

A photograph of a man wearing a grey cowboy hat and a white t-shirt, sitting on a bed. He is holding two young children. The child on the left is wearing a white onesie with pink hearts. The child on the right is wearing a blue patterned onesie. The man is looking down at the children with a gentle expression. In the top left corner, there is a dark circular badge with a dotted border containing the text '36 HOURS' in green and white.

36
HOURS

OHH BABY, BABY

DIANA K. WHITNEY

Diana Whitney
Ooh Baby, Baby

Содержание

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As a devastating summer storm hits Grand Springs, Colorado, the next thirty-six hours will change the town and its residents forever...

In the midst of a blackout and flooded roads, cowboy Travis Stockwell delivers Peggy Saxon's two precious babies in the back of his cab. To Travis's own surprise, the determined single mother's desire to provide a better life for her children restores his belief in family.

Travis becomes determined to do what's best for Peggy and the twins even as he falls in love with them. But what if the best thing for them is the stable life he can't provide? Now the footloose cowboy has to make a choice—one that could change his life forever.

Book 3 of the 36 Hours series. Don't miss Book 4: A woman has visions of murder—but who will believe her in *For Her Eyes Only* by New York Times bestselling author Sharon Sala.

Ooh Baby, Baby

Diana K. Whitney



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Chapter One

Blackness gripped her like a fist. Outside, the wind howled, and rain pummeled the thin windowpanes. Thunder rumbled. Lightning cracked.

Inside, the silence of her heart was deafening. Terrifying. And so very, very lonely.

Peggy Saxon shifted on the worn sofa to massage the small of her back. It didn't help. The nagging throb simply wouldn't go away. She heaved her pregnant bulk sideways, seeking a semicomfortable position. The threadbare sofa arm poked her ribs.

Muttering, Peggy used a strategically tucked throw pillow to pad the exposed wood, then grabbed the tiny battery-powered radio from a nearby table. She needed something to drown out the roaring storm, the inner silence of desolation. She needed music. Voices. Even crackling white noise would be a distraction from desperate sadness, from secret fear.

On the radio, a tight male voice announced new road closures due to mud slides. Phone lines were hit and miss, but the power company, having been flooded out by a massive surge of murky goo, still had no estimate as to when electricity would be restored. A state of emergency had been declared.

It was five o'clock in the morning. There was no light. No heat. The lovely mountain hamlet of Grand Springs, Colorado,

was under siege. And Peggy Saxon was alone.

* * *

“Dispatch to unit six. Travis...are you there?”

Travis Stockwell ducked into the cab, knocked his hat off on the door frame and swore as his prized Stetson landed in the mud. He scooped it up, muttered and wiped the brim with a paisley handkerchief.

The raspy female voice boomed with familiar agitation. “Unit six, respond. Respond, dadgummit, or I’ll be tossing out those fancy boots of yours and renting your room to the highest bidder.”

“Aw, for crying out loud.” Travis tossed the wet Stetson on the cab’s front passenger seat, poked the soiled handkerchief back into his pocket, which was already crammed with a soggy pack of pumpkin seeds, and snatched up the microphone. “All right, already. This is unit six, soaking wet, so hungry I could chew cardboard, and so danged tired I don’t give a fat flying fig what you do with that flea-bitten flophouse.”

A long-suffering sigh crackled over the line. “Where’n Sam Hill are you?”

Travis squinted through the splattered windshield toward a weary group of guardsmen hoisting the gear he’d just unloaded. “Near as I can figure, about a half mile from the cutoff road to Mountain Meadows campground. I just dropped off the evacuation troop.”

“What’s your ETA?”

“I dunno. Thirty minutes, maybe sooner if the traffic lights are back on line.”

“They’re not. The whole town is blacked out. Oh, and don’t take Orchard Road back into town.”

“Mud slide?”

“Big one. Looks like it might have taken a couple cars.”

Travis swore, slapped the steering wheel. “Maybe I should head that way to see if I can help.”

The microphone crackled. “Jimmy’s already en route with a group of volunteers and a trunk full of shovels. I need you back in town. Every emergency vehicle in the area is tied up. City hall is scrambling for rescue transport.”

“On my way,” Travis said, and flipped the ignition with his free hand. “Unit six out.”

“Travis, keep this radio on. Cell service is going in and out, so this is the only way I can always reach you”

“Yeah, okay.”

“You be careful, hear?”

“I will, sis.” With that, he dropped the mike, shifted into gear and drove into the blinding rain.

* * *

Light blasted away blackness. The dingy duplex shuddered through thunder, screeched as if in pain.

Peggy gasped, suddenly awake, clutched her distended belly and struggled to her feet. An eerie energy crawled up her arms, lifting the fine hairs. Another flash, another roar. She covered

her ears, bit her lip, may have cried out, but the sound was swallowed by a deafening crack and the reverberating crash of splintered lumber. Her scalp tingled, felt singed.

Peggy couldn't hear the scream but felt it explode from her parched throat. She wrapped her arms over her head, curled forward to protect the precious life in her womb. The house was collapsing around her. She knew it. She felt it. She heard the agonized shriek of fractured wood, of ripped nails. The floor rumbled beneath her feet.

Then the rumbling softened into silence.

She heard a thin sob, then realized it had come from her. Opening her eyes, she blinked into the darkness, seeing nothing but familiar shadows of doorways and lumpy furniture. Now, all she heard was the rain. The pounding, incessant rain.

Shaking violently, Peggy felt around the sofa cushions until her fingers brushed smooth metal, the flashlight that had been beside her throughout the long, black night. Her hand quivered around it, her thumb spasmed against the protruding switch. A beam of brilliant reassurance bounced from a wall.

She swept the light around the room, across the ceiling and over the floor, stopping briefly on the wall clock, which read eight o'clock. Everything was as it should be. No giant cracks, no collapsing timbers. The pocket radio had fallen under the coffee table, but the sparsely furnished room was otherwise tidy.

Peggy swept the light toward the front door, then veered left to aim the beam through the window and check the front porch

—or rather, what was left of it.

The dilapidated decking had been crushed by an enormous pine that had once shaded the south side of the duplex and was now wedged against her front door. Judging by the angle at which the tree had fallen, she suspected that the other half of the duplex had borne the brunt of the damage. Fortunately, the unit was vacant, which meant her nearest neighbor was a quarter mile away.

Swallowing a sour surge of panic, Peggy told herself the damage probably wasn't as bad as it looked. Besides, the storm would be over soon. It had to be. The town couldn't take much more.

Peggy couldn't take much more.

She wiped her forehead, mildly surprised as a coating of icy fear came away on her fingertips. No shame in that. It was okay to be scared. As long as you didn't show it, didn't provide a weakness to target. Fear was a private matter, a respected adversary to be acknowledged, then controlled and ultimately defeated.

Peggy understood the process intimately. She'd fought fear all her life. She'd always won. Always.

Until now.

The grinding pain ripped her belly like a buzz saw, doubling her over. She had no breath to cry out, but her mind screamed for her. Fear surged victorious. She was in labor. She was terrified.

And she was alone.

* * *

Travis jammed the brakes, cursing. The cab fishtailed to a stop. In front of him, an impatient line of vehicles bunched behind an overturned big rig blocking both lanes of traffic. He sighed, tugged his hat down to his eyebrows and reached for the microphone.

“Unit six to dispatch.” When there was no immediate response, he gave the mike button an impatient tap. “Aw, hell, Sue Anne, quit sucking soda and get on the dangd radio. I don’t have all day.”

Actually, it appeared that he did have all day. That eighteen-wheeler wasn’t going anywhere on its own, and Travis suspected it would be hours before the emergency team could spring loose the heavy-duty equipment needed to clear the roadway. At least the rain had eased to a dull drizzle, and it was just now becoming light—even though dawn broke hours ago.

The microphone emitted a juicy hiss. “Dang you, Travis, you are such a brat.”

“Caught you, didn’t I? You know, sis, there’s a twelve-step program for people who can’t control their cola. You ought to look into it.” He held the transmission button down so he didn’t have to listen to a sputtered reply, and squinted through the smeared windshield. “The interstate transition is blocked by a semi. I might be able to backtrack toward Virginia Road, but it’ll add a forty-five to my ETA.”

When he finally remembered to release the mike switch, Sue

Anne was in midsentence. "About five miles from your location."

He frowned. "Say again?"

"We have an emergency relay from 911 dispatch. Pickup is at 5662 Rourke Way."

Travis was familiar with the street, a rutted two-lane cutting a rural swath around the outskirts of town. He jotted the address on a scratch pad affixed to the dash. "I'll be there in ten."

He hung a U-turn, stomped the accelerator and sped away.

* * *

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Short, shallow breaths. Pant like a dog. That's what the book said, wasn't it? Or maybe it said to take a deep breath and hold it. Peggy couldn't remember. It had been more than three hours since her first pain, and suddenly, dear Lord, she couldn't remember.

If only she'd taken the Lamaze classes her doctor had suggested. But she hadn't, because the classes were geared for couples and she'd been too embarrassed to go alone. So she'd bought a handbook on childbirth, read it cover to cover and thought she was prepared.

Only now she couldn't remember what the book said, what she was supposed to do.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Peggy willed herself to be calm and to focus on what she'd learned. Short breaths. Yes, she was sure now. Short breaths during labor, deep breaths during crowning, when it was time to push.

To push.

Oh, God.

The contraction eased, allowing panic to bubble like bad beer. It was too soon, Peggy thought frantically. Too soon. She wasn't due for three weeks. She wasn't ready to give birth, not ready at all.

Her heart raced, pumping icy perspiration out of every pore. She licked her lips. They were rough, cracked. Dry as dirt.

The doctor was waiting at the hospital. When she'd phoned a few hours ago, he'd told her that everything would be all right. And she wanted to believe him. She did believe him.

The image of kind blue eyes and a rumpled, grandfatherly smile warmed her heart. Dr. Dowling had been good to her. He understood how difficult things had been since Clyde left, and had gone out of his way to spend extra time during her appointments, time to calm, to soothe her. Peggy longed for that comfort now, for the gentle touch of proficient hands, the resonant, parental voice that made her feel safe and secure.

He was waiting for her. At the hospital. Now.

Where the hell was that cab?

