as he eased Layla out of Mrs. Moretti’s arms. The woman looked at him skeptically, and then smiled and surrendered her precious package.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask her,” he told Rusty. “I was kind of busy at the time. We both were.”

To underscore his point, he smiled at the baby in his arms.

“You delivered that?” Nathan McLane asked Cody. He was as close as possible to a permanent occupant at the Murphy brothers’ saloon. His weathered expression was creased with awe.

Cody had never been one to embellish on a story or give himself credit if he could avoid it. He shrugged now. “I was just there to catch her. She more or less delivered herself,” he told Nathan and the rest of the waiting-room occupants.

Travis Wakefield, ever the practical man, was obviously trying to work out the logistics to Cody’s story. He’d gone to the window to look again at the truck Cody had driven over.

“You leave your truck back there?” he asked. “Cause the one out there sure isn’t yours.”

That was when Cody suddenly remembered. He looked up. “My horse.”

“What about Flint?” Red Yakima asked, getting up and moving closer to Cody.

Cody had risen to his feet as well and now walked over to the bay window, scanning as much of the area as he could make out from his present vantage point. Flint was nowhere in sight.

“I couldn’t tie him to the back of the truck because I had to drive fast,” he told Red. “I told him to follow me.”

“You ‘told’ him to follow,” Rosie Ortiz, one of the occupants in the waiting room, repeated skeptically. “And what, he said, ‘Sure?’”

“Horses are smarter than most people,” Red tonelessly informed the woman. He turned his attention back to Cody. “You want me to go out and see if I can find him for you?” the man offered.

Cody turned the matter over in his head. He could either take the man up on his offer or turn the infant back over to Mrs. Moretti—and he did want to hang around to make sure Devon pulled through. There was a chance that she might not, although he really didn't want to entertain that idea for the baby's sake.

He had no idea why, but he felt that if he remained here, she wouldn't die. He knew he was being superstitious, but everyone around here had some superstition they clung to. His was that if he walked out, the door would be left open for bad things to transpire.

Cody looked at the weathered ranch hand he had known for most of his life. "I'd appreciate that, Red."

"Don't mention it," the man told him, waving a dismissive hand. "I'll stop at the sheriff's office and tell them you didn't fall into a ditch or off the side of the cliff, put Rick's mind at ease," Red added matter-of-factly.

"I owe you."

Red smiled for the first time. "Hey, buy me a beer next time we're at the saloon together and we'll call it even."

"You got it," Cody agreed, although in his opinion it didn't really even begin to repay the man for taking the trouble to track Flint down.

Red walked out of the clinic.

Less than a minute later, Holly came out, an apologetic expression on her face. She looked around the waiting room at the patients.

"It's going to be a while, I'm afraid," she told them. Braced for complaints, she was surprised when none were voiced. "The doctors have got their hands full. Your names are all on the sign-in sheet. If you'd like to come back tomorrow, you'll be seen in the order that you arrived today," she said, once again looking around the room, waiting for some sort of descent or grumbling.

"How long is 'a while'?" Oral Hanson wanted to know, obviously weighing his options.

Holly answered honestly. "At least a couple of hours." Honesty forced her to add, "Maybe more."

The man shrugged his wide shoulder. "Got nothin' I'm doing anyway, not since my boys took over the ranch. Seems they're always telling me to 'go take a load off' anyway, so I might as well do that and stay put." Smiling at the baby in Cody's arms, he added, "I'd like to find out if the little one's mama pulls through."

Most of the other patients were not of the same mind as Oral. They had busy lives to get back to, so they decided to leave the clinic and return the next day as suggested.

But a few, including Mrs. Moretti, remained. When Cody looked at the older woman quizzically, Mrs. Moretti said, "I thought maybe I'd stick around, give you a little help if you need it. You'll want to have your hands free if they call you back in there." Lowering her voice, she added, "You know, just in case."

It was obvious to Cody that Mrs. Moretti had already convinced herself that there was more going on between him and the woman he'd found today.

Anita Moretti wasn't a gossip by any stretch of the imagination, but the woman did enjoy a good story, both hearing one and, occasionally, passing one along. He couldn't fault her for being human, even though what he knew she was thinking was entirely a fabrication.

And Cody knew better than to protest or try to set the woman straight. Saying anything to the contrary would only get him more deeply entrenched. Mrs. Moretti would go on believing what she chose to believe.

Connor had always maintained that when you lost control of the situation, the best thing to do was to politely say "thank you" and then back away as quickly as possible.

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Moretti," Cody told the woman.

Because he was agitated and didn't know what to do with himself, Cody began to walk the floor. Layla seemed to enjoy the rhythmic movements and before long obligingly dozed off.

Making no secret of the fact that she was watching him, Mrs. Moretti smiled and gave him the thumbs-up. "You're a natural," she told Cody, beaming.

"I'm not doing anything but walking," Cody pointed out.

He heard the door behind him opening. Turning, he was about to tell whomever had come in that service was temporarily on hold until further notice.

