



# LITTLE COWGIRL ON HIS DOORSTEP

DONNA  
ALWARD



*Cherish*<sup>™</sup>

DONNA ALWARD

**Little Cowgirl on His Doorstep**

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For Avery the sight of rugged and dangerously sexy Callum is enough to set her pulse racing. Too bad she's only on his ranch to tell him that her adorable baby niece, Nell, is his daughter! But when Callum wants them to stay with him, how can Avery resist the feeling that she has found the place she and Nell truly belong?

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## **Avery's pulse started to thump. What did he want? Why had she felt so very glad to see him striding across the pavement?**

"She's mine," he blurted out.

That was not what Avery had expected. "I beg your pardon?"

His face softened. "She looks exactly like my baby sister did at that age. Today's appointment... it's a formality, Avery. I know she's mine. I've known it deep down for a few days now."

Avery's thoughts jumbled together. He had a sister? Callum was so gruff and solitary it seemed impossible to think of him surrounded by parents and siblings. And yet she knew he hadn't just hatched, fully formed, into the broody recluse he seemed to be.

And then there was the heady fact that, without proof, he was actually acknowledging that Nell was his daughter.

She was happy about that. And scared as hell, too. The same feelings she'd had that first day came rushing back. Afraid of what he might demand. Afraid of losing the most precious thing in her life.

Dear Reader,

Do you have sisters? Aren't they great? I mean, every now and again they make you want to pull your hair out or maybe roll your eyes, but when push comes to shove...

My sisters are quite a bit older than I am, and I'm sure when we were all—ahem—much younger there were times they wished I would just disappear. Like when they had dates and I wanted to tag along so I didn't miss anything. (Honestly, I was like a bad rash they couldn't get rid of!) Or when they started taking on adult responsibilities and the baby of the family seemed overly privileged. (Who, me?)

But there are other times when only a sister will do. Your sister always has your back. Your sister is one of the few people who can share the family memories you've gathered your whole life. Your sister will cry with you and your sister will make you cry with laughter. Your sister will keep your secrets. In short: there's nothing like a sister.

Which brings me to the current heroine of this book, Avery. Avery misses her sister, Crystal, so much. They were best friends, confidantes. Avery's a bit lost without Crystal and the only thing keeping her going is raising her baby niece, Nell. Having Nell is like having a little bit of her sister there with her. Being a good mom is the most important thing in her life, so dealing with Nell's father, Callum, becomes a bit tricky. Especially when she finds herself falling for him...

I thought about my sisters a lot while writing this story, and baby Nell is named after my own sister, Janell. I wonder if she will grow up to have the same twinkle in her eye and wicked sense of humor that my sister has?

Warmest wishes,

*Donna*

## About the Author

A busy wife and mother of three (two daughters and the family dog), **DONNA ALWARD** believes hers is the best job in the world: a combination of stay-at-home mom and romance novelist. An avid reader since childhood, Donna always made up her own stories. She completed her arts degree in English literature in 1994, but it wasn't until 2001 that she penned her first full-length novel and found herself hooked on writing romance. In 2006 she sold her first manuscript, and now writes warm, emotional stories for Mills & Boon® Cherish™.

In her new home office in Nova Scotia, Donna loves being back on the east coast of Canada after nearly twelve years in Alberta, where her career began, writing about cowboys and the West. Donna's debut romance, *Hired by the Cowboy*, was awarded the Bookseller's Best Award in 2008 for Best Traditional Romance.

With the Atlantic Ocean only minutes from her doorstep, Donna has found a fresh take on life and promises even more great romances in the near future!

Donna loves to hear from readers. You can contact her through her website, [www.donnaalward.com](http://www.donnaalward.com), her page at [www.myspace.com/dalward](http://www.myspace.com/dalward), or through her publisher.

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To my sisters

## CHAPTER ONE

*HE HAS A face that could frighten small children.*

That was the first thing that sprang to Avery Spencer's mind as she stared up at the imposing figure of Callum Shepard. With his stubbled face and long tangle of hair, he didn't look anything like the clean-cut, charismatic groomsman she'd met just over a year ago. And definitely not the image of a doting dad, she thought with dismay. He stood with feet spread wide, one broad hand splayed on the edge of the door, glowering down at her like she'd committed a cardinal sin.

