



HAPPY NEW YEAR,  
BABY FORTUNE!

LEANNE BANKS



*Cherish*<sup>™</sup>

Leanne Banks

**Happy New Year, Baby Fortune!**

«HarperCollins»

## **Banks L.**

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Lullabies . . . and cowboys? USA TODAY Bestselling Author Leanne Banks kicks off the new FORTUNES OF TEXAS continuity with a story of a single mom and the sexy rancher who sweeps her off her feet! As she rings in the new year in Horseback Hollow, Texas, single mom Stacey Fortune Jones tries to count her blessings. She has an adorable baby girl, Piper; supportive parents; good friends. Best of them all is Colton Foster, her longtime neighbor from the ranch next door. He always seems to be around when she needs him. Trouble is, she may be starting to need him a bit too much . . . She's off limits, Colton keeps telling himself. The tall, muscular rancher turns to mush every time he sees Stacey. But falling for his little sister's best friend seems wrong on so many levels. She's on the rebound. She's got a baby. She's...complicated. What's a big-hearted cowboy to do?

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## MEET THE FORTUNES!

**Fortune of the Month:** Stacey Fortune Jones

**Age:** 24

**Vital Statistics:** Blond hair, green eyes, stretch marks (sigh)

**Claim to Fame:** Raising bubbly baby girl all on her own

**Romantic Prospects:** None, or so she thinks. Romance and diapers just don't mix.

"I'm sure you've heard all the rumors. Folks are saying that Colton is interested in me. Colton Foster? Don't be ridiculous! He's known me since I was born! He's seen me with skinned knees and braces and all sorts of teenage awkwardness. And I just gave birth six months ago. Sexy, huh?"

"The only trouble is, I've started having these, uh, feelings for *him*. And I have no idea what to do about them. It's so inappropriate—not to mention embarrassing! And I have a sinking suspicion that—yikes!—Colton has *figured it all out!*"

**The Fortunes of Texas:** Welcome to Horseback Hollow!

Happy New Year, Baby Fortune!

Leanne Banks



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**LEANNE BANKS** is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author who is surprised every time she realizes how many books she has written. Leanne loves chocolate, the beach and new adventures. To name a few, Leanne has ridden an elephant, stood on an ostrich egg (no, it didn't break), gone parasailing and indoor skydiving. Leanne loves writing romance, because she believes in the power and magic of love. She lives in Virginia with her family and a four-and-a-half-pound Pomeranian named Bijou. Visit her website, [www.leannebanks.com](http://www.leannebanks.com).

This book is dedicated to my husband, Tony,  
for takeout and tolerance, super editors Gail Chasan and Susan Litman,  
and genius plotter Marcia Book Adirim.

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Chapter One

Stacey Fortune Jones was sure she had the cutest date at the New Year's Eve wedding reception for her cousin Sawyer Fortune and his bride, Laurel Redmond.

“Your baby is just gorgeous,” Sherry James, one of her neighbors, said as she patted Stacey’s six-month-old daughter’s arm. “She has the best smile.”

“Thank you,” Stacey said. Clothed in a red velvet dress with a lace headband, white tights and red shoes, her little Piper was a true head turner. Stacey had enjoyed getting Piper ready for her first big night out, and it seemed her daughter was having fun. Her big green gaze took in all the sights and sounds of the celebration, and she smiled easily with everyone who approached. “She’s a sweet baby now that she’s gotten through her colic.”

Sherry made a sympathetic clucking noise. “Colic can be hard on both the baby and the parents.”

Stacey gave a vague nod. “So true,” she said. In Stacey’s case, there was no need for the plural. There was no dad to help. He’d abandoned Stacey before Piper had even been born. Thank goodness her parents had let her move back in with them.

“Well, you’ve obviously done a great job with her. She’s the belle of the ball tonight,” Sherry said.

“Thank you,” Stacey said again.

“Oh, my husband’s calling me,” Sherry said. “You take care, now.”

Jiggling her daughter Piper on her hip, Stacey headed for an empty seat at a table to give her feet a rest. Looking around, she couldn’t believe that an airplane hangar could be transformed into such a beautiful reception site. Miles of tulle and lights decorated the space, and buffet tables groaned with delicious food. The sounds of a great band and happy voices echoed throughout the building. The guests, dressed in their finest, added to a celebratory mood. This wedding was the event of the season for the citizens of the small town of Horseback Hollow, Texas. People would be talking about it for years to come.

Although some might consider the choice of an airplane hangar a strange place to hold a wedding, it suited the groom and bride, since this was where the two were running a flight school together. No one had thought Sawyer or Laurel would ever settle down, let alone with each other. But the two stubborn yet free-spirited people had come to the conclusion that they were perfect for each other.

Stacey watched the newly married couple dance together and couldn’t help thinking about the wedding she had been planning with her ex, Joe. Sometimes she wondered if she had ever really known Joe at all, or if she had been in love with an illusion of the man she’d wanted him to be. Now she didn’t know if she’d ever find the love she saw on the faces of the bride and groom. Even though the hangar was filled with family and friends, and her little Piper was in her arms, Stacey suddenly felt alone.

“Hey,” a male voice said. “How’s it going?”

Stacey blinked to find her longtime neighbor, Colton Foster, sitting beside her. She gave herself a mental shake and tried to pull herself out of her blue moment. Colton’s sister, Rachel, was Stacey’s best friend; but Stacey had been overwhelmed with taking care of Piper, so she hadn’t seen him except in passing since the baby had been born.

She’d known the Foster family forever. Colton had graduated several years earlier from the same high school she’d attended. He’d always been quiet and hardworking. He was the firstborn and only son of the Fosters and had taken his responsibilities seriously.

Tonight he wore a dark suit along with a Stetson, but he usually dressed his tall, athletic body in jeans and work boots. He had brown eyes that seemed to see beneath the surface, brown wavy hair and a strong jaw. Stacey knew of several women who’d had crushes on him, but to Stacey, he would always be Rachel’s older brother.

“Great,” she said. “I’m doing great. Piper doesn’t have colic anymore, so I’ve actually gotten a few nights of sleep. My parents adore her. My brothers and sister adore her. She’s healthy and happy. Life couldn’t be better,” she insisted, willing herself to believe it.

Stacey searched Colton's face. She couldn't help wondering if he'd heard anything from Joe since he and her ex had been good friends. Colton had even been asked to be one of the groomsmen for Stacey and Joe's wedding. The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she swallowed it without asking. Did she really want to know? It wasn't as if she wanted him back. Still, Piper deserved to know her father, she thought. Stacey's stomach twisted as she met the gaze of her quiet neighbor. Maybe Stacey just wanted to hear that Joe was miserable without her.

The silence between them stretched. "She's a cute baby," Colton finally said.

Stacey smiled at her daughter. "Yes, she is. Someone even called her the belle of the ball," she said. "How are things with you?"

"Same as always," he said with a shrug. "Working a lot of hours to keep the ranch going."

Stacey searched for something else to say. The gap in conversation between her and Colton felt so awkward. She couldn't remember ever feeling this uncomfortable with him. "I haven't gotten out very much since Piper was born, so it's been a while since I've seen a lot of people or been to such a big party."

He nodded. "Yeah. Rachel tells me she drops by your house every now and then. She's been keeping us updated on how you're doing."

"Rachel has always been a good friend. I don't know what I would have done without her when—" Stacey broke off, determined not to mention Joe's name aloud. She cleared her throat and decided to change the direction of the conversation. "Well, I'm glad you're doing well," she said, almost wishing he would leave. Maybe then she wouldn't feel so awkward.

Another silence stretched between them, and Stacey almost decided to leave despite the fact that Piper was half-asleep in her arms.

"It's a new year," Colton finally said. "A new year is always a good time for a fresh start. Are you planning to go back to work soon?"