A glance at the front window confirmed that morning had indeed come. Cold, wet. Gray. The fallen tree loomed enormous, its massive trunk blocking all but a bleak sliver of gloomy sky.

The thought occurred to her that there was no way for her to get out through the front door, no way for anyone else to get in. But Peggy couldn't worry about that now, because a viselike

tightness was working its way from the base of her spine to around her belly.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

The pain swelled, twisted, sliced like a dull blade. Tears sprang to her eyes. She curled forward, wanting to scream, but her lungs were in spasm.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Peggy gritted her teeth, dug her fingers into the sofa cushions and imagined a hundred innovative ways for the ex-husband who'd abandoned her to die ugly.

* * *

Travis was horrified. He pulled onto the dirt shoulder behind a clunky old sedan and fervently hoped he was at the wrong address. Even in the gray, rain-dark pall he could see that anyone left inside that crushed structure needed an ambulance, not a cab.

He exited the checkered taxi and headed toward the duplex, veering around a massive root ball jutting from soaked earth. Closer examination revealed that except for the porch, now a splintered nest of rubble under the toppled tree, the dwelling itself seemed to be relatively unscathed.

Shading his eyes, Travis squinted between blowing pine boughs and saw a snapped porch beam had crushed one of the unit's two doors. The other door was undamaged, but completely blocked by the tree trunk, which he judged to be about four feet in diameter.

He cupped his mouth and shouted, "Conway Cab. Anyone in

there?" A movement behind one of the windows caught his eye. He shifted toward the unit on the left, thought he saw a shadow inside the room. Before he could focus, the shadow seemed to collapse, melt in upon itself and was gone.

Shifting, Travis grabbed a sturdy limb and hoisted himself up onto the fallen trunk, hoping for a better look, but gray light threw his own reflection back at him, obscuring his view inside. A windblown whip of pine needles stung his face. He swatted at it, lost his grip and dropped back to the mucky ground.

The sky darkened again. Clouds swirled, boiled black. The wind whistled a warning and began to howl.

Travis swore and pulled up his jacket collar until wet denim chafed his earlobes. He longed for warmth, the arid desert heat, the soft crush of dry sawdust beneath his boots. Cheering crowds. Bellowing livestock. Rawhide rasping his palms. The pungent smell of animalistic power, of sweating victory and bloody defeat.

Ah, he missed it. Just a few more weeks and he'd be back on the circuit, back where he belonged. Travis could hardly wait.

Ducking into the wind, he gripped the brim of his hat and circled back around the giant root ball toward the rear of the old duplex. A five-foot wooden fence creaked against the wind.

"Great," he muttered, automatically wrapping a protective arm around his taped ribs. At the moment, climbing a fence didn't much appeal to him, but there didn't seem to be a whole bunch of options. A quick glance around confirmed nothing but

a few vacant lots backing up to a conifer forest. No help there.

Issuing a pained sigh, he hoisted himself up and over, wincing as he dropped into the yard. He straightened slowly, waiting for the pain to ease. Doc had warned him that ribs fractured that badly were slow to heal. Slow? Hell, that wasn't the half of it. A snail could've crawled to Texas by the time Travis had mended enough to take a decent breath. He was better now. Not great, but better.

Travis straightened and stretched out the kinks. After a quick glance around the barren square of fenced grass, he strode to the back door of the first duplex, peered through the mullioned window and tapped on the glass.

There was no response, but Travis focused through the galley-style kitchen into the living room of the duplex. There were no lights inside, only slight illumination from a sliver of daylight breaking through the partially blocked front window. He saw the outline of a sofa, the triangular shadow of a lampshade and a table of some kind. His gaze narrowed, focusing on the floor beside the table. Something was heaped there, a crumpled silhouette that could have been a wadded blanket or a bundle of laundry.

But the bundle was moving. The crumpled silhouette was a person. A person in trouble.

Travis frantically rattled the knob. It was locked, so he took a step back and kicked the door in. In less than a heartbeat, he knelt beside a woman who was curled on her side, making strange

hissing sounds through her teeth.

He laid a tentative hand on her shoulder. “Ma’am?”

She opened her eyes, huge pools of emerald terror in a colorless face.

Travis’s breath backed up his throat. “It’s all right,” he muttered with considerably more confidence than he felt. “You’re going to be fine, ma’am, just fine.”

Her eyes widened, then squinched shut. To his shock, she formed her lips into an O and began to pant. He blinked, wondering why she would be overly warm when the room was colder than a barn in winter. For some odd reason, he noticed the bulge of her abdomen long before the reason for it struck him. When it did, he danged near went into shock.

“Oh, no,” he murmured, utterly transfixed by the realization. “No, no, ma’am, you can’t do this...not now. Please, lady—”

Her cheeks flexed with each quick puff.

“Oh, Lordy—”

Puff, puff, puff.

“Ma’am, please stop. This just really isn’t a good time—”

A shudder jittered through her body, then she suddenly went limp as a squashed snake and her breath slid out with a long, slow hiss.

Travis sat back on his boot heels, wiped his forehead. “Yes’m, that’s better. Much obliged.”

She looked up, her eyes bright with moisture. “What are you doing here?”

“Conway Cab Company, ma’am.” He licked his lips. “You did call for a cab, didn’t you? Oh, well, sure, sure you did, but maybe, ah—” he swallowed hard “—maybe under the circumstances, an ambulance would be a better choice.”

Her gaze narrowed. “Golly, what a swell idea.”

He flinched, feeling stupid. Every ambulance in town was tied up on emergency duty, which was why he’d been called out in the first place. “I guess you’ve already tried that.”

“I guess I have, cowboy.”

Flustered and completely out of his element, Travis blurted, “Can’t you put this off for a while? I mean, this is a really, really bad time to have a baby . . .” His voice trailed away as her eyes thinned into mean little slits. Obviously she was well aware of that fact and didn’t appreciate the reminder. He cleared his throat. “Okay, sure, no problem. We’ll, ah, just mosey on over to the hospital and ah—ma’am?”

As another contraction tightened, she bit her lip, made a peculiar vibrating sound deep in her throat, then started to pant again. She bent like a safety pin. Beads of sweat slicked her face. Her skin was white as death.

Travis was beside himself. Flustered and completely out of his element, he didn’t have a clue what to do. Instinctively reaching out, he patted her shoulder, then let out a yelp as she snatched up his hand and damned near crushed every bone in it. Since there was no way short of amputation to pry himself out of her spasmed grasp, he gritted his teeth and waited for her pain—and

his—to pass.

Several long seconds later, she released him and fell back exhausted. Her hand dropped limply onto the floor, and she issued a soft, guttural moan that touched Travis to the core.

He flexed his fingers, grateful that they still moved, then wiped a gentle thumb over her delicate brow that was the copper-gold color of a summer sunset. “Can I get you a glass of water? Maybe a wet cloth to, you know, cool you down some?”

A flash of pink moistened her lips, then was gone. “Thank you, but I’d really like to leave now. My doctor is waiting.”

“Oh, sure.” He glanced around the room, suddenly panicked. “We can’t get out. The front door is blocked.”

This was clearly not news to her. She sighed and wiggled a weak finger toward the kitchen. “That way.”

Travis considered that. “Even with me giving you a boost, it’ll be a mite tricky getting over that fence, what with your condition and all.”

She stared at him as if the word stupid had appeared in neon welts across his forehead. “As exciting as that sounds, I’d prefer to use the gate.”

“The gate,” he repeated, feeling more idiotic by the moment. He hadn’t seen a gate, but then again, he hadn’t spent much time looking for one. “Right. The gate.”

When she struggled upward, he helped her to her feet, then held on, fearing she might collapse. If it weren’t for his sore ribs, he would have carried her—“My valise,” she whispered.

“Excuse me?” He followed her gaze to a tapestry bag on a table beside the kitchen door. “Oh.”

He braced an arm around her. She took a shaky step forward, then suddenly went rigid as another contraction hit her.

Travis swallowed hard, tightening his grip to hold her upright. “You’re doing fine,” he murmured as she puffed and shuddered. With his free hand, he stroked her upper arm, offering the same quiet encouragement he’d have used to gentle a skittish mare. “Just a few more seconds...that’s right...breathe real short-like...that’s good, ma’am, that’s real good.”

A rush of air escaped her slack lips. She sagged against him, gasping. She was just a slip of a thing, really, barely big enough to rest her head against his shoulder. Faded freckles were scattered across the bridge of her nose, and the scent of sweet flowers wafted from hair that tangled around her shoulders like a curly mass of poppy red fire.

A protective surge swelled up in his gut, an odd sensation that made him want to whip out a saber and fight the world to keep her safe. At the moment, that meant getting her to the hospital.

Travis tugged down his Stetson, grabbed the valise and ushered the exhausted woman to the cab.

* * *

“Aa-a-ah!”

The cry from the back seat sent chills down Travis’s spine. He looked in the rearview mirror, and could have wept. The poor woman was contorted in pain, white as death except for a bright

trickle of blood where she'd bitten her lip. "Hold on, ma'am. We'll be there soon."

Her features relaxed slightly. She licked her lips and gave a weak nod.

Focusing on the road, Travis swerved around a large rock dislodged by the rain, then slowed to forge a muddy puddle. Black sludge splattered the cab's hood and fenders. Travis's brother-in-law, who owned the cab company, was a spit-and-polish stickler, but at the moment Travis didn't much care. He concentrated every ounce of his attention on his mission, which at the moment was traversing a winding gravel pathway that was pitted, potholed and edged with a quivering mass of muddy muck.

Navigating Virginia Road had always been a challenge; now it was a nightmare, But with paved interstate access still blocked by the overturned big rig, this was the only available route into town.

Squinting into the dreary late morning light, Travis saw the hairpin curve up ahead and touched the brake with his boot.

A blood-curdling shriek came from the back seat.

Travis jerked his eyes from the road to the mirror and back again, but it was too late. The mud slide loomed like a mountain. And they were heading right for it.

Chapter Two

Travis yanked the wheel. The woman shrieked. The cab spun doughnuts on wet gravel, then sank to its hubcaps in the mucky shoulder.

He gunned the engine. The tires spat mud and sank deeper. Logically, Travis understood that the vehicle was irretrievably mired, but panic was not a logical emotion. He jammed the cab into first gear and stomped the gas pedal to the floor. The engine revved madly. Black goo shot from beneath the spinning tires.