But he didn't have to say anything. It wasn't a new patient. Red had returned to the clinic.

"Couldn't find Flint?" Cody asked the older man. Red hadn't been gone very long, but, then, Cody had no right to expect him to scour the area. After all, Flint belonged to him, not Red.

"Didn't really have to look," Red replied. "That is one loyal stallion you've got yourself there, McCullough. Saw him coming right into the outskirts of town, as pretty as you please, minding his own business like he didn't have a care in the world and was just out for a morning stroll. Had to gentle him a little before I tied him to the hitching post down the street, but that's to be expected. He's waiting for you there," the ranch hand informed him.

Well, that was a relief, Cody thought. He hadn't realized he was so concerned until just this moment. He supposed this morning's events had stretched his nerves taut to the very limit.

"I appreciate it," Cody told the man.

"Yeah, yeah," Red dismissed the words of gratitude. "I said a beer would square us, remember? Now I'll go tell the sheriff you're safe and sound. See you around, McCullough," he told Cody.

Inclining his head in a show of respect, Red nodded at Mrs. Moretti just before he left the clinic.

Chapter Four

As Cody tried to decide his next move, the infant he was holding against him began to make a noise he couldn't quite make out. It didn't exactly sound like a whimper or a cry, but the baby was definitely voicing some sort of discontent.

In a few seconds, he had his answer. The infant had turned her head into his chest and appeared to be rooting around, her tiny lips making noises as she attempted to suck on his shirt.

"Looks like she's hungry," Mrs. Moretti told him helpfully. "She's trying to get her sustenance out of your shirt."

"Sorry, Layla, I'm afraid you're out of luck there," Cody told the baby, very gently separating the tiny mouth from his shirt.

At a temporary loss as to what to do, he looked at Mrs. Moretti for help.

The older woman shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't have anything for her. I stopped carrying formula with me several years ago. All my grandchildren are older than she is. But let me see if I can get one of the nurses to find something for her."

Rising heavily to her feet, the woman approached the registration desk and looked over it in hopes of seeing someone coming out of the impromptu operating room. She didn't, but that didn't stop her.

Making her way around the desk, Mrs. Moretti continued to the rear of the clinic. The doors to four of the exam rooms were wide open. Mrs. Moretti zeroed in on the one that was closed. When Melissa, one of her granddaughters, had needed stitches for the gash she'd gotten on her forehead thanks to a game of hide-and-seek that had gone wrong, she'd been taken into that room.

Knocking on the door, Mrs. Moretti raised her voice. "Sorry to bother you, but the baby out here seems to be hungry. Is there any formula in the clinic?" she asked politely.

After a moment the door opened in response to Mrs. Moretti's question. Holly was in the doorway.

"You didn't have to come out, dear. You could have just told me where the formula's kept and I would have gotten it," the woman said to Holly.

If given a choice, Mrs. Moretti always preferred being self-sufficient instead of dependent on the help of others.

“It’s just easier this way,” Holly told the woman. Besides, the doctors really didn’t want to have civilians rooting through their supplies. However, there was no polite way to say that to Mrs. Moretti, so she let that pass. “How’s everyone out here?” she asked as she took the woman to the supply cabinet in the last exam room.

There were several bottles of formula on the bottom shelf. Taking one, Holly decided to look in on the baby before heating the formula up.

“Mostly gone,” Mrs. Moretti told her matter-of-factly, still following behind her. “Except for a couple of us. And, of course, Cody and the baby. Poor little thing’s hungry.” She smiled sympathetically. “I guess being born was hard work for her.”

“I guess so,” Holly agreed. She walked out into the waiting room. “How’s our girl?” she asked Cody.

He was rocking the baby back and forth in an attempt to soothe her. “Okay, I think.” And then he flushed. “I’ve got more experience with newborn calves than humans.”

It amazed Holly how someone who looked the way Cody McCullough did—broad-shouldered, athletic with a soft, sexy smile and soul-melting blue eyes—could be so humble.

“You’re doing fine, Cody,” she assured him. “I’ll just go and warm up this formula for you.” Holly paused for a moment, needing to ask him a question just to be sure. “You all right with feeding it to her?”

Cody nodded, adding, “Not much different than with a calf, right?”

She’d never heard it put quite that way before. She supposed that there were similarities. “As long as you make sure you don’t try to get her to stand up while she’s doing it.”

Cody laughed. “I think I’ve already figured that part out.”

* * *

HOLLY RETURNED WITHIN MINUTES, the small bottle of formula warmed and ready to be given to the hungry infant. “There you go,” she said, handing Cody the bottle.

She was about to coach him through it, but saw that she needn’t have worried. Cody was doing just fine with feeding the baby.

Instead, she gave him an encouraging smile. Still, she had to admit to herself that there was a little concern on her part.

“You’re sure you’ll be all right out here?” she asked him.