Stacey sighed. "I'm not sure what to do now. I loved my job. I was a nurse at the hospital in Lubbock, but the idea of leaving Piper just tears me up. Even though my mother would babysit for me, it wouldn't be fair. My mother is busy enough without taking on the full care of a baby. Plus, I hate the idea of being so far away if Piper should need me."

"Is there anywhere else closer you could work?" he asked.

"I've thought about that, but as you know, the employment opportunities here in Horseback Hollow aren't great. There's no hospital here. It's frustrating because I don't want to be dependent on my parents. At the same time, I'm Piper's one and only parent, and I'm determined that she gets all the love she needs and deserves."

\* \* \*

Colton studied Stacey for a long moment and realized that something about his younger sister's friend had changed. She used to be so happy and carefree. Now it seemed as if there was a shadow clouding the sunny optimism she'd always exhibited. He couldn't help feeling a hard stab of guilt. He wondered if the conversation he'd had with Joe over a year ago had influenced the man to propose to Stacey. Maybe he shouldn't have warned Joe that he might lose Stacey to someone else if he didn't put a ring on her finger. If they hadn't gotten engaged, maybe she wouldn't have gotten pregnant and Joe wouldn't have left her. After Joe had left Stacey pregnant with his child, Colton's opinion of his friend had plummeted. Now he wondered if Joe had just felt possessive about Stacey. He obviously hadn't loved her the way she deserved to be loved. Colton had always known Joe's home life hadn't been the best when he was growing up, but in Colton's mind, that was no excuse for how Joe had treated Stacey.

More than Stacey's outlook had changed, Colton noticed. She just seemed more grown-up. His gaze dipped to her body, and he couldn't help noticing she was curvier than she used to be. She'd filled out in all the right places. He glanced at her face and saw that her eyes seemed to contain a newfound knowledge.

Stacey had become a woman, he concluded. She was no longer the young girl who'd giggled constantly with his younger sister Rachel. He watched her lift a glass to her lips and take a sip of champagne, then slide her tongue over her lips.

The motion made his gut clench in an odd way. He wondered how her lips would feel against his. He wondered how her body would feel....

Shocked at the direction his mind was headed, Colton reined in his thoughts. This was Stacey, for Pete's sake. Not some random girl at a bar. He cleared his throat.

Stacey glanced around the room. "There are a lot of Fortunes. I'm still trying to keep all the names straight."

"That's for sure. Do you know all of them?" he asked.

Stacey shot him a sideways glance. "I've been introduced to all of them. I'm trying my best to remember their names. Between my mother, her brother James and her sister, Josephine, they have thirteen children."

Colton gave a low whistle. "That's a lot."

"And that doesn't include the wives. Just about all of James Fortune's children have gotten married within the last year," she said.

"I'm curious. What made all of you take on the Fortune name?"

She shrugged. "We did it for Mom. I know it sounds weird, but for Mama, finding her birth family has been a big deal. Even though her adoptive parents loved and adored her, there were things about her past that seemed a big mystery because she knew she was adopted. I think that meeting her brother James and her sister, Josephine, makes her feel more complete. For my mom, taking on the Fortune name is a symbolic way of declaring her connection to the Fortune family. Most of us have added the Fortune name out of respect to her. My brother Liam is holding out, though."

"How does your father feel about it?"

"That's a good question," she said. "My father is very stoic. He hasn't said anything aloud, and he has loved my mother pretty much since the dawn of time, but I have a feeling he may not like the name change. I'm not sure he would ever say it, because he's supportive of my mom. He would always have her back, but I wouldn't blame him if this pinched his ego a little bit."

"Speaking of your Mama Jeanne," Colton said. "She's coming this way."

Stacey smiled. "Betcha she wants to show off her grandbaby. Watch and see."

Stacey's mother wore her snowy white hair on the back of her head, and she sported a nice but not fancy dress. Jeanne Marie Fortune Jones was one of the most welcoming women Colton had ever met. Everyone in Horseback Hollow loved the nurturing woman. Jeanne extended her arms as she got close to Stacey and the baby. "Give me that little peanut," Mrs. Jones said. "It's time for me to give you a little break."

"She's been fine," Stacey said, handing over the baby to her mother. "I think she is half-asleep."

"Already? At her first party?" Mrs. Jones adjusted Piper's headband. "I need to introduce her to a few people before she totally zonks out." Mrs. Jones glanced at Colton. "Good to see you and your family here tonight. We're glad you could make it," she said.

"Wouldn't miss it," he said. "It was nice of you to make sure we were invited."

"Well, of course you're invited. You're like family to us. What do you think of little Piper here?" she asked, beaming with pride.

"She's a pretty little thing," Colton said, although babies made him a little uneasy. Seemed as if they could start screaming like wild banshees with no cause or warning.

"That she is," Mrs. Jones said. "I just want to make sure James and Josephine get to see her. You take a little break, Stacey."

Stacey nodded and smiled as her mother left. "Told you she wanted to show her off."

Colton glanced at Stacey's mother as she joined her Fortune siblings at a table and bounced the baby on her knee. The other woman, Josephine, smiled at the baby and jiggled the baby's hand.

Stacey smiled as she looked at her mother and her aunt and uncle. They were still learning about each other, but they were growing in love for each other, too.

“So, how does it feel to be a Fortune?” Colton asked.

“I don’t know,” Stacey said. “It may take some time to figure it out.”

“Well, it must be nice not to have to worry about money anymore,” he said.

Stacey shook her head and gave a short chuckle. “You must not have heard. My mother gave back the Fortune money. She didn’t feel right about accepting it.”

“Whoa,” Colton said.

Stacey nodded. “Her brother James wanted to give her a lot of money. But she felt that money rightfully should go to his children. Mama doesn’t want her relationship with James and the rest of the Fortunes tainted by her taking money from him.”

Colton shook his head. “Your mama is an amazing woman. That was an honorable thing to do.”

“I think so, too, but not everyone agrees with her decision,” Stacey said. “For Mama’s sake, I hope everything will turn out okay.”

\* \* \*

At that moment, Jeanne Fortune Jones was in heaven. Sharing her grandbaby with her newly discovered brother and sister, with family all around, Jeanne felt complete. Jeanne had always known she was adopted. Her parents had loved her as if they’d given birth to her, perhaps more. Yet even with all that love and adoration, something had been missing. Now she knew what it was—her brother and sister. Joined together in the womb as triplets, separated for most of their lives, the three of them were back together again. To Jeanne, it all seemed a beautiful circle of life.

Her often-stern-faced brother James cleared his throat. “Jeanne, I still wish you would accept the money I tried to give you earlier. It feels wrong. Won’t you reconsider?”

Jeanne immediately shook her head. Her conviction was clear as crystal on this matter. Jeanne knew that James’s children had turned their backs on him because they’d misunderstood James’s attempted generosity toward Jeanne. Now, after months of an angry, silent divide, James and his family were being reunited. “Absolutely not. I refuse to be the cause of a rift between you and your children. Besides, you earned that money. I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

James sighed. “But I feel guilty that I have so much and you have so little.”

Jeanne shook her head and smiled as she looked down at her sweet granddaughter. “I’ve been around long enough to know that there are all kinds of riches. I have a wonderful husband, loving children and this beautiful grandchild. And now I have the two of you. My life couldn’t be happier. I feel like I’m the lucky one.”

“Do the rest of your family members feel that way?” James asked doubtfully.

Jeanne thought of her son Christopher and his resentment. Chris just had some growing up to do. He would realize what was truly important in due time. At least, she hoped he would. “Mostly,” she said. “Look at how most of my kids have accepted the Fortune name. They know I would do anything for them, and they would do anything for me.”

Jeanne noticed her sister seemed quieter than usual. “Are you okay, Josephine? Is this party too much for you?”

Josephine shook her head. “No. It’s a grand party. You Texans know how to pull out all the stops,” she said in her lovely British accent.