“Aa-a-ah!”

A quick glance into the rearview mirror confirmed that the situation in the back seat was not going at all well. Sweat trickled into his eyes. He snatched up the microphone. “We’ve got big trouble! Send an ambulance to Virginia Road, about three miles down from the turnoff. For God’s sake, hurry, Sue Anne. We’re fixing to have a baby here!”

The radio crackled. “Say again?”

“A baby, a baby!”

“Ayeeee-ee!” The woman gasped, bolted upright. “It’s coming! Oh, God, it’s coming!”

Travis spun in his seat. “Not yet, ma’am, please. Help is on the way. Just hold on a few more minutes, okay?”

She went limp and fell back against the door, panting. “I need to push.”

“Oh, Lordy, don’t do that!”

“I have to.”

“No, no, you don’t.” Frantic, Travis dropped the microphone and hoisted his torso over the headrest far enough to grasp her cold hand. “Think of something real calming, you know, like a pasture of grazing horses or maybe a pretty little creek. That always helps me to hold off during, uh, well, you know.”

She gave him a look that could freeze meat.

Travis swallowed hard. “I guess maybe you’re not in the mood to think about that sort of thing right now.”

Her eyes were green slits. “Oh, I’m thinking about it, cowboy. Believe me, I’m thinking about it— Ah! Oh! Oh!”

As the contraction hit, she clutched his wrist with both hands, hauling half his torso into the back seat. Behind him, a voice cracked over the radio, but Travis couldn’t deal with that because the thrashing woman with a death grip on his arm was shrieking distinctly unladylike epithets along with horribly graphic, gender-specific alterations she planned to perform on a man named Clyde.

Sue Anne’s voice crackled from the radio. “Travis! Travis, pick up. I’m patching you through to Vanderbilt Memorial’s ER. Travis!”

The driver’s headrest pressed Travis’s throbbing ribs as he teetered over the seat back, struggling to extricate himself from the woman’s clenched fingers. When he freed himself, he scooped up the microphone.

Before he could scream into the speaker, a crisp, female voice crackled out. “This is Dr. Jennings—”

Travis plunged his thumb on the mike switch. “Help!” he blurted. “She wants to push!”

“How close are the contractions?”

Travis shifted a wary glance toward the thrashing woman. “One right after another. Geez, they just won’t stop.”

“Can you see the baby’s head?”

“Huh?” Travis frowned at the microphone. “You’re kidding, right?”

The doctor gentled her tone. “My name is Amanda. What’s yours?”

“Travis, ma’am.”

“Well, Travis, you’re going to deliver this baby—”

“The hell I am!”

“And I’m going to help you.”

“Uh-uh, no way.” Travis shook his head so hard his hat shifted. “This is not going to happen—”

“It’s coming!” the woman screamed, then curled forward, teeth gritted as her face folded in on itself.

Travis dove into the back seat, dragging the microphone with him. “She says it’s coming!” he shouted, yanking the mike cord taut. “What do I do?”

The doctor’s voice was crisp, competent. “Remove her clothing and see if the head is crowning.”

Defeated, Travis issued a pained sigh, licked his lips and

mumbled, “I’m real sorry, ma’am, but we, ah, need to adjust your skirt and such.”

The woman bared her teeth, allowed him to do what had to be done, then snarled like cornered prey.

Taken aback, Travis wiped his forehead, blinking at the woman who appeared ready to rip out his Adam’s apple and shove it up his nose. But he saw something else in her eyes. He saw terror.

Her snarl slipped into a broken sob. “Please,” she whispered. “Help me.”

Travis’s heart melted. “I will, ma’am. Don’t you fret. I’ll take real good care of you and your baby.”

Her gaze was skeptical, but tinged with hope. “Have you done this before?”

“Hmm? Oh, sure. Dozens of times.” Since the reassurance seemed to calm her, Travis chose not to mention that all of his previous patients had hooves.

A split second later the woman was convulsing again, locked in the throes of the worst contraction yet. Travis grabbed the mike. “The baby’s coming, all right. I can see its head.”

“Good,” the doctor said. “You’ll need something to grip the child with. Do you have a towel, or any kind of clean cloth?”

“Well, ah.” Travis plucked at his muddy shirt. “I don’t think so.”

“Valise,” the woman mumbled when the pain eased.

“Hmm?” Travis followed her weak gesture to the tapestry bag

on the floorboard. “Oh. Wait a minute, Doc.” He snapped the bag open and pulled out a handful of items, including a couple of adult-size nighties, a robe, some baby gowns and two tiny blankets. “Okay, I got some stuff.” A guttural moan caught his attention. He froze for a moment, then stuttered, “Sh-she’s going at it again, Doc. Oh, Lordy, the baby’s coming out!”

“Reach down and support the child’s head,” Dr. Jennings said brusquely. “During the next contraction, ease the shoulders out of the birth canal.”

Instantly forgetting the doctor’s instruction about using a cloth, Travis dropped the flowered nightie, lurched forward and made a clumsy grab for the tiny wet skull. “Its eyes are open. It’s looking at me—”

The woman sucked in a rasping gulp of air, squeezed her eyes shut and pushed for all she was worth. A wriggling infant slipped into Travis’s waiting hands...then squirted right out of them. The baby landed fortuitously on the woman’s stomach, where it emitted a startled gasp, screwed up its purple face and began to howl lustily.

Travis fell back, horrified by how close he’d come to dropping the slippery little guy. He didn’t know squat about babies—hell, he’d never even touched one before—but it didn’t take a genius to realize that bouncing one off the floorboard was a really bad idea.

The exhausted woman peeled open an eyelid and smiled. “A boy,” she murmured. “A perfect little boy. Isn’t he beautiful?”

She beamed expectantly.

Travis eyed the ugly, wrinkled creature and decided God would forgive a small lie. “Yes’m, he’s real pretty.”

The radio crackled. “Travis? What’s going on there?”

He took a shuddering breath and picked up the microphone that was dangling over the headrest by its cord. “The baby’s here, Doc, and it’s yelling something fierce.”

Dr. Jennings chuckled. “Good job, Travis, but your work isn’t done yet.”

After answering several questions about the child’s appearance and the mother’s condition, Travis managed to follow the doctor’s instructions about clearing the infant’s nose and mouth, then used a strip of flowered cloth to tie off the umbilical cord. He’d just draped one of the blankets over the still-howling child when the woman went rigid.

“Ma’am?” Travis blinked sweat out of his eyes. “Oh, Lordy, ma’am, why are you doing that again?”

She gritted her teeth, curling forward.

“Something’s wrong, Doc!” Travis dropped the mike, snatched up the wrapped infant from her stomach and looked frantically around. His gaze fell on the open valise, which conveniently resembled a small bassinet. After hurriedly tucking the wrapped infant inside, he turned his attention to the woman and nearly went into cardiac arrest.

“Holy smokes,” he hollered into the microphone. “She’s having another one!”

“Well, Travis,” Dr. Jennings replied calmly. “At least now you know what to do.”

* * *

Peggy let her head fall back against the cab door, eyes closed, lips slack. A world of blackness spun around her, sucking her in. Her mind wept.

From a distance, she heard the familiar voice urging her with a desperation that touched but couldn't move her. “Push! Please, ma'am, you have to push.”

“Can't,” she murmured, overwhelmed by the effort of the monosyllabic utterance.

Wet hair stuck to her face, clung to her quivering eyelids. She didn't have the strength to lift her hands, yet felt gentle fingers stroke her skin, smoothing the damp strands away. The touch was so tender, so loving. She forced her eyes open and saw his face. Rugged yet young, not much older than she was. Round eyes, dark with worry, fringed with a stub of golden brown lashes. A mouth that was full, sensitive. Lips that were moving.

She strained to hear. “Your baby needs help,” he was saying. “I know it's hard, but you have to try, ma'am, you have to.”

The contraction struck like an earthquake in her soul. Her back arched without permission, throwing her backward, shaking her, pummeling her, battering her body without mercy. The world darkened as her eyes rolled up into her skull.

“Push, ma'am! Oh, Lordy. Doc? She can't, she just can't. You've got to get her some help... please, Doc, she can't take no

more.”

The voice was coming from somewhere, everywhere. Peggy focused on it, used it as a lifeline to bring herself back from the brink.

Your baby needs help, ma’am.

Peggy forced her mind away from the white light of unconsciousness.

Your baby needs help.

The young cowboy’s words echoed in her mind, giving her strength.

Your baby.

She drilled her fingernails into the upholstered car seat.

Needs help.

She thrust her head forward until her chin struck her chest, then coiled forward, using every ounce of strength she could muster. Stars broke through her mind. Lights flashed. Blood roared past her ears like an exploding ocean.

She fell back, panting. Drained. Empty.

Empty.

With immense effort, Peggy opened one eye and saw the limp little body lying on her abdomen. The cowboy was alternately wiping its tiny mouth and talking into the microphone. A dull hiss in her ears kept her from hearing him, but she could tell by his grim expression that something was very wrong.

Blinking sweat from her eyes, Peggy tried to touch the precious infant, but her hand felt like lead. The cowboy dropped

the microphone, snatched up a wad of cloth—one of her nightgowns, she thought—and began to vigorously massage the tiny body.

Slowly the droning hiss dissipated and Peggy could hear again, although sound was distorted, distant. She tried to speak, couldn't, coughed, tried again. "What's...wrong?"

The bleak-eyed cowboy didn't look up. "Nothing, ma'am. You've got yourself a pretty little girl, and everything's fine, just fine."

But it wasn't fine at all. Even in her exhausted stupor Peggy could see that the baby was smaller than her brother, and more lethargic. Her color was odd, too, kind of a dusty lavender that made Peggy's heart flutter in fear. "My baby...?"

"Don't you fret." The flowered fabric came apart in his hands. He used a strip of it to tie off the cord. "I'm not going to let anything happen to your baby." As he spoke, he continued to massage the limp little limbs, then he bent down and puffed gently into her tiny mouth.

A lump rose into Peggy's throat. Hysteria bubbled from her lips. "God...oh, God... Please, please—"

The infant's arms twitched, once, then again. A tiny foot kicked the air. There was a squeaky sputter, then the baby's chest heaved.

"That's right, darling," the cowboy murmured. "Take yourself a big old breath. There you go, sweetheart, there you go."