“He’ll be fine,” Mrs. Moretti told the nurse, answering for Cody. “I’ll stay on just in case,” she volunteered.

Cody looked at the older woman as he fed Layla. “You sure? It might be a long wait to see one of the doctors, when they’re finally free.”

It was becoming obvious that the delay would be even longer than anticipated. “I can come back for that tomorrow, but I’ll stay here with you as long as you feel I might be of some help.”

“I don’t want to keep you, Mrs. Moretti,” Cody told her.

Mrs. Moretti laughed. “It’s been a long time since I was a kept woman,” she told him with a wink that both surprised and amused him. There was still a little bit of the young flirt within the older matron. And then she waved her hand, dismissing his protest. “Don’t give it another thought.”

Feeling that everything was under control, Holly told them, “I’d better be getting back in there.”

A flash of anxiety came out of nowhere, surprising Cody. “How is she doing?” he asked.

“Better than when you first brought her in.” That was all Holly felt comfortable saying at this point. She’d learned that it was better to say too little than too much.

With that, the young nurse left the waiting room and hurried back to the operating room.

Mrs. Moretti sensed Cody’s concern.

“She’ll be fine,” she assured Cody, patting his hand in the same soothing fashion she’d employed with all of her own children. “They don’t come any better than Dr. Dan and Dr. Alisha,” the grandmother of six told him. “Those two are the best thing that ever happened to this little town,” she said with conviction.

* * *

HALF AN HOUR PASSED. Layla finished the formula that Holly had brought out for her. Though he strained his ears, Cody couldn’t discern anything coming from the rear of the clinic. He didn’t hear any voices, nor did he hear a door being opened.

This “operation” was going on much too long, he thought. Something was very wrong.

As if reading his mind, Mrs. Moretti leaned forward. Her eyes meeting his, she told him, “Remember, no news is good news.”

“Yeah,” he murmured without conviction.

Cody knew that the woman meant well, but the old saying didn’t really comfort him at this point. He’d always been the kind of person who met everything head-on. He didn’t have that option here. All he could do was wait and the inactivity was making him fidget inwardly.

“Well, I guess I’ll come back tomorrow,” Oral Hanson suddenly announced to the room, even though Cody and Mrs. Moretti were the only two occupants left.

After getting up, the man crossed over and paused in front of Cody. He looked down at the baby and allowed a nostalgic expression to pass over his face.

“Brings back memories,” he explained, referring to when his children had been that small. “You hang in there, Cody, you hear?”

Cody merely nodded. There wasn’t anything else that he could do, really.

“You’re doing a good thing,” Oral said as he left the clinic.

“He’s right, you know,” Mrs. Moretti told Cody, adding her voice to the sentiment.

He was really beginning to feel guilty having the woman remain here with him.

“Mrs. Moretti, you don’t have to stay any longer,” he told her. “You’ve got a family to get back to.”

He knew that because of extenuating circumstances, Mrs. Moretti was helping to raise two of her younger grandchildren. It wasn’t fair to the woman to make her stay on his account. After all, it wasn’t as if he was helpless.

But Mrs. Moretti shook her head. “I don’t feel right about leaving you alone.”

“Two doctors and two nurses is not ‘alone,’ Mrs. Moretti,” he reminded her. “All I have to do is raise my voice and one of them is bound to come out. Really, go home to your family,” he urged, then added, “Layla and I will be fine. Really.”

Mrs. Moretti’s dark eyes crinkled as she smiled at the sleeping infant in his arms. “Such a lovely name,” she told him. “That was your mama’s name, wasn’t it?” she asked. Cody nodded in response. “All right,” the older woman said with a resigned sigh as she rose to her feet. “I guess they’ll be wondering what happened to me if I don’t get home soon.” Mrs. Moretti spared him one last encouraging pat on the shoulder. “Don’t give up hope, Cody.”

“No, ma’am, I won’t,” he promised her.

Nodding her head, Mrs. Moretti picked up her oversize purse and finally made her way out of the clinic.

“Looks like it’s just you and me now,” Cody whispered to the baby once the door had closed behind Mrs. Moretti.

“And then,” he amended as he heard the door to the clinic opening again, “maybe not.” Raising his voice so that the woman would turn around, Cody said, “Mrs. Moretti, really, it’s okay. Go home.”

“I’m not Mrs. Moretti and I’m not going home, at least not until I find out just what the hell is going on here.”

Surprised, holding the baby pressed against his chest, Cody shifted around in his seat to see Connor walking into the clinic.

Anyone looking at them would have instantly known that Cody and Connor were brothers, but Connor, three years older and two inches taller, was leaner and more weathered-looking than Cody. And while they both had the same blue eyes, Connor's hair was a darker shade of blond than Cody's.

"Where did you get that?" Connor asked, nodding at the baby as he took a seat next to his brother.

"Mrs. Abernathy was having a yard sale," Cody cracked. "I couldn't help myself."

"I'll let that go," Connor told him. He studied his brother for a moment. "I hear that you've had a hard morning."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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