Except if anyone was the sinner here, it was him. And she reminded herself of that fact to keep from being intimidated—as surely that was his intent. She felt the first tiny trickle of sweat sneak down her spine in the cloying summer heat. Everyone always said Alberta was a *dry* heat, but that sure wasn't keeping her shirt from sticking to her back. It made her shift uncomfortably just at the moment she needed to be in absolute control. This could go so wrong in so many ways....

"What do you want?" he asked sharply.

Apparently he had also acquired the manners of a boor. How lovely. For a brief second Avery considered that making this trip might have been a colossal mistake. But then she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. No, it had been the right thing to do. At least after today there would no longer be any secrets or lies. She wouldn't spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder wondering what would happen if he ever found out about Nell. Far better to face it head-on and get it over with.

Besides, when it came down to brass tacks, Avery really believed that Nell deserved to know both parents. She swallowed, battling against the familiar wave of grief whenever she thought of her sister, Crystal. In this case, Nell deserved to get to know the one true parent she had left. Callum.

"You don't remember me, do you, Mr. Shepard?"

His dark brows pulled together. "Should I?"

That stung. After all, she remembered him, and he'd looked far different the last time she'd seen him, which was one year, one month and...what, five days ago? Not that she was counting, mind you. Back then his hair had been precisely cut, his face clean-shaven and he'd been wearing a suit with a single white rose in the lapel. Avery's tongue snuck out and licked across her dry lips. She knew that because the moment he'd stepped into the hotel suite she'd looked up and her mouth had gone dry and her palms sweaty. Callum Shepard had been gorgeous. And when he'd smiled, her stomach had gone all swirly.

Even when he'd looked right past Avery and his gaze had fallen on her sister.

Now his hair hung in straggly waves down to his collar, he looked as if he hadn't shaved in two days and his plaid shirt was only half tucked into old jeans. And smile? More like permanent scowl. The change was remarkable—and disheartening considering the circumstances. Not to mention incredibly intimidating.

Being intimidated wouldn't suit at all, not if she were to stay in control of the situation as she planned. "I'm Avery Spencer." She held out her hand, determined to meet the task ahead with politeness and a modicum of grace.

His face stayed blank and his hand stayed beside his thigh. Not much surprise that it didn't sound familiar, she supposed. After all, he'd only had eyes for Crystal that weekend. He probably hadn't given Avery a second glance. Why would he?

"It doesn't ring a bell, sorry." And still he stood in the middle of the doorway. No invitation to come in, no nothing. Gatekeeper, lord and master of his own domain. She lowered her hand again, feeling foolish.

"We met in Niagara Falls last year."

Ah, she thought with satisfaction. A flicker of *something* passed over his face. Avery swallowed and added, “At Pete and Elizabeth’s wedding.”

His dark eyes settled on her, so intense it made her want to fidget. She clenched her fingers together and made herself remain still.

“You were there?” he asked.

If that was an attempt to make her feel insignificant, it succeeded. Was she so plain that she wasn’t even the least bit noticeable? The slightest bit memorable? Granted, she’d never been as beautiful as her sister and whenever they were together, Avery did tend to fade into the background next to Crystal’s perfect figure and pretty face. But confirmation that he didn’t remember at all...

Ouch.

“I was in the wedding party,” she explained, wishing she could just tell him her reason for showing up and get it over with. But she had to ease into it. Especially since she hadn’t really been afforded so much as a smile or welcome. This was going to be so much harder than she’d imagined, and she’d practiced the words in her head over and over on the flight from Toronto to Edmonton, and from the drive from Edmonton to Cadence Creek. Now those words didn’t seem to fit the situation at all.

“You were?”

Why did he keep questioning everything she said? Annoyance flickered and she struggled to tamp it down. She had to keep a lid on her temper. Calm and rational was the only way to get through this first meeting.