In response, the baby pulled up her knees, flailed her tiny

fists, screwed up her face and belted a howl even louder than her brother's had been.

Peggy exhaled all at once. Tears sprang to her eyes. "Oooh." She bit her lip, overcome with joy and relief.

The cowboy's shoulders rolled forward. He lifted his hat, wiped his face with his forearm and heaved a shuddering breath. "You go on and holler all you want," he murmured to the wailing infant. "You got a right to be mad."

He tucked his hat back over a disheveled shock of sun-streaked brown hair, then awkwardly wrapped the thrashing infant in a blanket. His hands were huge, clumsy, endearingly gentle. When he brushed a sweet kiss across the baby's soft little scalp, Peggy's heart swelled until she thought it would explode. She'd never seen a man, any man, exhibit such tenderness. It touched her to the marrow.

Peggy cradled her daughter in the crook of her arm, loosened the blanket to marvel at the perfect little body and, of course, to count each miniature finger and teensy toe. Gratitude surged into her throat, nearly choking her. She swallowed, struggling to speak. "I don't know how to thank you."

He shrugged, clearly uncomfortable. "I didn't do much."
"You saved her life."

The second shrug was more like a twitch. "She's a gutsy little gal," he murmured, angling an admiring glance. "Just like her mama."

That's when Peggy saw it, the telltale moisture clinging bright

to his stubbled cheeks. Their eyes met and held. Something special passed between them, something warm and wonderful. Something that changed her life.

* * *

Shortly after the second birth, the ambulance arrived and Travis was shuffled aside in the chaos. While the medics tended to the new mother and her twins, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and ambled through the gray drizzle, stopping occasionally to peer through the wet cab window at the frenzy of activity.

A gurney was pulled from the rear of the ambulance and wheeled to the open cab door. Travis strained to watch, but was pushed aside by a burly EMT as the weak woman was lifted out. A baby fussed. Travis thought it was the boy. He was attuned to each infant's distinctive sound. They were a part of him now.

He stretched upward, trying to see, but caught only a quick glimpse of matching bundles whisked to the waiting ambulance. The gurney wheeled by. Another glimpse, this time of flaming hair spread on white linen, a pale face, eyes closed, beautiful in its purity, smiling in repose.

Someone slapped his shoulder. Someone shook his hand. Travis paid little attention. He was busy watching the ambulance doors close.

A moment later, the vehicle sped away, lights flashing.

Alone now, Travis pulled down the brim of his hat, folded his arms and propped a hip against the cab fender to wait for the

tow truck. But his mind replayed the morning's events over and over and over again. After twenty-eight years of living, Travis Stockwell had finally figured out what life was about.

He'd never be the same.

* * *

Vanderbilt Memorial's emergency room was packed with patients, clamoring with chaos. A rash of blackout-induced traffic accidents and storm-related injuries had strained the ER's resources to the breaking point.

Peggy, who'd been wheeled to a curtained examination area, was distressed when her twins were immediately whisked away. She struggled to sit up, was overcome by a wave of dizziness and managed only to prop herself up on one elbow.

A flurry of activity bustled just beyond her cubicle, uniformed personnel rushing with purpose while civilians wandered aimlessly like shell-shocked soldiers.

One civilian caught Peggy's eye, a bewildered gentleman with glazed eyes. His handsome face was expressionless, and he shuffled back and forth, eyeing the activity around him as if it were the most perplexing thing on earth.

A nurse appeared and took hold of his arm. "There you are, Mr. Smith. We've been looking for you."

The man focused, then frowned. "Smith?"

"For the moment," the nurse mumbled, distracted as a gurney encircled by medics whizzed past. "At least until we locate your family and find out who you really are."

“Family?” The man’s confused expression broke Peggy’s heart. He touched the bandage on his head and flinched. “Smith,” he murmured. “Martin Smith.”

“That’s right.” The nurse sighed and ushered him away before Peggy could get her attention.

When another uniformed woman appeared just beyond the cubicle’s open drape, Peggy waved weakly. “Nurse! Please, can you help me?”

The woman glanced around, issued an empathetic smile and hurried over. Peggy clutched her frantically. “Where have they taken my babies?”

“Up to Pediatrics,” the nurse replied, peeling Peggy’s fingers from her wrist.

“But they’re all right, aren’t they?”

The nurse managed a frazzled nod. “I’m sure they’re perfectly healthy, Mrs. Saxon, but we need to examine them. It’s routine for newborns.”

“Why can’t I go with them?”

“Dr. Dowling wants to see you first. He’s with a patient right now, but he’ll be down shortly.” She patted Peggy’s hand, then rushed off in response to a colleague’s call.

Peggy lay weakly against the pillow. Her body was drained, but her mind was a frantic contradiction of fear and relief. It was over. Her babies were safe and healthy, thanks to a certain cab-driving cowboy with puppy brown eyes. She shuddered to think what might have happened if he hadn’t been there.

She bit her lip, shaking off the frightening image. It didn't matter what might have been. All that mattered was that he had been there, a stoic stranger who'd saved her babies' lives, probably her life, as well. And she didn't even know his name.

“Peggy?”

She turned her head and recognized Marsha Steinberg, a member of the city council's administrative staff. They didn't know each other well, but their paths had occasionally crossed at city hall where Peggy held a clerical position before taking maternity leave.

The portly woman hurried over. Her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. “My stars, child, what are you doing here?” Her bloodshot gaze shifted, then her lips thinned into a weak smile. “Why, you've had those babies. And so soon, too.” She clucked her tongue and bit her lip. “Time goes by so fast. In the blink of an eye, things change. Lives begin. Lives end.” Her voice quivered, choked to a sob. “So fast.”

Peggy felt a chill. The woman was clearly distraught, and this was a hospital. “Is something wrong, Marsha? Your family... has there been an accident?”

She shook her head, sniffed and forced a smile. “Gracious, look at me, all teary-eyed when this is the best day of your entire life.” She forcefully patted Peggy's hand, rattling a jangle of bracelets encircling her thick wrist. “Now, where are those beautiful babes of yours? I just can't wait to see them.”

“Upstairs,” Peggy murmured, following the woman's gaze to

where a familiar, bleak-eyed man was speaking with an equally grim physician. “Is that Hal Stuart?”

A fresh spurt of tears beaded the older woman’s lashes. She nodded and snatched a tissue from the box beside Peggy’s bed.

Peggy frowned. “I thought he and Randi were leaving for their honeymoon right after the wedding.”

Marsha’s face crumpled like a wet shirt. “There wasn’t any wedding,” she wailed, then burst into tears.

Stunned, Peggy didn’t know what to say. The marriage of Hal Stuart and Randi Howell had been touted as the social event of the season. It had been front-page news for months, and since Hal was the mayor’s son, half of city hall, including Peggy, had been involved in finalizing preparations at Squaw Creek Lodge, which had been braced for the biggest nuptial bash in Grand Springs history.

Marsha blew her nose, snatched up another tissue and frantically dabbed her eyes. “It was horrible, simply horrible. The guests were seated, the organ was preparing to play the Wedding March, and then—poof!”

“Poof?”

“The lights went out.”

“Oh. The blackout.” Peggy relaxed slightly. “Well, they’ll have to reschedule, I suppose....”

“No, no.” Shaking her head until her gray curls bobbed, Marsha clasped a palm over her mouth, struggling for composure. After a long moment, she straightened, wiping her

palms on her suit skirt. “The bride is gone.”

“Gone where?”

“No one knows. She just...disappeared.” Marsha clasped her hands and angled a compassionate glance toward Hal Stuart, who was still engrossed in somber conversation. “The poor man,” she murmured. “Poor, poor man.”

Exhaling, Peggy shoved a tangle of hair from her eyes and tried to grasp what she’d learned. Or more important, what it all meant. She’d seen Randi Howell a few times, usually at city hall when she and her fiancé, Hal, had dropped in on the mayor. As Peggy recalled, Randi was stunning in an outdoorsy kind of way, with dark blue eyes and a wild mane of curly black hair that seemed ready to explode from the braids she favored.

Peggy had thought her rather shy, because she rarely spoke unless spoken to, and avoided eye contact. It seemed odd that a meek, apparently pliable young woman would be drawn to a man of such opposing temperament. Certainly no one had ever accused Hal Stuart of being timid. Brash, yes. Perhaps even controlling. But never timid.

As much as Peggy liked Hal’s mother, Olivia, she’d never much cared for the mayor’s ambitious offspring. There was something, well, furtive about him. Shifty.

And, of course, to Peggy’s way of thinking, Hal Stuart had one other fatal flaw. He was male.

Peggy didn’t exactly dislike men; she simply didn’t trust them, and with good reason. Still, there were exceptions. A certain

heroic, cab-driving cowboy came to mind—"Poor Hal," Marsha murmured again. "He's devastated, positively devastated."

Pushing away a niggle of guilt at having thought ill of a man who was clearly troubled, Peggy managed an empathetic smile. "It's a shame the wedding didn't go as planned, but I'm sure Randi will turn up soon, they'll talk things out and everything will be just fine."

Marsha waved that away as irrelevant. "Randi Howell is no loss to a man like Hal Stuart. He was too good for her to begin with. But he and Olivia were so close—" She sobbed into the tissue, perplexing Peggy even more.

"I don't understand. What has Olivia got to do with the wedding?"

The woman's shoulders shook with the force of her sobs. "No one knew," she blubbered, nearly incoherent now. "She seemed so vibrant, so strong. No one knew her heart was weak."

A chill skittered down Peggy's spine. "Has something happened to the mayor?"

Marsha shuddered, sniffed, clutched Peggy's hand. "Oh, my dear, her assistant found her on the kitchen floor shortly after the lights went out."

"A heart attack?" When the woman nodded miserably, Peggy clutched the bedclothes. Olivia Stuart was a brusque woman, but a kind one. She'd gone out of her way to help Peggy through one of the most traumatic times of her life. Peggy adored her. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Not Olivia."

Snatching another tissue, Marsha blew her nose again, then fixed Peggy with red-rimmed eyes. "I'm so sorry, dear. I know you were close."

"People recover from heart attacks all the time. I know it's serious, but she'll be all right, won't she? She has to be all right."

Marsha gazed back toward the spot where Hal Stuart had been standing. He was gone. She closed her eyes a moment, then faced Peggy. "No, dear, she won't be all right. Olivia is dead."