Jeanne Marie studied her refined sister in her luxury designer clothing. Who would have ever thought that she, Jeanne Jones, could be related to a woman who had married into the British royal family?

The thought made her laugh. She and James and Josephine had been joined in the womb. That was the ultimate equality. But more important than that, Jeanne knew herself, her heart and her family. She was beyond happy with her life. She sensed, however, that James and Josephine might not be so happy with theirs, but she hoped she was wrong....

“All of my children are single. I hope they will find love someday,” Josephine murmured under her breath.

“Of course they will,” Jeanne said, patting her sister’s hand. “It just takes some time.”

Josephine looked at Jeanne with a soft gaze. “I’m so glad we found each other.”

Jeanne squeezed her sister’s hand. “I am, too.”

\* \* \*

From across the room, Stacey enjoyed watching her mother with her siblings, but then she caught sight of her brother Chris striding toward her. His face looked like a thundercloud. “Uh-oh.”

“I need to talk to you for a moment,” Chris said, and gave Colton a short nod. “Excuse us.”

Stacey lifted her lips in a smile that she suspected resembled more of a wince. “Excuse me,” she said, and followed Christopher to a semiquiet corner of the airplane hangar.

“Do you see how chummy Mama Jeanne is being with James and Josephine? It makes me sick to my stomach to see her being so nice to them,” he said.

“Well, of course she’s being nice to them. She’s thrilled she finally found out that she has brothers and a sister. You know Mama has always wondered about her birth family.”

“That’s not the point,” Christopher said. “I don’t understand how she is all right with the fact that her brothers James and John grew up with boatloads of money. And her sister, Josephine, was married to British royalty, for Pete’s sake. It’s not fair that they’re so wealthy and she’s had to watch every dime.”

Chris had always been ambitious, pretty much since birth. The status quo wasn’t going to be enough for him. Stacey had long known he wanted more for himself and the whole family. Chris and their father, Deke, had rubbed each other wrong on this subject on more than one occasion.

Stacey hated to see her brother so upset when she knew her mother was thrilled with the recent discovery of her siblings. “Mama’s life hasn’t been so bad. She has all of us kids and a great husband. They both have good health and would support each other through thick and thin.” She couldn’t help thinking about how Joe had left her high and dry once he’d learned she was pregnant. Her father wouldn’t dream of doing anything like that to her mother.

Chris’s eye twitched, and Stacey could tell he wasn’t the least bit appeased. “It’s still not fair. Tell the truth. Wouldn’t it be nice if we didn’t have to worry about money? Think about Piper. Wouldn’t you like to know she would have everything she needs?”

“Piper will have everything she needs. Her life may not be filled with luxury, but she will get what she needs,” Stacey insisted, feeling defensive because she wasn’t making any money right now.

“Yeah, but you gotta admit things could be easier,” he said.

Stacey sighed. “They could be,” she admitted, but shook her head. “But I can’t let myself go there. I’m going to have to make my own way. There’s no fairy tale happening for me.”

“I’m not asking for a fairy tale. I’m just thinking Mom should at least get a piece of the pie,” he said. “Seems to me that Mom’s new brother and sister are greedy and selfish.”

“It’s not James Fortune’s fault that we aren’t getting any Fortune money. James gave her money, and Mama chose to give the money back. James may be a little stiff, but he seems nice enough. He really didn’t even have to offer the money to Mama in the first place, but he did. I bet if any of us really needed financial help that he would be glad to help.”

Chris tilted his head to one side in a thoughtful way, and Stacey could practically see the wheels turning in his mind. “You may have a point. I think I’ll have a word with Uncle James.”

Stacey opened her mouth to tell him to think it over before he approached their new relative, but he was gone before she could say a word. Stacey twisted her fingers together. She wished Chris wouldn’t get so worked up about this, but she feared her discussion with him hadn’t helped one bit.

Sighing, she glanced away and caught sight of the bride and groom, Laurel and Sawyer, snuggling in a corner, feeding each other bites of wedding cake. The sight was so romantic. She

could tell by the expressions on their faces that they clearly adored each other. Her heart twisted. She wondered if anyone would ever look at her that way.

Stacey gave herself a hard mental shake and reminded herself that her priority was Piper now. She surveyed the room, looking for her baby, and saw that her new aunt Josephine was holding Piper in her arms. Mama Jeanne was sitting right beside her. Stacey knew her mother would guard the baby like a bear with its cub. Stacey told herself she had a lot to be grateful for with such a supportive family.

Feeling thirsty, she navigated her way through the crowd toward the fountain of punch and got a cup. She took several sips and glanced up. Her gaze met Colton's. He was looking at her with a strange expression on his face. She felt a little dip in her stomach. What was that? she wondered. Why was he looking at her that way? And why did her stomach feel funny? Maybe she'd better get a bite to eat.

She wandered to one of the food tables and nibbled on a few appetizers.

"Everything okay with Chris?" Colton asked from behind her.

She turned around and was grateful her stomach didn't do any more dipping. "I'm not sure. Chris has some things he needs to work out. I wish I could help him, but he can have a one-track mind sometimes. Unfortunately, I think this may be one of those times."

"You want me to talk to him?" he asked.

"He might listen to you more than he does me, but I think this is something he's going to have to work out on his own," she said and rolled her eyes. "Brothers."

He chuckled and looked at the dance floor. "I'm not the best dancer in the world, but I can probably spin you around a few times without stepping on your feet. Do you want to dance?"

She blinked in surprise. Stacey couldn't remember the last time she'd danced except with Piper. His invitation made her feel almost like a real human being, more than a mother. She smiled. "I'd like that very much."

Stacey stepped into Colton's arms, and they danced a Western-style waltz to the romantic tune. Of course she would never have romantic feelings for Colton, but she couldn't help noticing his broad shoulders and how strong he felt. It was nice to be held, even if it was just as friends. Taking a deep breath, she caught the scent of his cologne and leather. Looking into his brown eyes, she thought she'd always liked the steadfast honesty in his gaze. Colton was Mr. Steady, all male and no nonsense. Looking closer, she observed, for the first time, though, that he had long eyelashes. She'd never noticed before. Maybe because she'd never been this close to him?

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She felt a twinge of self-consciousness. "Nothing important."

"Then why are you staring at me? Do I have some food on my face?"

Her lips twitched, and she told herself to get over her self-consciousness. After all, this was Colton. He might as well be one of her brothers. "If you must know, Mr. Nosy, I was thinking that you have the longest eyelashes I've ever seen on a man. A lot of women would give their eyeteeth for your eyelashes."

Surprise flashed through his eyes, and he laughed. It was a strong, masculine, happy sound that made her smile. "That's a first."

"No one else has ever told you that?" she asked and narrowed her eyes in disbelief. Although Colton wasn't one to talk about his romantic life, and he certainly was no womanizer, she knew he'd spent time with more than a woman or two. "Can you honestly tell me no woman has ever complimented you on your long eyelashes?"

"Not that I can remember," he said, which sounded as if he was hedging to Stacey. He shrugged. "The ladies usually give me other kinds of compliments," he said in a low voice that bordered on sensual.

Surprise and something else rushed through Stacey. She had never thought of Colton in those terms, and she wasn't now, she told herself. "What kinds of compliments?" she couldn't resist asking.

"Oh, this and that."

Another nonanswer, she thought, her curiosity piqued.

The song drew to a close, and the bandleader tapped on his microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have less than a minute left to this year. It’s time for the countdown.”

A server delivered horns and noisemakers and confetti pops. Stacey absently accepted a noisemaker and confetti pop and looked around for her baby. “I wonder if Piper is still with Mama Jeanne,” she murmured, then caught sight of her mother holding a noisemaker for the baby.

“...five...four...three...two...one,” the bandleader said. “Happy New Year!”