“I was one of Elizabeth’s bridesmaids. You were Pete’s best man.” She tried a smile, hoping to soften him a touch. A slight breeze ruffled her blouse, offering a tiny bit of relief from the blazing heat. There weren’t even any shade trees to offer respite from the sun, just green and brown fields surrounding the rather plain farmhouse, broken only by a large barn and a couple of sheds.

“Yes, I think I can remember that much,” he said, a touch impatiently.

Avery looked over her shoulder, glancing back at the car she’d rented at the airport. So far Nell hadn’t made a peep—but that wouldn’t hold out forever. She was glad now that she’d chosen to leave Nell in the car, considering Shepard’s convenient amnesia about the weekend in question. But time was ticking. The window was rolled all the way down, but it was too hot to leave the baby in the car for more than a few minutes.

She turned back, deciding they were getting nowhere and she might as well step it up. “You probably don’t remember me because you were pretty interested in my sister,” she stated plainly. “Crystal.”

Something lit in his eyes. So he did remember. She wasn’t surprised. It was hard to forget Crystal Spencer once you’d met her. Pain flickered at the thought. Avery’s sister had been the brightest light in her life. Her death had been sudden and shocking, only a few days after giving birth to Nell. Avery had been plunged into darkness, losing her only real family.

But the darkness only lasted for a short time. Nell had become the new light in her life. Her saving grace.

“I remember your sister,” he said, a touch of caution in his voice. “But that doesn’t explain why you’re knocking on my door...what did you say your name was, again?”

“Avery,” she repeated firmly. “My name is Avery.”

“Right. Look, if this is about Crystal, we had an understanding from the start. It was a weekend thing. No expectations.”

Avery noticed he ran his hand through his hair, though, like he wasn’t quite as cool about everything as he’d first appeared. And Avery was quite aware that the terms of the weekend had been set out from the start. Crystal had made that abundantly plain each time Avery tried to convince her to try to find Callum. Each time Crystal had flatly refused to budge. She’d been determined to raise

Nell on her own. She didn't want some here-today-gone-tomorrow soldier as a father to her child. Especially since they barely knew each other.

Avery had never judged Crystal for how she'd conceived Nell. But she had judged her for willingly keeping silent about her pregnancy. Avery still believed that Callum deserved to know, but she wished she could take back the things she'd said to her sister.

"Crystal is dead, Mr. Shepard."

His hand dropped to his side as silence fell around them. Avery swallowed around the thickness in her throat. Saying the words never got easier.

"I'm so sorry," he said quietly, his voice a low rumble, and his gaze softened. It was the first sign of humanity she'd glimpsed in him.

"I don't know how else to put this, so I'm just going to say it," she said, taking a deep breath and thinking a quick, silent prayer for strength. She was going to need it in the hours...in the days...ahead. "Crystal died shortly after delivering a baby. *Your* baby, Mr. Shepard. She's sleeping in the car behind me, and she's just over four months old."

Callum heard the words but they seemed to swim around in his head, not fitting together right. Crystal...Niagara Falls...baby.

But they'd been careful...hadn't they?

There had to be some mistake. He couldn't be a father. He remembered Avery, all right. He'd been flat-out lying about that part, not wanting to give himself away. At the first glimpse of her he'd flashed back to a memory of the bridesmaids, all lined up in dresses the color of a peacock feather. She'd been there, all right, an understated beauty next to the flashier glamour of her sister. At the time he'd thought her fresh and innocent. Perfect. And intimidating as hell.

But that didn't mean Avery was telling the whole story. After all, most scams succeeded because they carried a whiff of truth, just enough to be credible. Her presence here rattled him, so he held his cards close to his chest.

"I'm not a father," he heard himself say. "It's impossible."

"I assure you it's not," she repeated. "You did have sex with my sister that weekend, didn't you?" She blinked at him innocently. "You'll notice I refrain from using the term 'making love' as I'm relatively sure love had nothing to do with it. Considering you'd just met and then never contacted her again."

Her reprimand broke through the haze in his mind and he tightened his fingers around the door. Lord, she was a piece of work. Righteousness all wrapped up in a tidy little package of uptight conservatism—from her tailored white trousers to her buttoned-up blouse with the scarf precisely knotted—just so—around her neck. His gaze dropped to her shoes. Little heels, not too high, of course. Nothing that smacked of outright sex appeal for this woman. Oh, he had her pegged, all right. Or at least the part she was playing.