* * *

It was late afternoon before Peggy was moved up to the maternity ward. As promised, the twins were brought to her, whereupon she promptly unwrapped them again to study every appendage on their pink, healthy little bodies. Satisfied and brimming with maternal love, she dressed them carefully, then cuddled her beloved infants until the floor nurse insisted she needed rest and whisked them back to the nursery.

An hour later Peggy was awake, restless. She couldn't sleep because her stitches hurt and her mind was awash with conflicting emotions—love for her beautiful new babies, mingled with terror at the responsibility of raising them alone, and profound grief at the death of a woman who'd been her friend.

Life was so fragile, so precious.

An image flashed through her mind, a fleeting memory of glowing brown eyes, a tender kiss brushed across her newborn daughter's brow. The stranger had saved her baby's life, and she couldn't even recall if she'd thanked him.

At that moment, her memory of the man became so crisp, so clear, that she could literally see him standing there, hat in his hands, eyes shifting with shy, western charm that was oddly endearing. She smiled at the apparition.

It spoke to her. "I, ah, didn't mean to disturb you, ma'am."

She blinked, frowned. "It's you."

Looking perplexed, he aimed a quick glance over his shoulder, then eyed Peggy warily. "Yes'm, I guess it is."

She pushed herself up and wiped a tangle of hair from her eyes. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

Startled and a bit crestfallen, he backed toward the open door. "I just wanted to, uh, see how you were doing. I'll be going now —"

"No!" She bolted upright, whipping back the covers as if preparing to chase after him. He froze, his eyes huge. "I'm glad you're here," Peggy said, wondering where that peculiar bubbly voice had come from. "I really wanted to see you again."

That seemed to unnerve him. "You did?"

"Of course. I wanted to thank you."

"No need, ma'am."

"You saved my children's lives, and probably mine, as well. I'd say that deserves at least a modicum of gratitude." She cocked her head, amused by his obvious discomfort. "Isn't this where you're supposed to say, 'Aw, shucks, ma'am, it weren't nothing?'"

He widened his eyes, then narrowed them, but a smile played around the corner of his mouth. "You poking fun at me?"

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On your promise never to reveal to a living soul anything I did or said in the back of that cab.”

His grin broke free. “Such things are a private matter.”

“You’re a good man, Mr.—” She cocked a brow in question.

“Stockwell, ma’am. Travis John Stockwell.” He stepped forward, extending his hand.

Peggy took it, feeling the abrasion of calluses against her palm. This was a man who did more than drive cabs, she realized. These were work-worn hands, with strong fingers toughened by years of hard labor. Clyde’s hands had been soft.

Clyde had been soft.

“Ma’am?”

“Hmm?” Blinking up, Peggy realized that she still had a grip on the cowboy’s hand and was studying his softly haired knuckles as if they contained universal secrets. She released him reluctantly. “Well, Mr. Stockwell—”

“Call me Travis.” His dark eyes twinkled with good humor. “All things considered, I think we’d best be on a first-name basis.”

She felt herself blush, but couldn’t keep from smiling. “In that case, I’m glad to meet you, Travis. I’m Peggy Saxon.”

“Peggy.” The name slid off his tongue sweetly, with a soft twang that made it sound almost exotic. “That’s real pretty.” He regarded her intensely for a moment, then glanced around the

room. “So, the babies are doing okay?”

“They’re wonderful, pink and healthy and full of vigor.” To her horror, a sudden gush of tears stung her eyes. “The doctor said that my daughter probably wouldn’t have made it if you hadn’t cleared her airway so quickly. I’m so grateful—” She bit her lip, irritated by the rush of emotion. “Hormones are such a pain. I’m normally not much of a crier.”

The poor man looked stricken. “No, ma’am, you’re sure not. You’re the bravest woman I know.”

That startled her. “You must not know many women.”

He coughed, shifted his hat to his left hand and wiped a well-defined and decidedly muscular forearm over his brow. “Truth is, I don’t have much chance to, uh, socialize. Not that I couldn’t,” he added quickly. “It’s just that the rodeo circuit keeps me traveling so much there’s never enough time to get to know folks.”

Peggy brightened. “You like to travel?”

“Yes’m, I guess I do.”

“That must be so exciting. When I was a little girl, I used to pour over maps and crayon circles around all the places I wanted to visit.” She issued a nostalgic sigh and leaned back against the pillows. “Then I grew up.”

Travis eyed her intently, started to speak, then thought better of it. He studied his boots, then aimed another glance around the room, seeming visibly disappointed that the babies weren’t available. “Guess I should go. You need your rest.”

She waved that away. “I’m too keyed up to rest. Do you want

to see the twins?”

His eyes lit like neon. “Yes, ma’am, I sure do.”

“So do I. I hate sitting here, waiting for some nurse to bring me my own children.” Pivoting carefully, Peggy lowered her feet to the floor.

Instantly, Travis stepped forward to grasp her elbow. “Are you sure it’s okay for you to be out of bed?”

“It had better be. I’m going home Monday.”

“You’re still looking peaked and all.”

“The doctors said I’ll be fine, but they want me and the babies stronger before we’re all released.”

“Guess they know best,” he muttered, although clearly he disagreed. He slipped a protective arm around her waist. “Lean on me, ma’am.”

“Peggy, remember?”

“Yes, ma’am, Peggy.”

She chuckled. “Cowboy, you are just too much.”

Travis flopped on his hat to free both hands and helped Peggy down the hall toward the windowed wall of the nursery. They saw the activity from several feet away. Peggy felt Travis stiffen, hesitate. Her heart leapt into her throat.

She pushed away and stumbled forward on her own. A moment later he caught up and braced her as she pressed her hands against the glass. Inside, a team of medical personnel surrounded a Plexiglas incubator, their worried eyes focused above sterile masks. Frantic activity announced a tiny life in peril.

Peggy couldn't see the infant they were working on, but knew it could be one of her own precious babies. She was distraught. She was terrified.

But this time she wasn't alone.

Chapter Three

Travis felt like he'd been kicked in the gut.

He tightened his grip on the frantic woman, urging her away from the nursery window. "Let's go on back now. You ought to be resting."

Peggy yanked out of his grasp just as a woman emerged from a nearby doorway. There was a stethoscope poking out of her breast pocket, so Peggy latched onto her. "What's going on in there? Please, is something wrong with one of my babies?"

The nurse spiked a quick glance through the nursery window and smiled sadly. "That's the preemie nursery." She added a deflective nod down the hallway. "Your babies are in the next room."

Peggy's breath rushed out all at once. She sagged bonelessly into Travis's arms. A warm, liquid feeling spread through his chest. He tried to ignore it, but a sweet fragrance wafted up from her hair, and the feel of her soft weight against him made him feel, well, kind of knightly.

It was a stupid sensation. Travis wasn't anybody's knight in shining armor. Even the fleeting image made him feel like a fool. Still, there it was, a protective instinct so strong that it shook him to his boots.

When Peggy's gaze shuddered toward the incubator, the nurse's did, too. "That's Christopher," she said with a sad sigh.

“He was born late last night, only it was a little too soon for him, so he has some problems.”

Peggy’s lip quivered. “Will he be all right?”

“We hope so.”

Peggy looked up at Travis, her eyes wide with concern, moist with sympathy. “The poor little thing. His mother must be so frantic.”

The nurse’s lips thinned into an angry line. “One would think so. Unfortunately, we have no idea where she is. A security guard saw her slip out through the north-wing exit, but he didn’t realize that she was a patient, and since we were having trouble with the hospital generator at the time, things were a bit chaotic.”

Peggy was horrified. “You mean she simply walked away and abandoned her baby?”

“So it seems.”

“How can that be?” Peggy whispered. “How could any mother do such an evil thing?”

The nurse made a conspicuous attempt to soften her disapproval with a forced smile. “Christopher’s mother wasn’t much more than a child herself. She may have been overwhelmed by the responsibility of motherhood. We hope she’ll be back when she’s had a chance to think things through.”

Travis followed Peggy’s gaze to the incubator, which was partially exposed now that most of the medical team had moved away. Apparently the crisis was over. Electronic screens reflected rhythmic peaks and valleys, and inside the clear plastic box,

hooked to a vicious assortment of tubes and wires, was the tiniest human Travis had ever seen in his entire life.

One doctor in surgical scrubs remained with the infant, gazing through the Plexiglas with an incredibly sad expression, but the rest of the group were already removing their masks, exiting the area with tight faces and rounded shoulders.

The nurse nodded at the red-eyed physician still hovering over the incubator. “That’s Dr. Howell.”

Peggy glanced up. “Randi Howell’s brother?”

“Yes. It’s been a horrible time for poor Noah. First his sister disappeared on her wedding day, then Olivia’s death, and now this poor little preemie struggling for life without anyone to love him.”

Travis knew Peggy was going to cry even before the first surge of moisture brightened those meadow green eyes. He made eye contact with the nurse, who understood his silent question and took Peggy’s arm, urging her down the hallway.

The woman’s smile broadened. “Your babies are doing beautifully, Mrs. Saxon.”

Peggy sniffed, brightened. “Are they?”

“Indeed, and they’re just gorgeous. Let’s go have a look, shall we?”

“Oh, yes.” Breathless, Peggy wiped her wet cheek, focusing on the window toward which she was being tactfully guided. “Oh... oh, there they are! Aren’t they beautiful, Travis?”

“Uh—” he gulped “—huh.” Clearly, childbirth had affected

the poor woman's vision. To Travis's good old twenty-twenty sight, the red-haired infants in question resembled a matching pair of rumple-faced orangutans. "Umm, how come they're all wrinkly?"

Peggy laughed, a delightful, melodic sound that sent happy chills down his spine. "Patience, Mr. Stockwell. God just hasn't had a chance to iron them yet."

Oddly enough, that made sense. Travis nodded dumbly, his gaze locked on the tiny faces blinking up from their Plexiglas bassinets. The boy, so designated by a blue-striped stretch cap, had loosened the tight infant wrap and was placidly gumming his fist. The pink-capped little girl completed a giant yawn, then stared straight at Travis as if thinking, "Hey, I know you!"

A lump rose in his throat, nearly choking him. They may not be the prettiest babies he'd ever seen, but he was absolutely convinced that they were the smartest.