Stacey met Colton’s gaze while many couples kissed to welcome the New Year, and she felt a twist of self-consciousness. Maybe a hug would do.

Colton gave a shrug. “May as well join the crowd,” he said, and lowered his head and kissed her just beside her lips. Closer to her mouth than her cheek, the sensation of the kiss sent a ripple of electricity throughout her body.

What in the world? she thought, staring up at him as he met her gaze.

“Happy New Year, Stacey.”

Chapter Two

Colton couldn’t get Stacey Fortune Jones off his mind.

Even now as he was taking inventory in one of the feed sheds with his dad, he wasn’t paying full attention. He told himself it was because beneath Stacey’s sunny smile, he sensed a deep sadness. That bothered him, especially since he wondered if he could have prevented it. He remembered the day he’d told his friend Joe, Stacey’s ex, that Stacey was a special girl. If Joe didn’t want to lose her, then he’d better put a ring on it. The very next day Joe had proposed, and Stacey had gone full speed ahead with the wedding plans. The result had been a disaster and Colton still blamed himself. If only he’d kept his mouth shut. He’d known Stacey was crazy about Joe. Colton had thought Joe had just needed a little nudge. How wrong he’d been.

His father turned to him. “Did you input that last number I gave you?”

Colton bit the inside of his jaw. “Sorry. You mind repeating it?”

“What’s wrong with you?” his father asked. “You seem as if you’re a million miles away. Did you catch that virus that’s going around?”

Colton shook his head, thinking the only virus he had caught was the guilt virus. He’d been fighting that one for a while now, and it had only gotten worse when he’d seen Stacey at the wedding. “No. I was just thinking about that extension course I’m taking and if we’re going to want to spend the money on the improvements to the ranch that I’ve been learning about during my last lesson.”

“Well, we’ve already got these e-tablet gizmos. Part of me likes that you’re keeping us up to speed, but these e-tablets weren’t cheap.”

“Yes, I know,” Colton said, his lips twitching in amusement. “You sure like playing solitaire on yours when you’re not using it for work, don’t you?”

His father shot him a mock glare, then made a sound somewhere between a cough and a chuckle. “All right, you’ve made your point. Let’s get back to work, so you can take a break. You’re acting like you need it.”

“I don’t—”

“Then what’s the last number I gave you?” his father countered.

Colton frowned. “Okay, give me the number again,” he said, but he sure didn’t want a break. He needed to keep busy so he wouldn’t be thinking about how he had contributed to ruining Stacey’s life.

Despite his father’s encouragement to take a break after doing inventory, Colton drove his truck out to check some fences that had been questionable in the past. Although January wasn’t the busiest time for the ranch since the foals wouldn’t come until spring, there was still plenty to do. Keeping the mamas healthy, safe and fed meant he had to stay on top of the condition of the fences and the pastures.

Colton checked several stretches of fence and only found one weak area. He made a note of it and returned to the family ranch. He'd been born and raised in the sprawling ranch house. After he'd turned twenty-five, they'd added an extra wing so that he could have some privacy. The fact that his room was farther from the center of the house usually worked for him, but there were times he just wanted his own place. Someday soon he would broach the subject with his father. Colton had a lot of money in the bank and in investments, so he could easily fund the purchase of a new home, but building Colton's home seemed like a matter of pride for Colton's father, Frank. All too aware of ranch finances, Colton didn't want to provide any extra strain. His father was still strong and healthy, but his back wasn't the best. Colton wanted to ease his burdens, not make them worse.

As he climbed the steps to the porch, he thought of Stacey again and made a decision. He was going to try to find a way to help bring back her sunny disposition. There had to be a way. Passing by the den, he saw his sister Rachel watching a reality matchmaker show on television. Those kinds of shows drove him crazy. He couldn't understand why Rachel watched them. The couples never ended up staying together. Obviously he didn't understand the female psyche.

Colton shrugged. Maybe he should pick Rachel's brain. Not only was she female, but she was also Stacey's best friend. Perhaps she could give him a few ideas. He grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen, then returned to the den and sank onto a chair.

"How's it going?" he asked when Rachel couldn't seem to tear her attention from the television show.

"Pretty good," she said, glancing at him. "I'm taking a little break from making lesson plans for student teaching. How about you?"

"Good," he said. "It's quiet. No trouble. Have you heard anything about Dad's back?"

"Not lately," she said. "I wish he would go to the doctor. I don't see how he's going to get better if he doesn't try to do anything about it."

"I try to keep him from doing things that might hurt him, but I can't be by his side every minute," he said.

"True," she said. "He's lucky you're around as much as you are." She shot him a playful smile. "Colton, the saint."

"Yeah, right," he said in a dark voice. "Listen, I wanted to ask you something."

"What's that?" she asked, glancing back at the television. "Mom told me to tell you there's a potpie in the fridge if you want to heat it up for dinner."

"I'm not asking about dinner. I want to know what women want," he said.

She swiveled her head around to gape at him. "Well, that's a loaded question."

He lifted his shoulders. "Seems pretty straight-on to me. What do women want?"

Rachel laughed. "There's no one perfect answer. It depends on the woman." She looked at him with curiosity in her eyes. "Who do you have in mind?"

Colton resisted the urge to squirm under her inquisitive gaze. He'd rather die than admit he had Stacey on his mind. "Forget I said anything," he said and started to rise.

"Now, wait just a minute. You asked me a question. The least you can do is give me a chance to try to give you some suggestions." She looked at him suspiciously. "Although I can't help wondering who you're trying to please. And I don't have to tell you that nothing stays secret in Horseback Hollow for long."

"I know," he said.

Rachel sighed in frustration. "Well, there are the die-hard regulars," she said. "Roses and flowers."

Colton shook his head. "Nothing that obvious."

"Hmm," Rachel said. "The truth is that what most women want is a man who listens."

Colton frowned and shook his head. "That can't be it."

Rachel stared at him for a long moment. “I have an idea,” she said, picking up her cell phone and dialing.

“What are you doing?” he asked, but his sister wasn’t paying any attention to him.

“Stacey,” Rachel said, sliding Colton a sly glance. “My brother needs a consultation. Can you come over?”

Colton nearly croaked. “Stacey?” he echoed.

Rachel nodded. “Great,” she said into the phone. “See you in a few minutes.” She disconnected the call and smiled at Colton. “This is great. You’ll have advice from two women instead of just one.”

Oh, Lord, what had he gotten himself into? “I think I’ll heat up some of that potpie,” Colton said, hatching an escape plan.

“Don’t go too far. Stacey will be here soon,” Rachel said, then shot him a crafty glance. “And don’t take off for your bedroom. I know where to find you.”

Colton stifled a groan. This was why he needed his own place. He was too accessible. Colton heated the potpie and returned to the den, telling himself he would set a mental time limit of fifteen minutes for the insanity about to ensue. He scarfed down as much food as possible during the next few moments.

A knock sounded at the door, but Stacey didn’t wait for anyone to answer. She’d been bursting through that door as long as he could remember. “Hey, Rachel, I’m here,” she called as she made her way to the den. Dressed in a winter-white coat, she carried her baby on her hip with ease. Piper wore a red coat and cap, and her cheeks were flushed with good health. She stared curiously around the room with her big, green eyes.

“Give me that sweet baby,” Rachel said, rushing to reach for Piper.

Piper allowed herself to be taken from Stacey, but the baby watched to make sure her mama was in sight. Rachel unfastened the baby’s coat and took off her cap.

Stacey shrugged out of her own coat and glanced from Rachel to Colton. “What’s this about a consultation? Why on earth would Colton need a consultation from us?”

Rachel’s face lit with mischief. “Colton asked me what women really want. We need to brainstorm Colton’s love life.”

Stacey looked at Colton in confusion. “I always thought Colton got along as well as he wanted to in that department. I’ve heard from a few girls who—” She cleared her throat. “Well, they seemed to like him just fine.”