"The staff adores them," the nurse was saying. "They're such good babies. Have you decided on names yet?"

Smiling, Peggy touched the window, flexing her fingertips against the glass. "What was the name of that road we were stuck on?"

Travis blinked. "Road? Oh, you mean Virginia?"

"That's it." She bent forward, wiggling her fingers at the little girl. "Hello, Virginia Marie. Mommy loves you." Angling a glance over her shoulder, she smiled. "Marie was my mother's name. And as long as we're performing introductions, Travis

John Stockwell, I'd like you to meet Travis John Saxon."

If he hadn't been gripping Peggy's elbow, Travis would have fallen smack on his face. He opened his mouth, closed it, tugged his hat brim and stared at the floor. "I get it. You're having fun with me again, right?"

She straightened, eyes sparkling. "If you mean I'm enjoying your stunned expression, yes, I guess I am. But Travis is a fine name, strong, sensitive, gentle—" her gaze jittered and dropped—"—just like the man who carries it. I want that for my son."

Travis licked his lips and shifted. "I don't know what to say, ma'am—"

"Peggy."

"Yes'm, Peggy, it's a real honor—and I appreciate it, really I do, only..."

She cocked her head. "Only what?"

"Only your husband might not be real excited about having his son named after a broken-down rodeo bum."

For a moment, she simply stared at him, with that tousled mane of hair spiraling around her face like a fountain of flame. Her complexion had pinked up considerably, although she was still extremely fair, and the smattering of freckles were standing at attention like a platoon of rust-colored soldiers. Even without a speck of makeup, Peggy Saxon was one incredibly beautiful woman.

Travis wondered why he hadn't noticed that before.

She pursed her lips and tapped a bare foot. "First off, Mr.

Stockwell, I take umbrage at the term ‘bum.’ You’re a fine man, and I won’t allow you to make light of yourself.”

Completely taken aback, he murmured, “Yes’m, sorry,” then winced at the foolish response.

Ignoring his discomfort, she appraised his body from scalp to toe and back again, with such blatant admiration that he felt his neck heat. “Second, nothing about you is visibly broken-down, and even if it was, I also consider that term to be derogatory and therefore off-limits when referring to my son’s namesake. Last but not least, I have no husband.” She speared him with a look. “Does that about cover your list of objections?”

Travis swallowed hard. “Yes’m, I believe it does.”

* * *

Issuing a pained sigh, Travis settled into the lounge and cooled his forehead with a can of soda. “I’m plumb tuckered. Having babies sure wears a man out.”

In the corner of the Conways’ converted den, Sue Anne swiveled away from the dispatch center to toss her brother a sour look. “Try shoving a ten-pound watermelon up your nostril and I might consider feeling sorry for you.”

He popped the soda can, took a long swallow and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Yep, women sure got it easy, just lie back and puff like a hound while us menfolk do the real work.” He ducked as a throw pillow whizzed past his head.

Travis retrieved the pillow and tucked it behind his back. “A mite touchy, eh, sis?”

She scowled at him. "I told Mama I wanted a kitten. She came home with you."

"And you've been bullying me ever since."

"It's a rotten job, but someone has to do it." She smiled sweetly. "You have to admit I'm good."

"Best bully in the whole dangd world, next to that fat-knuckled little horse apple who used to steal my lunch money."

Sue Anne angled a smug grin. "Who do you think hired him?"

"No fooling?" Travis hiked a brow. "Well, I'm glad to hear that. Takes some of the guilt off me for ripping pages out of your diary and pasting them up in the boys' bathroom."

Sue Anne roared to her feet. "You did what?"

Travis tipped back his hat, propped the soda can on his knee and launched into an exaggerated falsetto recitation. "I'll just die if Daniel Harris doesn't ask me to the spring hop. He's so-o-o dreamy. Every time he looks at me, my heart flutters and I get all gooey inside—' Hey!" He flung up his forearms to ward off another pillow, two magazines and a tissue box. "Cripes, sis, chill out, will you? I was just joshing."

Travis peeked out from under his crossed forearms to judge the extent of his scowling sister's ire. Her brows were puckered, but not enough to form a pleated bridge across her nose. That meant she was perturbed, but not dangerous. At least, not to Travis. A stranger would have taken one look at that glowering face and run for his life.

Sue Anne Conway kind of had that effect on folks. By any

standard, she was an imposing woman. Only an inch shorter than Travis, she outweighed him by twenty pounds and had been three-time women's barrel-racing champion before settling down with the only man who'd ever beat her at arm wrestling.

After skewering her brother with a narrowed stare, she plopped back into the dispatch chair, ruffled a choppy shock of short brown hair and smoothed her oversized I Brake for Cowboys T-shirt. "Lucky for you the radio console is bolted to the desk, or I'd jam the dangd thing in your ear."

"Love you, too, sis."

"Yeah, yeah." Sue Anne sniffed, shrugged, but couldn't hide a smile. "I love you, too, kid."

Travis had never doubted that for a moment. His sister was the only stable person in his life, not to mention the only family he'd had since their no-account father drank himself to death on Travis's sixteenth birthday. Even though Sue Anne had been busy with her own family, she and Jimmy had welcomed the orphaned adolescent into their home.

But not for long. At eighteen, Travis had struck out on his own and had soon earned a reputation as one of the best bronc riders on the circuit. The rodeo became his home, leaving Travis free, mobile and emotionally unencumbered. He liked it that way. And on those rare times when irritated livestock used him for a doormat, Travis always limped back to his sister's house to sulk and lick his wounds until the call of the whispering wanderer made his boots itch.

Times like now, when he'd been grounded for weeks with a bruised liver and a chest full of cracked ribs. Heaving a pained sigh, Travis retrieved the wet package of pumpkin seeds and shook a few into his palm while the dispatch console hissed to life.

A familiar voice drawled, "Unit one to dispatch. You there, babe?"

Sue Anne swiveled around and flipped the switch. "Hi, sweet cheeks. Where else would I be?"

"Never know. Good-looking woman like you must get lots of offers."

"Course I do. Why, there's a whole line of hopefuls queued in the parlor, just waiting for me to come to my senses and let one of 'em sweep me off my feet."

"And right pretty feet they are, too." Jimmy Conway's voice crackled with humor, but was slurred with fatigue. "Listen, hon, I'm outside city hall, getting ready to roll. Seems a pipe break opened a big ol' sinkhole outside an apartment unit up on North Nash Street. I can't take but half a crew. Buzz Ted, will you? See if he can pick up the rest."

"Ted's on his way in." Sue Anne focused on a mural-size city map tacked up on the wall to her left. "He should be a couple of miles from you. I'll divert him."

"Thanks, cupcake. Unit one out."

A moment later, Sue Anne was on the radio with the oldest of her two sons. At twenty, Ted Conway was a chip off the old

block, a hard-working, hell-raising, good ol' boy who'd tear his shirt off for a buddy and risk his life for a stranger in need. Like his father, Ted was boisterous, adventurous and salt-of-the-earth good.

His younger brother, Danny, was less active and more sensitive than either his father or brother, but was every bit as committed to the down-home ethics that had made the entire Conway family one of the best liked and most respected in Grand Springs. Having just graduated from high school, Danny was already firming up college plans despite objections from his chagrined father, who'd always assumed that both of his boys would enter the family business.

If Jimmy had been disappointed that his youngest preferred computers to cabs, Sue Anne had been quietly pleased, not so much by her son's choice of career but by his fortitude in pursuing that choice. Sue Anne was the backbone of the family, the champion of choice, probably because she'd had so few options in her own life.

At thirteen, she'd been thrust into the roles of mother to a six-year-old brother and housekeeper for a drunken slug of a man who'd never known the meaning of the word parent. If it hadn't been for watching Jimmy Conway, Travis wouldn't have had a clue what a father was supposed to do. Jimmy was a good dad, a real good dad. He instinctively knew the right thing to do, to say. He'd raised himself a pair of danged fine sons, too.

But Jimmy had a good dad himself. Travis had long accepted

the sad fact that a man who never had a real father could never expect to be one.

Which was exactly why Travis had long ago vowed to never, ever have kids.

“Travis?”

“Hmm?” He looked up, blinked and saw Sue Anne frowning. “Sorry. Guess I was lost in space.”

“So what’s new about that?” She smiled, a maternal, loving kind of grin that always made Travis feel, well, special. “You look tired, kid. Why don’t you go take a nap or something?”

The reminder made him yawn. He rolled his head until his neck cracked, stretched and set the soda can on the table. “Maybe later. Right now, things are still pretty much a mess out there. As soon as the garage finishes washing and fueling unit six, I’ll be on my way and see where I’m wanted.”

At the word wanted, Peggy Saxon’s face popped into his mind with startling clarity. Eyes like a field of spring clover, hair that sparkled like a wood-stoked campfire, and a tweaked-up nose spattered with the cutest freckles he ever had seen. Now, there’s a woman who could make a man crazy with want.

Apparently, Travis’s eyes glazed, because before he knew it, Sue Anne was on his case again.

“Doggone it, Travis, you’re so danged tuckered you can’t even keep your wits about you. There’s no way I’m letting you back on the streets.”

He yanked off his hat, ruffled his hair and issued a frustrated

sigh. “That’s not it, sis. I was just thinking about— Aw, hell.” He slapped the Stetson against his knee before resettling it on his head. “She’s all alone, you know? She hasn’t got anybody at all.”

Sue Anne blinked. “Who’s all alone?”

“Peggy...er, Mrs. Saxon.”

“Ah, the twins lady.”

“Can you believe those poor babies are going to grow up without a daddy?”

Sue Anne shrugged. “We did. Long as they’ve got a mama, they’ll be okay.” She widened her eyes, realizing what she’d said. “I’m sorry, hon. I didn’t mean—”

“I know, sis.” He leaned back, understanding that his sister feared his feelings were hurt, but not certain how to explain that when it came to their mother, he couldn’t recall enough to have any feelings at all. “I know you and Mama were real close, and I know how much you miss her. Thing is, I don’t, because I can’t remember anything about her.”

“I wish you could.” Sue Anne fiddled with the microphone cord. “You missed out on so much, Travis. That pains me.”

“I didn’t miss out on nothing. I had you.” He glanced up and sighed. “Aw, geez, you’re not going to tear up on me, are you?”

“Getting a cold, that’s all.” Sue Anne sniffed and cleared her throat. “I shouldn’t have left you so soon.”

“You didn’t leave me. You got married. There’s a heap of difference.”

“You were just a kid.”

“I was nine, old enough to take care of myself.”

“No, you weren’t.” Sue Anne rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands, just as she’d done years ago when she’d been a tearful sixteen-year-old creeping into her baby brother’s room to tell him she was running off to get married. “I should have taken you along instead of leaving you with him.” She spit the last word out like a bad taste, then issued an irritated grunt and spun back to the console. “Go take a nap, Travis.”

“Is that a boss-type order, or a mommy-type order?”

She glowered over her shoulder. “You aren’t too big to whup, boy.”

“Hell, no one’s too big for you to whup.” Travis stood, rolled the kinks out of his shoulder and strode across the room. “Jimmy still have those chain saws out in the shed?”

Sue Anne was on her feet now. “What are you up to?”

“Same as always, about five foot ten.” Grinning, he tipped his hat. “If you need me, I’ll be on Rourke Way. You’ve got the address.”

With that, he sauntered out the door, whistling.

* * *

From her third-floor window, Peggy gazed out at the dark town. A few lights were visible in the distance—glowing windows in the police station across the square and in a squat building down the block that she thought was the telephone company. Apparently, those locations were relying on generators, as was the hospital. Everything else was black, cold.

Dead-looking.

She shivered.

“What are you doing up, Mrs. Saxon?” The night nurse scurried across polished linoleum, whispering loudly enough to rouse the other occupant of the ward, a woman who’d given birth only a few hours ago. “It’s after midnight,” the nurse scolded. “You should be sleeping.”

“It’s too hot to sleep.”

“There’s not enough power for air-conditioning,” the nurse murmured, stopping beside Peggy’s abandoned bed long enough to indulge in a pillow-fluffing frenzy. She looked up and brightened. “A sponge bath might make you feel better. Shall I bring a water basin and a washcloth?”

“No, please don’t bother. I’ll be fine.” She gazed back out the window, fighting fingers of fear that she couldn’t quite identify and was powerless to control.

Clucking her tongue, the woman snagged Peggy’s arm, hustling her back to bed. “My dear, you really must get some rest. You’ve a big day on Monday. The blackout will soon be over, and you and your beautiful little ones will home, starting your new life together. Isn’t that wonderful?” Without waiting for an answer, the nurse tucked in the bedclothes, patted her patient’s stiff shoulder and left the room.

Peggy winced, swallowing a sudden surge of tears. She wasn’t really going home. Home was a cheery clapboard house a thousand miles away, a place where her beloved mother had

once baked cookies, bandaged skinned knees and hugged away loneliness. There had been nothing on earth that Peggy's mom couldn't fix with a loving kiss, a soothing word. She'd raised her daughter alone, without the slightest hint of financial or emotional support from the husband who'd abandoned the family when Peggy was barely four. Her mother had worked, slaved, sacrificed everything for her child. When she'd died, Peggy's entire world had collapsed.

So Peggy didn't have a home anymore. All she had was temporary use of a dilapidated structure in a town of friendly strangers, a town in the throes of crisis. Like her mother, Peggy had been abandoned to raise her family alone. Unlike her mother, Peggy didn't have the foggiest notion how that could be done.

Although Peggy had squirreled away as much money as possible during the past six months to get her through the upcoming maternity leave, but she'd still have to dip into her small savings for food, baby supplies and medical costs until she could return to work.

And then what? Even if she could afford the exorbitant price of good day care, how could she hand her precious children over to strangers?

How could she not? She had to work, had to support her babies.

"Oh, God, Mama," she murmured into the darkness. "I wish you were here."

Then she turned into her pillow and wept.

* * *

The moon was out. Travis thought that a good sign. No more rain, at least for a while. Grand Springs could dry out, clean up. Clear the roads.

The last item was the most important, at least to Travis's mind. He gazed past Sue Anne's frilly curtains to the sturdy pickup with the weatherproof Fiberglas shell that had served as his permanent home for more years than he cared to remember. It was a good truck, dependable as a well-broken roping horse. He and that old diesel had ridden a lot of miles together, seen a lot of fine country. Grand Springs was a nice-enough place, but it was small, kind of stifling for a career cowboy like Travis John Stockwell.

Travis John.

He smiled, turning away from the window, savoring the image of a screwed-up little face framed by wispy feathers of auburn hair. His namesake. Lordy, the thought sent a proud shiver down his spine. It was almost like being a daddy.

Or, at least, it was as close as Travis would ever get, since fatherhood had been crossed off his list a long, long time ago. Kids were too special, too vulnerable to be stuck with a broken-down rodeo bum—Peggy Saxon's decisive voice boomed into his mind. I take umbrage at the term 'bum.' You're a fine man, and I won't allow you to make light of yourself.

Properly chastised—again—he felt himself flinch, then grin stupidly into the darkness. No one had ever scolded him for thinking too little of himself. Truth was, he kind of liked it, liked

the spitfire spunk in Peggy Saxon's eyes as she'd stood up to him without a second thought. Most women were kind of wishy-washy, always trying to please a man, butter him up with wiles and such. Not Peggy. She wasn't afraid to stand up in a man's face and tell him what was on her mind. Travis liked that.

And he liked her, too. Feisty women intrigued him. He admired their spunk and independence. Most of all, he liked that they didn't need him.

Not that he minded helping folks out now and again, but he didn't want to be needed, to be smothered by the clingy weakness of those who didn't have enough gumption to face the world on their own.

Peggy Saxon wasn't like that, he decided. She was a tough woman, and smart, too. He liked the way she spoke, using educated speech the way rich folks used money—by tossing it around without a worry in the world. He admired that, admired her. There was just one small problem. Travis couldn't seem to get the gutsy little redhead out of his mind. For a man who'd already taken the road as his lady, that was bothersome. And it was scary.

Chapter Four

On Monday morning, Peggy had just finished stuffing a plethora of complimentary baby supplies into a brown paper tote when a soft knock caught her attention.

Travis Stockwell hovered in the open doorway with one hand behind his back and the other clutching a bouquet of flowers. He hesitated, entering only when invited by Peggy's bright smile. "Morning, ma'am." He shuffled his feet, glanced down at the colorful flowers as if seeing them for the first time, then extended them awkwardly. "I thought these might brighten your day some."

She took them gently, reverently, taking time to inhale the sweet fragrance of budding yellow roses nested in a cloud of white baby's breath. "They're lovely," she murmured, touched by the simple gesture and genuinely surprised because she hadn't expected to see Travis Stockwell again, hadn't seen him since Saturday evening. "You didn't have to do this."

He shrugged and flexed his free hand a moment before tucking his thumb in a belt loop beside a silver buckle embossed with the outline of a bucking horse. "All new mommies deserve flowers, you more than most."

Cradling the cellophaned bouquet, Peggy regarded the lanky cowboy with gratitude. Thankfully, he was too much a gentleman to point out the obvious fact that she had no one else to bring her

flowers, or to offer congratulations on the birth of her babies. “I appreciate this more than you know, Travis. Thank you.”

His smile was quick, nervous, positively devastating—a flash of white teeth, a sexy sparkle that lit his dark eyes like amber flame. Peggy sucked in a breath, licked her lips, lowered her gaze and noticed a furry gray tube protruding from the crook of his arm. She blinked. “What in the world...?”

Travis followed her gaze. “Oh, almost forgot.” Grinning proudly, he held out two of the most adorable stuffed elephants she’d ever seen. One of the creatures wore a squishy blue velour cowboy hat. The other wore a pink one. “For the babies,” he explained when she simply stood there laughing. “Kids like stuffed animals.”

She covered her quivering mouth. “So I’ve heard.”

Frowning, he raised the blue-hatted elephant to stare into its beady black eyes. “Shucks, Homer, I think the lady’s making sport of you.”

Peggy could barely contain herself. “Homer?”

“Yes’m, and this here—” he held up the pink-hatted animal “—is Bertha. They’re twins, you see, so I thought it was, you know, appropriate.”

“Oh, yes, quite appropriate,” she murmured, wiping her eyes. “It’s just that I’ve never seen an elephant wearing a Stetson.”

He looked stung. “They’re Texas elephants, ma’am.”

“Ah, well, that explains it.”

“Yes’m.”

“Are you from Texas, Travis?”

“Born and raised,” he replied, setting the furry toys on the bed. “Been gone a long time, though.” Before Peggy could follow up with another question about her new friend’s past, he nodded at the open valise. “Looks like you’re all packed.”

“Hmm? Oh, yes. I just have to call a cab...” She angled him a look and found him grinning at her.

He clicked his boot heels together. “At your service, ma’am.” She smiled and heaved a soft sigh. “Peggy, remember?”

“Yes’m, Peggy.”

“Hello-o-o!” A cheery nurse strode into the room with a wriggling bundle tucked in each crooked arm. “Are we all ready to go home?”

Peggy brightened, reaching out to take her blinking little daughter from the nurse. “Yes, all ready. Hello, sweetheart,” she cooed, tickling her daughter’s feather-soft cheek. “Mommy loves you.” Virginia peered up as if trying to focus. She yawned, which tickled Peggy immensely. “I think she knows me.”

“Of course she does, dear. You’re her mommy.” The nurse turned to Travis, eyed him quickly, then held out little Travis. “Here you go, Dad.”

Travis’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. He took a quick step backward, locking his hands behind his back. “Uh, thank you, ma’am, but I, uh—” his frantic gaze scraped the room “—I might squash him or something.”

Peggy took pity on the poor fellow. “Mr. Stockwell is a

friend,” she explained to the nurse, who promptly raised a brow. Peggy adjusted Ginny’s wrapping and reached out with her free arm. “I’ll take T.J.”

Travis lit up. “T.J.?”

“Umm.” Peggy cradled her sleepy son beside his bright-eyed sister. “Using initials as a nickname is quite the rage these days. I think it suits him, don’t you?”

“Sure does,” he agreed, eyeing the infant with an almost parental pride. “Sounds real manly.”

“Manly, hmm? Then, perhaps I should reconsider.”

The edge on her voice took them both by surprise, and she immediately softened the comment. “It just seems a bit premature to project my son into a state of divine machismo before he can even burp by himself.”