“Thank you, Stacey. I have gotten along just fine in that department, despite my sister’s opinion,” he said in a dry voice.

Rachel jiggled the baby on her hip. “Well, this one must be different if you’re asking me what women want,” Rachel said.

Colton checked his watch. Thirteen minutes to go. This was going to feel like an eternity.

“Who is this girl?” Stacey asked, curiously gazing at Colton.

“He won’t tell,” Rachel answered for him.

Colton figured his sister was good for something.

“Well, what kind of woman is she? Country or city?” Stacey asked.

“If she’s here, she’s only one kind,” Rachel said. “Country. We have no city to speak of.”

“Hmm,” Stacey said, and Colton again resisted the urge to squirm. “You could take her to dinner.”

“Out of town,” Rachel added. “People are so nosy here.”

“Flowers would be good,” Stacey said.

“He said flowers are too obvious,” Rachel said.

Stacey frowned. “Too obvious?” she echoed.

“What if I just wanted to cheer her up?” Colton asked. “What if I don’t necessarily want to date her?”

Rachel scowled. “Oh, that’s a totally different matter. You don’t want to be with her?”

Colton ground his teeth. “That’s not the priority.”

“So, you may want to be with her in the future?” Rachel asked.

“Let’s deal with the present,” he said in a grumbly voice.

“In that case—” Rachel said.

“Just visit her,” Stacey said firmly. “And let her talk, maybe about what’s been going on with her. Try and keep the conversation light. Nothing heavy.”

“Small talk,” Rachel said cheerfully.

Colton frowned. “What the hell is small talk besides weather?”

Both Stacey and Rachel laughed. “Nothing too deep,” Rachel said. “You can even talk about clothing.”

Colton scowled. “Clothing?” he echoed.

Stacey and Rachel exchanged an amused glance. “Work on it,” Rachel said. “Read the paper. There may be something there you can chit-chat about.”

“You could take her to get ice cream,” Stacey said.

“In the winter?” Colton asked.

“I love ice cream any time of year,” she confessed.

“If you really want to cheer up a woman, you could take a DVD of a chick flick and watch it with her,” Rachel added.

Colton made a face. “If you say so,” he said.

“Well, you asked,” Rachel said with a bit of a testy tone. “Is this girl sick or just depressed? I know you said flowers are too obvious, but you could just happen to have some extra chocolates in your truck. Chocolate makes just about everything better.”

“Except labor pains,” Stacey said. “Chocolate doesn’t help with labor pains.”

Colton cleared his throat. He didn’t like the direction this conversation was headed in. “I think I’m done with my dinner now.”

“I’ll take your plate,” Rachel said. “You take Piper.”

Colton pulled back.

Stacey shot him a look of surprise. “Oh, for goodness’ sakes. You’re not afraid of a baby, are you?”

“Of course I’m not afraid,” he said, lying through his teeth. She was cute, but she was so little.

“Then, you can hold her,” Rachel said, pushing Piper into his arms. “She’s not radioactive.”

Colton held the baby away from his body, staring into her face. She squirmed in his hands.

“You need to hold her closer,” Stacey said. “She feels insecure in that position.”

“I’m not gonna drop her,” he said.

“I know that, but she doesn’t,” Stacey said.

He sat and gingerly set her on his lap, and she stopped wiggling.

Piper cooed at him, lifting her finger toward his face. She seemed to stare at his every feature. What amazing concentration she had. He inhaled and caught a whiff of sweet baby smell. Colton felt a strange sensation inside him, as if the baby was trying to communicate with him. She was a cute thing. He felt an odd protective feeling for the child even though Piper wasn’t his. It was as if he was suddenly driven to keep her safe. At the same time, he was terrified she was going to start screaming any minute.

“You look so nervous, Colton. I can take her,” Stacey said, lifting the baby from his arms.

Colton felt a huge sense of relief. At the same time, he wouldn’t mind breathing in Piper’s sweet scent again.

“So, did our advice help?” Stacey asked as she shifted Piper onto her hip.

Colton couldn't stop his gaze from flowing down her curvy body, then up again. A flash of what her nude body might look like slid through his brain. Colton gulped. Stacey—his sister's friend, the literal girl next door—was unbelievably sexy. Colton wondered if he was going insane.

“Isn't she sweet?” Stacey asked.

Colton lifted his head in a round nod. “Sweet,” he said. But frightening, he thought, although he would never admit it in a million years. Colton was no baby expert, and he had no idea what to do with a tot like Piper. For that matter, he wasn't sure what to do with all the forbidden thoughts he was having about Stacey.

\* \* \*

Later that night when Stacey had finally put Piper to sleep, she headed for her own bed after she'd washed her face and brushed her teeth. She couldn't shake the image of Colton holding Piper. The baby had taken to Colton almost immediately. He didn't know it, but Stacey did. Colton had looked wary about Piper, but the baby had clearly found him fascinating. She'd stared into his face as if she'd wanted to memorize every feature.

Stacey had found herself watching him more than she ever had in the past. Crazy, she told herself and closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. She counted backward from two hundred and finally fell asleep and into a vivid dream. Piper was crawling down the aisle of a chapel wearing her christening gown. Her sweet baby finally reached the altar, and Joe stood, with his back to Stacey.

“I do,” Joe said.

Her heart pounding, Stacey tried to scream, but no sound came from her mouth. She felt utterly helpless.

“Joe,” she whispered. “Joe...”

Stacey rushed toward the altar. “Joe,” she called.

Stacey watched Joe bend over to pick up Piper. Her heart melted. Joe was going to love Piper. Her baby was finally going to have a daddy. It seemed to take hours, but Stacey finally reached her groom and touched his shoulder.

He turned, but her groom wasn't Joe.

It was Colton.

Alarm rushed through her.

Stacey awakened in a sweat. Joe? Colton? This couldn't be. “Colton,” she whispered aloud and sat up in her bed. Why was she dreaming of Colton? Why was she even thinking of him? He was her neighbor, her best friend's brother. Ridiculous, she told herself. Beyond ridiculous. She shook her head and tried to push away the image of the tall, sexy cowboy.

Stacey forced herself to relax. She'd learned to seek sleep when her baby slept. Taking several deep breaths, she told herself not to think about Colton. She shouldn't think about his wide shoulders and his insanely curly, dark eyelashes. She shouldn't think about his strong jaw and great muscles and dependability. He was the kind of man who would always stand beside a friend and support him or her.

Colton was also a man who was clearly interested in another woman at the moment. Why else would he have sought Rachel's help about what women really want?

The reality of that made Stacey feel a little cranky, although, for the life of her, she couldn't say why.

“Go to sleep,” she told herself. She would be so busy tomorrow with Piper that she would truly regret one minute of sleep she'd lose thinking about Colton.

\* \* \*

The next day, just after Stacey put Piper down for her afternoon nap, she heard a knock at the front door. She knew that her mother had gone to a sewing circle meeting and her father was outside working, so she wanted to catch whoever was at the door before they awakened Piper. Heaven knew, Stacey cherished nap time.

She raced toward the front door and whisked it open. Colton stood on the front porch holding a pie. Surprise and pleasure rushed through her. “Well, hello to you. Come on inside.”

“I can’t stay long. My mother fixed a batch of apple pies, and she thought your family might enjoy one,” he said, following her.

“We certainly will. This will go great with the dinner I’m fixing tonight. Please, tell her I said thank you. Would you like some coffee?” she asked.

“No need,” he said. “I really can’t stay long. You’re fixing dinner, you say? Do I smell pot roast?”

“You do,” she said, and took the pie to the kitchen and quickly returned. “Since I’m not bringing home the bacon right now, I try to help around the house as much as possible. I fix dinner and clean while Piper naps. It’s the least I can do. I’m also thinking about doing some after-school tutoring in math and science. I can have kids come here and Piper’s not walking yet. I hear once the babies start walking, it’s a whole different ballgame.”