“Yes, ma’am—ah, Peggy. Kids need a chance to be kids, and that’s a fact.” He tipped his hat back, regarding her intently.

Peggy strongly suspected that he’d have said more about her apparent aversion to manliness had the maternity nurse not been flitting around the room, ears tweaked, eyes sparkling with interest.

When an awkward silence indicated that there would be no further discussion on the subject, the nurse sighed and rubbed her hands together. “All right, then. I presume the doctor has already discussed postpartum care and so forth. Do you have any other questions?”

Peggy felt the blood drain from her face. Questions? Dear

God, she had a million of them, not the least of which was how she could possibly give both of her precious babies the nurturing care they deserved when she'd barely learned how to take care of herself. There was so much to think about. Breast-feeding, she'd discovered, wasn't nearly as natural as the books had implied. She'd assumed that babies instinctively understood what to do. Well, they didn't, and this morning's feeding had been a frustrating ordeal for all of them.

The instructional nurse had soothed, encouraged and reassured her that a learning process was perfectly natural, and the babies would soon become quite proficient at filling their own little tummies. But what if they never learned how to suckle? And even if they did, Peggy was such a novice at motherhood, she feared doing something horribly wrong. What if she got confused as to which baby had been fed and which hadn't? Worse, what if her body couldn't produce enough breast milk to satisfy both infants?

And God forbid, what if they became ill? Would she know what to do? She'd read a million books on infant care over the past few months, but had little hands-on experience caring for babies. None with babies as tiny as her own. She shifted the tiny bundles in her arms, fighting a surge of panic.

"Mrs. Saxon?"

"Hmm? Oh, no questions, thank you."

"Well, then." The nurse glanced around, frowning. "Have you chosen to take advantage of our Mommy's Helper program?"

The program in question cost more than a month's rent and wasn't covered by insurance. Peggy refused to look up. "It, ah, won't be necessary."

"So you've made other arrangements for in-home assistance?"

"Yes."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Travis's eyebrow hike up and sent him a pleading glance. He frowned, but thankfully said nothing. The last thing Peggy's pocketbook needed was enforcement of the hospital's policy for postpartum patients without in-home assistance. She barely had enough to meet the insurance co-payment for two nights, let alone four.

So Peggy had lied. Again.

In the space of five short minutes, she'd lied about having questions, she'd lied about having help. Guilt pricked her, but only a little. There'd been a time in her life when she'd been naively truthful, gullibly sincere. Lies had wedged like chicken bones in her throat, choking her into silence. But that had been years ago. A lifetime ago. Before her illusions had been shattered.

Virtue, she'd discovered, was not a universal concept. Guile was the key to survival. And Peggy Saxon was a survivor. She had to be. Her babies were counting on her.

* * *

The drive home from the hospital was quiet, thoughtful. In the back seat, the twins were fastened in matching car seats that doubled as baby carriers, gifts from her coworkers. Peggy sat between them, a hand resting on each flannel-wrapped little

tummy while she gazed out the window, lost in thought.

Power had been restored about six on Sunday morning. Traffic lights were on line and functioning. Gridlock had eased as mud-clogged roads were cleared and abandoned vehicles reclaimed. Grand Springs residents emerged to dig out and tally their losses. The blackout was over, but the effects lingered. The town itself would never be quite the same.

Peggy certainly wouldn't. Her entire world had been transformed since Saturday. She was a mother now. A mother. The sacred word frightened her, but she cherished it all the same and prayed she'd be worthy. Her babies were so precious. They deserved every wonderful thing life had to offer, health and happiness and the joy of knowing they were loved.

And they were loved. Deeply. Desperately.

The cab slowed, swerved to the right. Peggy idly glanced out the window at a bustling group of chain-saw-wielding workers clearing storm debris. She paid them little mind. Every block swarmed with weary residents repairing shattered shingles, hauling broken tree limbs and dragging ruined carpeting to cluttered curbs. Neighbor worked with neighbor, a familial shouldering of shared crisis. Peggy admired that, envied it.

But she wasn't really a part of it. Never had been. A community's social fabric was knit too tightly to assimilate a person so flawed that she'd been abandoned by her own father. Or her own husband.

Or both.

“Ma’am?”

Peggy blinked up and saw Travis pivot away from the steering wheel to stare into the back seat.

“You feeling all right?”

A bit dazed, she realized that the cab was no longer vibrating, because the engine had been turned off. “Yes, I’m fine. Why have we stopped?”

“You’re home, ma’am.”

Frowning, she focused out the side window and saw several beefy workers marching toward the cab. “Home?” she murmured, eyeing the duplex, which was in the process of having its porch reframed by a construction crew. “Who are these people?”

“Just a few friends of mine.” Travis pushed open the driver’s door, flashing a grin over his shoulder. “Thought you might need a bit of help hoisting that big old tree off your porch.”

Tree. Of course, that’s what was different. Peggy scooted forward on the seat, peering over the headrest to stare out the front windshield. “Ohmigosh. It’s gone.”

Well, the fallen pine wasn’t exactly gone, but it had been sliced into manageable hunks and hauled into the yard, where it was apparently in the process of being chopped into firewood.

She gasped as the back door flew open, and cringed as a meaty, grinning face poked inside. “Whoo-ee! Look at those purty little babes. Ain’t they sweet.” A pair of china blue eyes crinkled at the corners, focusing on Peggy from beneath a hairy

buzz of sandy-colored brows that matched the man's military-style crew cut. "You must be the proud mama. Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am. I'm James T. Conway. My friends call me Jimmy."

Before she could withdraw, the ruddy-faced fellow had clamped one of her limp hands between two of the biggest, beefiest palms she'd ever seen in her life. "I, ah—" Her gaze darted toward the front seat. It was empty. She was trapped. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Conway."

"Jimmy," he replied cheerfully. Releasing her, the brawny guy reached beneath Virginia's carrier and unsnapped the seat belt. Before Peggy could protest, he'd expertly unlatched and raised the padded plastic carrier handle and hoisted the carrier, baby and all, out of the cab. "You'd be little Ginny," he said, holding the carrier up so his huge red face was inches from her daughter's tiny button nose. "Just look at them big ol' eyes. You're a beauty, you are. Your poor mama's gonna have to whack them boys off with a shovel."

Horrified to see her precious daughter in the oversize clutches of a complete stranger, Peggy struggled out of the cab. "Mr. Conway, please—" Someone took hold of her elbow.

It was Travis. "Watch your step, ma'am. Wouldn't want you to slip and, ah, skin nothing."

"Thank you," she murmured, glancing up at him. When she looked back toward Jimmy Conway, he'd been joined by a younger version of himself who was toting T.J.'s carrier. A

stunned glance behind her confirmed that the back seat of the cab was now empty.

“That’s my nephew Ted,” Travis said genially. “You’ve already met his daddy.”

“They have my babies,” Peggy said foolishly.

Ted looked up, grinning just like his father. “They’re real pretty, ma’am. Real pretty.”

“Uh, thank—”

“That little Travis? Lemme see that boy.” Jimmy snagged T.J.’s carrier, which Ted relinquished without protest. “Well, dang if he don’t look like you, Travis.” Travis narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

Peggy hurried forward, hands extended. “Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Conway. I’ll take them. Mr. Conway...?”

James T. Conway—Jimmy to his friends—had hoisted both carriers to eye level and was marching across the yard making peculiar kootchie-coo noises at the tiny occupants.

Horrified, Peggy turned to Travis for help and found him with his head in the trunk. “That man has my babies!” she blurted.

Travis straightened and passed the tapestry valise and a fat package of complimentary disposable diapers to Ted. “Jimmy likes kids.”

Reaching back into the trunk, Travis retrieved the two stuffed elephants. Ted took them, too, then nodded happily at Peggy and followed his burly father into the duplex while Travis snapped his fingers at a slender, dark-haired teenager just beyond the cab’s

hood. “Danny, come take this bag, will you?”

“Sure, Uncle Travis.” The boy leapt forward, snatched the tote of complimentary baby supplies and gave Peggy a shy smile. “Congratulations, ma’am. You must be very proud.”

The handsome adolescent was a younger version of Travis, with dark, puppy-dog eyes and a smile like a Texas sunrise. Peggy couldn’t help but smile back. “Thank you, Danny. Yes, I’m very proud.” Noting a few wood chips nested in the young man’s ruffled hair, she nodded toward the partially cut stack of firewood. “Did you do that?”

“Some.” Danny actually blushed. “Dad and Ted did most of the work. They’re the muscles of the family.”

Travis slammed the trunk. “And Danny’s the brains.”

Flushing wildly now, the boy peeked from beneath a fringe of thick, dark eyelashes that Peggy would personally have killed for. “Don’t let Mom hear you say that. She always claims that if brains were gunpowder, men still couldn’t blow their own noses.”

“Your mama’s right,” Travis said, chuckling. “Women rule the world, and that’s a fact.” He took Peggy’s elbow, escorted her a few feet toward the house, then stopped abruptly. “Oops.” He loped back to the cab, reached in the open window and retrieved the yellow rose bouquet.

A moment later, Peggy stepped onto the freshly laid planks of her porch, clutching her lovely flowers. Still dazed, she hesitated and glanced toward two smiling construction workers who were shuffling nearby, brushing sawdust off their sleeves and looking

exceptionally pleased with themselves. “This is—” words nearly failed her “—wonderful,” she finished, feeling emotion clog her throat. “I never expected this. I—I can’t believe how much trouble you’ve all gone to for me.”

Travis lightly nudged her with his elbow. “Aw, shucks, ma’am, it weren’t nothing.”

When she stared up at him, he winked, reminding her of how she’d used the same words to tease him at the hospital. “Touché, Mr. Stockwell.”

He shifted, used a fingertip to push back his hat and furrowed his brows into a frown that couldn’t conceal the amused sparkle in eyes that reminded her of sun-warmed cognac. “There you go, using them fancy foreign words on a poor old country boy.”

Danny edged by them, pausing at the threshold. “Don’t let him yank your chain,” he told Peggy. “Uncle Travis turned down a mathematics scholarship and speaks three languages.” The boy swiveled aside to let his uncle’s booted foot kick empty air.

“Smart aleck kid,” Travis mumbled, swatting his hat against his lean, denim-clad thighs. “Young’uns nowadays have no respect for their elders.”

“Why did you turn down a scholarship?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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