“I’m sure it is,” he said.

Stacey looked up at Colton and noticed his eyelashes again. When had he become sexy-looking? she wondered. Although she’d certainly always known Colton was male, she just hadn’t thought of him as a man. And she shouldn’t be thinking that way now either.

The silence stretched between them, and Stacey felt heat rush to her face. “Are you sure I can’t get you a cup of coffee? It’s the least I can do with you bringing over a pie.”

“Trust me. I didn’t bake that pie,” he said in a dry tone. “But I’ll take a cup if you’re insisting. I’ll be working outside, and it won’t hurt to get warmed up before I face the cold.”

“Just a moment,” she said, and returned to the kitchen to pour Colton’s coffee. As she reentered the den, she gave him the cup. “Any problems or just the regular endless chores?”

He nodded. “I need to do a little work on some fences. My dad’s back isn’t what it used to be, so I try to tackle anything that may cause him pain.”

“That’s nice of you,” she said. “He refuses to go to the doctor, doesn’t he?”

Colton nodded again. “He doesn’t believe in it. Says it’s a waste of time and money. The last time he went to the doctor, he nearly died from a burst appendix. And we almost had to beat him into going.”

“I remember when that happened,” Stacey said. “It was a long time ago. I’m sure someone has told him that there have been huge advances made in medical science.”

“All of us have told him that, but he’d rather eat nails than admit he’s hurting.”

“Maybe you can persuade him to go to the doctor if you take him out for lunch in Vicker’s Corners sometime,” she suggested.

“Possible,” he said. “Rachel might have better luck with him than I would. He has always let her get away with murder.”

Stacey laughed. “She would disagree and give you half a dozen examples of when she has gotten in trouble. But even I know he has been harder on you.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But I always felt as if I had good parents. I’m sure you feel the same way, too.”

“True,” she said. “My father can be a little remote sometimes, but he’s as solid as they come. After I had Piper, both my parents insisted I come back here to live with them.” A slice of guilt cut through her. “I just wish I could give Piper what I had growing up.” She felt the surprising threat of moisture in her eyes and blinked furiously. “It just wasn’t meant to be.”

Colton squeezed her arm. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. From where I sit, it looks as if you’re doing a dang good job. That baby is surrounded by people who love her. That’s more than a lot of kids can say.”

The tight feeling in her chest eased just a little from his words of encouragement. “Thanks. I have my share of doubts.”

“Well, stop your doubting. You’ve got a healthy baby, and she’s doing great,” he said. “Besides that, you’ve got a slice of Olive Foster’s famous apple pie in your future tonight.”

“The only way I’ll get a slice is if I hide it until after the meal,” she said.

“Well, that’s a no-brainer,” he said, and leaned toward her in a way that seemed much sexier than it should. “Hide the pie. Indulge yourself.”

Stacey’s heart raced at Colton’s instruction. A naughty image of how she could indulge herself with Colton raced through her mind, but she immediately slammed the door on her thoughts. After all, the last time she’d indulged herself she’d gotten pregnant.

### Chapter Three

“I’m sorry I can’t go with you,” Rachel said to Stacey on her cell phone. “My friend Abby called me at the last minute to babysit, and it’s her anniversary.”

“I understand. You and I can catch up later,” Stacey said, even though she dreaded attending Ella Mae Jergen’s baby shower. Ella Mae was married to a hotshot surgeon, and the couple owned houses in both Lubbock and in the next town past Horseback Hollow. Ella Mae was pregnant with her first baby. The shower was a big deal for Horseback Hollow because Ella Mae had been born and raised there and her parents still lived in town. The shower was being held in the Jergen’s mansion in the next town. Stacey couldn’t help feeling intimidated.

Ella Mae, however, had been supportive of Stacey and had attended the shower for Piper, so Stacey was determined to return the favor.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked as Stacey put a pot of beans on for dinner while she held Piper on her hip.

“Nothing,” Stacey said.

“Doesn’t sound like nothing to me,” Jeanne said, and put a lid on the beans. “Let me hold my grandbaby.”

All Stacey had to do was lean toward her mother, and Piper extended her chubby little arms to her Gabby. Stacey checked the chicken and vegetables. “Looking good,” she murmured.

“You don’t have to cook every night,” her mother said as she clucked over Piper.

“I’m not contributing to the household with green stuff, so I want to contribute in other ways,” Stacey said.

“I don’t want you overdoing it,” her mother said.

“I’m not. I’m young and healthy,” she said.

“That sounds like something I said when I was younger,” her mother said. “You still didn’t answer my question about your conversation with Rachel.”

Stacey sighed. “Ella Mae’s baby shower is tonight.”

A brief silence followed.

“Oh,” her mother said, because she knew that the Jergens were wealthy and anything they did had to be, oh, so perfect. “Do you want me to go with you?”

Her mother’s offer was so sweet that it brought tears to her eyes. Stacey put down her spoon and went to her mother to hug her. “You’re the best mother in the world. You know that, don’t you?”

Jeanne gave Stacey a big squeeze, then pulled back with a soft chuckle. “What makes you say that?”

“Because you always do the right thing. I wonder if I can do half as many right things as you have,” Stacey said, looking into her mother’s eyes and wishing that just by looking, she could receive all of her mother’s wisdom.

Her mother slid her hand around Stacey’s shoulders and gave her another squeeze. “You’re already doing the right thing. Look at this gorgeous, healthy baby. You’re a wonderful mother.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Stacey said, feeling as if she’d just received the highest praise possible.

“You don’t have to go to Ella Mae’s baby shower. Just drop off a gift,” her mother said.

“No,” Stacey said with a firm shake of her head. “She came to my shower. I should go to hers.”

Jeanne pressed her lips together. “If you’re sure...”

“I am,” Stacey said. “And you already said you don’t mind watching Piper. Right?”

“Not at all,” her mother said. “You don’t ask me often enough. I love my little Piper girl.”

Stacey’s heart swelled with emotion. “I’m so blessed,” she said.

“Yes, you are,” her mother said. “Now go get ready for Ella Mae’s shower. You hold your head high. Don’t forget it. You’ve done the right thing, and you’re a good mother. Just make sure you’re the second one out the door.”

Stacey looked at her mother in confusion. “Second one out the door?”

“I never told you this before, but if you ever go to a party that you don’t want to attend, then you can be the second one to leave. You don’t want to be the first, but being the second is fine,” her mother said.

Another word of wisdom Stacey swore to remember. “I’ll be watching for who leaves first.”

“And if anyone starts making insinuating comments about Joe, then pull out Piper’s baby pictures. That should shut them up right away.”

Stacey smiled at her mother. “Thanks, Mom.”

Stacey raced to her room to pull on a black dress and boots. She put on some lip gloss and concealer, then threw on a colorful scarf and her peacoat.

“See you later, Mom,” she called, then headed for her Toyota. Thank goodness snow and sleet had stayed away from Horseback Hollow during the past week. She started her car and got to the end of the driveway before she realized she had forgotten the gift for Ella Mae’s baby.

Stacey backtracked and collected the gift, then returned to her trusty car. She headed out of Horseback Hollow toward the next town, then took several turns down several back roads until she reached the gated driveway for Ella Mae’s house. The gate lifted to allow her entrance, and Stacey rode down the paved drive to the front of the Jergen mansion. The windows of the house were lit, and the front door was open. Stacey knew what she would find inside. A crystal chandelier and exquisite high-profile designer furniture and decor.

Stacey was accustomed to homemade decorations and freshly painted rooms. Mama Jeanne decorated her home with family photos and mementos. The Joneses’ home was warm and welcoming, but furniture had been chosen for durability, not how pretty it was.

A man approached Stacey as she paused in the driveway. “May I park your car, ma’am?”

Stacey blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m the valet for the evening,” he said.

Stacey blinked again. Heaven help her. Valet? Don’t fight it, she told herself. Let him park the car. She would have to park her own all the nights thereafter, and that was okay.

Stacey accepted a nonalcoholic basil-something cocktail. She would have preferred a beer. She joined in with the socializing and the games and predicted that Ella Mae would have a boy. Stacey suspected that Ella Mae’s husband would want a boy right off the bat, so she hoped Ella would be able to seal the deal with a male child.

When it came time for the big reveal of the baby’s sex, it was done via cake. Blue. Stacey had been correct. Everyone cheered.

Ella Mae circled the room with her posse and stopped to visit with Stacey.

“I’m so glad you could come,” Ella Mae said. “I know you’ve been busy with your baby.”

“So true,” Stacey said. “You’ll learn soon enough.”

“Well, I’ll have help,” Ella Mae said. “I’ll have a husband and a nanny.”

Stacey lost her breath. She felt as if she’d been slapped. She took a careful breath and remembered what her mother had said. She pulled out her cell phone. “Have you seen my Piper? She’s just gorgeous, don’t you think?” she asked as she flipped through the photos.

“What a darling,” one of Ella Mae’s friends said. “She’s beautiful.”

Stacey nodded. “And good as gold.”

A couple moments later Ella Mae and her pack moved on. Stacey watched the door and saw two guests leave. It was time for her to go. On the drive home she decided to stop at the Superette to

pick up some bananas for Piper. Piper loved bananas. Luckily, the Superette had quite a few. Then she headed to the only bar in town, the Two Moon Saloon, with the intention of drinking half a beer. She would be fine driving after drinking a whole beer, but Stacey wouldn't risk anything. Since she'd become a mother, everything had changed. She couldn't take any chances.

She went to the bar and ordered a beer. The first time in nearly a year and a half. She took a sip and felt so guilty she asked for a glass of water. Sensing the gazes of several men on her, she sipped at her water and wondered if coming here had been a good idea after all.

The bartender put another beer in front of her. "The guy at the end of the bar bought this for you."

Stacey glanced down the bar but didn't recognize the man. "Oh, I can't accept it. I don't know him."

"I can't take it back," the bartender said.

Feeling extremely uncomfortable, Stacey took another sip of water and eyed the door.

"Fancy meeting you here," a familiar male voice said.

"Oh, thank goodness," she said, and stretched both of her hands toward Colton.

"Problem?" he asked, glancing down at her hands clutching his arm.

"I just went to Ella Mae Jergen's baby shower. She made a snarky comment about my missing baby daddy. I came here for a beer, but I couldn't make myself drink it. And some guy bought me another beer. Save me," she said.

Colton chuckled and gently extracted her fingers from his arm. "Hey, Phil, buy Stacey's admirer a beer on me."

"Thank you," she said. "I was just going to drink half a beer, but I felt guilty after the first sip. Do you know how long it's been since I had a drink at a bar?"

"Apparently too long," Colton said.

"Maybe," she said.

"You don't have to give up living just because you had a baby," he said.

She nodded, but she didn't really agree.

Colton lifted her chin with his finger. "Your life is not over. You can still have fun," he said.

"I have fun," she said, unable to resist the urge to squirm. "I have lots of fun with Piper."

Colton shot her a doubtful glance. "You need to start getting out more. And I don't mean baby showers."

Stacey lifted her eyebrows at Colton's suggestion. "You don't mean dating, do you?"

"You don't have to date. You just need to get out. You're acting—" He broke off.

Stacey frowned. "I'm acting how?"

Colton scrubbed his jaw. "I don't know how to say this."

"Well, spit it out," she said. "I want to know."

Colton sighed. "You're acting...old."

Stacey stared at him in disbelief. "Old?" she repeated. "I'm acting old?" She couldn't remember when she'd felt so insulted. "I'm only twenty-four. How can I be old?"

"I didn't say you are old," Colton said in a low voice. "I said you're acting old."

"Well, I have a baby now. I need to be responsible," she said.

"I agree, but you don't have to stop living your life," he said.

Stacey paused, thinking about what Colton had told her. "You're Mr. Responsibility. I can't believe you're telling me to cut loose and be a wild woman."

"I didn't say you should be a wild woman. I just said you need to get out more," he said.

"Hmm," Stacey said. "I'm going to have to think about this." She paused. "I wonder who I could call if I decide to get out. If I decide I want to have half a beer."

"You can call me," Colton offered. "Remember, I'm Mr. Responsibility."

In her experience, Stacey knew that Colton was Mr. Responsibility. He always had been and she valued that quality in him now more than ever. But lately, when she looked at Colton, she couldn't seem to forget what it had felt like to dance in his arms on New Year's Eve. And that almost kiss they'd shared. Almost, but not quite. She wondered what a real kiss from him would feel like. Stacey almost wished he'd kiss her and she would be disappointed, so she could stop thinking about him so much.

\* \* \*

The next day, Colton showed up unexpectedly at the Joneses' house. Stacey was happy to see him even though he seemed intent on asking her father's thoughts about some issue with the cattle. She brought Colton and her father some coffee. Colton tossed her a smile but kept talking with her father.

Stacey couldn't help feeling a little jealous of the time he was spending with her father. She knew Piper would awaken any moment, and her time would then be divided. Hurry up, Dad. But she knew the mental urging was useless. Her father was usually stone quiet, but when it came to talking about the ranch, once he got going, he didn't stop.

She checked her watch and felt her stomach clench as she waited for Piper to call out for her. Finally, her father took a potty break. Hallelujah.

"Better today?" Colton asked her as he headed for the door, where Stacey waited on the porch.

She nodded. "I guess so. Sorry if I freaked out on you last night."

"You didn't," he said. "It's like I said. You just need to get out more. I know your mama would be more than happy to watch Piper for you every now and then."

"I don't want to burden her," Stacey said as she stepped out of the front porch with him. "They've taken Piper and me in. I don't want to take advantage of them."

"You wouldn't ever do that," he said. "Listen, how about if I take you to the bar and grill in town? What's a good day for you?"

Surprise rippled through her. "Are you sure? I don't want to intrude on your, uh, relationship with your new girlfriend."

He hesitated a half beat. "She won't mind," he said. "When do you want to go?"

"I think Thursday may work. I'll have to ask Mama first. Can I get back to you?"

"Sure," he said, and squeezed her arm just like one of her brothers would. "Remember to smile."

She stared after him as he started to walk away. "Wait," she said, and he turned around. "Do I frown that much?"

He paused. "You used to seem a lot happier," Colton said. "I hate to see you so sad and burdened."

"My life is different now," she said.

"But is it sad?" he asked.

She took a deep breath and thought about his question. "Not really." She smiled. "I'll call you about dinner at the grill followed by a beer. I appreciate the pity date."

"It's no pity date," he said. "We've known each other a long time. We should be able to cheer each other up. You may have to do it for me sometime," he said.

"That's hard for me to imagine," she said.

"You never know," he said, and her father returned to the den, ready to talk ranching.

Stacey gazed at Colton. There was more to him than she'd ever thought. Stacey wondered what it would be like to go on a real date with Colton. She wondered how it would feel to be the object of his affection. Rolling her eyes at herself, she shook her head and went to the laundry room to wash another load of baby clothes.

The next day, Stacey played with Piper, after cleaning the house and fixing dinner. She couldn't help thinking about Colton's offer for an evening out. It wouldn't be fancy, but it would be a relief. She debated calling him ten times over, then finally gave in. He didn't pick up, so she hung up. Five minutes later, she called again. He still didn't answer, but this time she left an answer.

A half hour later, he returned her call. “Hello?” she said as she stirred soup for dinner and held Piper on her hip.

“Need an escape?” Colton asked.

She gave a short laugh. “How did you know?”

“Saw the hang-up, then heard the desperation in your voice mail,” he said.

“I’m not that desperate,” she said, even though she really needed an evening out.

“I know. Everyone needs an escape hatch every now and then,” he said.

“What’s yours?” she asked.

“If I really want to get away, I can go into town or even Vicker’s Corners,” he said.

“But you don’t have a baby,” she said.

He chuckled. “That I don’t,” he said. “It won’t be fancy. Tomorrow night okay? What time do you want me to pick you up?”

“Five-thirty,” she said.

“Early night?”

She laughed. “These days I only do early nights,” she said. “You have a problem with that?”

“None at all, I’ll see you tomorrow at five-thirty.” He chuckled. “Call me if you need to escape earlier.”

Stacey couldn’t help smiling. “I’ll pace myself. Bye for now.”

The following day, Stacey’s afternoon fell apart. Piper woke up early from her nap, and Stacey feared she’d burned the baked spaghetti casserole. She was having a bad hair day, and Piper was so cranky, Stacey wasn’t sure she should ask her mother to babysit for the evening.

“Are you teething, sweetie?” she asked Piper.

Piper’s sweet face crumpled in pain. Stacey sighed. “Mama, she’s so fussy. I’m not sure I should leave her with you.”

Her mother extended her arms to Piper, but Piper turned away. “Oh, come on, you sugar,” Jeanne said to Piper. “I’ll take care of you. Rub your sore gums with something that will make you feel better.”

“No rum,” Stacey said.

“I wasn’t thinking of rum,” Mama Jeanne said with an innocent expression on her face.

“No whiskey,” Stacey added.

“I would never numb a baby’s gums with whiskey,” her mother said. “But bourbon...”

Stacey sighed. “Let me find the Orajel. I should have given it to her earlier.”

“You know what your doctors say. You need to stay on top of the pain. You’ve told me that too many times to count when my hip was hurting.”

“You’re right, Mama. I should have done better for Piper,” she said, feeling guilty.

“Well, don’t leap off a ledge. She’s not suffering that much,” her mother said, snatching Piper from her arms. “Go put on some lipstick and blush. You look worn out.”

Piper fussed and squabbled, but didn’t quite cry. “You’re sure you’ll be okay?”

“I’ve had a lot more babies than you have, sweetheart,” Jeanne said.

“I’m working hard to meet a high standard,” Stacey muttered.

“Hold on there,” her mother said, putting her hand on Stacey’s arm. “You’re a great mother. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. I didn’t have to take care of my babies by myself. I had your father to help me, and trust me, he walked the floor many times at night to comfort all of you.”

“I just feel bad that Piper won’t have the kind of mother and father I had,” Stacey said.

“Piper’s getting plenty of loving. Her mama needs to stop trying for sainthood. Enjoy your evening out. It will be good for you and your baby.”

“If you say so,” Stacey said.

“I do. Now, go put on some lipstick,” she said.

“Colton won’t care. He’s just taking me out to be nice,” Stacey said, halfway hoping her mother would deny it.

“Maybe so, but it will make you feel better. That’s the important thing,” her mother said.

“Right,” Stacey said, and headed to her room to remake herself for a trip to the grill where she would eat a burger and fries. This was how her life had evolved. Her big exciting night within a month was a trip to the grill.

Pathetic, she thought, but couldn’t deny she was just glad to get away from the ranch. She put on lipstick, a little blush and some mascara. At the last moment, she sprayed her wrists with perfume.

“Stacey,” her mother called from down the hall. “Colton’s here.”

A rush of excitement raced through her, and she rushed down the hall. Colton stood there dressed in jeans, a coat and his Stetson. “Hi,” he said. “You look nice.”

“Colton is afraid of Piper,” her mother announced.

“I’m not afraid of her,” he corrected. “She just looks so happy in your arms that I don’t want to disrupt her.”

Stacey chuckled under her breath. “You can go after a bear on your ranch, but a baby brings you to your knees.”

Colton scowled at her. “I can shoot a bear.”

Both Stacey and her mother erupted with laughter. “We should give him a break,” her mother said. “Y’all enjoy yourselves.” She lowered her voice. “Drink a beer for me.”

“Mama,” Stacey said, shocked.

“Oh, stop. Even a mother of seven likes to kick up her heels every now and then. See you later,” she said, and returned to the kitchen.

Stacey met Colton’s gaze. “I never expected that.”

“Me either,” Colton said, then lifted his lips in a crafty grin. “But I liked it.”

Colton helped her into his truck and drove into town. “So, have you figured out what you want on your burger? Cheese, onions, mustard...”

“Cheese, mustard, grilled onions and steak sauce,” she said. “I don’t need the whole burger. I want the bun and fixin’s.”

“And French fries?” he asked.

“Yes, indeed,” she said.

“We can take the burger into the bar if you want your beer with your meal,” he said.

“The bar is loud,” she said. “I can have a soda or water with my burger. It will be nice to hear myself think.”

“Does your baby scream that much?” he asked.

Stacey shook her head. “Piper’s much better now that she’s done with her colic. But now she’s teething. I need to remember to soothe her gums. I forgot today.”

“Must be hard. All that crying,” he said.

“She sleeps well at night and usually takes a good long nap. I’m lucky she’s not crawling right now. She’s really a good baby, Colton. I could have it much harder,” she said, wanting Colton to like Piper.

“Yeah,” he said, but he didn’t sound convinced.

“Is my Mama right? Are you afraid of Piper?” she asked in a singsong voice.

“I’m not afraid of a baby,” he said, his tone cranky. “I just haven’t been around babies very much.”

Stacey backed off. She wanted the evening to be pleasant. “How do you like your burger?”

“As big as I can get it. Mustard, mayonnaise, onion, pickle, lettuce and tomato,” he said.

“You can have half of mine,” she offered.

“We’ll see. Maybe your appetite will improve now that you’re out of the pen,” he said.

She laughed, but his teasing made her feel good. “You are so bad.”

“And you are so glad,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said. She couldn’t disagree.

Colton pulled into the parking lot of The Horseback Hollow Grill, and he helped her out of his truck. His gentlemanly manners made her feel younger and more desirable. They walked into the grill and had to wait a few minutes for a table. Maybe more than one person needed an escape tonight, Stacey thought.

They sat, ordered, and the server delivered their sodas. Stacey took a long, cool sip of her drink and closed her eyes. “Good,” she said.

“Simple pleasures are the best,” Colton said.

Stacey looked at Colton for a long moment and shrugged her shoulders. “So, talk to me about grown-up stuff.”

His eyes rounded. “Grown-up stuff?” he echoed.

“Yes,” she said. “Movies, politics, current events.”

“Well, politicians are as crooked as ever. There are blizzards and tsunamis. Wait till summer and there will be hurricanes, mudslides and fires.” He grimaced. “I hate to admit it, but I haven’t seen a movie lately. Rachel is watching the reality shows. I watch a lot of the History Channel,” he said.

“What about movies?” she asked. “Do you like James Bond?”

He nodded. “I did see the most recent one. Lots of action.”

“And lots of violence,” she said.

“Yeah, but the good guy wins.”

“That’s most important,” she said, and the server delivered their meals.

“That was fast,” she said.

“Burgers are what they are known for,” Colton said, and took a big bite out of his.

Stacey took a bite of her own and closed her eyes to savor a burger someone else had cooked for her. “Perfect amount of mustard and steak sauce,” she said. “But all I need is half.”

“You sure about that?” Colton teased, taking another big bite.

“I’m sure,” she said, and enjoyed several more bites of her burger. She ate a little more than half and stopped. “Oh, no. Now I’m full. How can I eat the fries? Let alone drink a beer?”

“You need to learn to pace yourself,” Colton said as he stared at his fries.

Stacey liked the wicked glint in his eyes that belied his practical advice. “Maybe I should fix some fences. Maybe that would help my appetite,” she said, unable to force herself to eat even one French fry.

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