He certainly didn't trust her enough yet to know if it was all an act or not. For all he knew, Crystal was fine and dandy. Or maybe this was Avery's kid and she was out to scam him for child support.

For the first time since opening the door, he felt his lips curve slightly. If she was after bags of money she was barking up the wrong tree. He'd sunk every dime he had into buying this place and the milk quota that went along with it. All he wanted from life now was to be left alone. To live his life on this quiet section of land with the open space and some livestock for company.

"Is something entertaining?" she asked, pursing her lips.

"Not a bit," he replied. "In fact, I don't believe a single word out of your mouth. I suggest you turn around and head back to where you came from."

And if his conscience dug at him a little bit, he would just damn well ignore it.

He stepped inside and shut the door in her face.

Only when it was latched did he close his eyes. He pressed his forehead to the door and let out a long, unsteady breath. This was not happening. It was not. Yes, he'd had a fling over a year ago, but it had been a bad time for him. Jane had broken things off and given him back the ring, destroying his hopes for the future. He'd wanted to be anywhere but at a wedding, pretending to celebrate a happy-ever-after he no longer believed in. Crystal had been the perfect diversion. But surely Elizabeth would have mentioned if her maid of honor had ended up pregnant. Women were close like that, weren't they?

But then he remembered that after the wedding, Elizabeth had moved to Quebec with Pete, hundreds of kilometers away from Crystal Spencer. They'd only been married a few months when Pete—along with Callum and the rest of their section—had been deployed.

Callum had been the only one of them to make it home. That fact still made his guts churn.

Through the wood he heard the slam of her car door. She was going, then. It was just as well. Callum Shepard wasn't anyone's father.

The sharp knock vibrated through his forehead and made him stand straight up. Not going. With a sigh he prepared to let her know in no uncertain terms that he wasn't playing her game. He opened the door and...

And stared, swallowing the words sitting on his tongue.

Avery cradled a tiny bundle in her arms, a still-sleeping bundle, wrapped in a soft yellow knitted blanket with only her head poking out of the folds. Tiny lips were surrounded by plump cheeks; the tiniest button nose dotted the middle of her face and dark hair showing just a hint of curl peeked out from beneath a tiny pink-and-white bonnet.

As much as he hated to admit it, it was hard to keep such a hard stance when the baby was right there in front of him rather than stashed away in a car.

"Miss Spencer," he began, more affected than he cared to admit, "I know what you're doing. You're playing the cute baby card."

"Is it working?"

Avery's clear blue eyes actually looked hopeful. Before they'd only held hostility and derision. She'd judged him for indulging in a brief affair with her sister. Why would she feel the need to do that if she were lying about him being the father? She was either telling the truth or she was an extraordinarily good liar.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending how one looked at it—he been burned before. Burned badly enough that he didn't trust himself to know the difference. No matter how much those extraordinary blue eyes implored him to believe her.

"Cute or not, I'm going to need more proof than your say-so," he answered. Yet he couldn't pull his gaze away from the fringe of dark hair. Avery was blonde. Crystal had been blonde. The baby had dark brown hair, like his.

Which proved absolutely nothing, he reminded himself.

"Could we at least come in?" she asked softly. "It's silly to be standing on your doorstep." She fluttered her hand. "The mosquitoes are out and I don't want Nell getting bit."

"Nell?"

Avery nodded. "Short for Janell. It was the name of Crystal's nurse at the hospital."

Something strange passed over Avery's face as she said the words. Callum's jaw tightened as he recognized the emotion. Pain. Grief. Lord knew he was familiar enough with them both. The longer this conversation went on, the more he was inclined to think she might be telling the truth.

He wondered what had happened to Crystal. He'd barely known her, but he did have enough humanity left in his soul to feel sorry she was gone. And to feel sorry for Avery, who had clearly loved her.

Reluctantly he stood back and pushed the door open. "Come on in, then. Don't mind the mess."

She'd soon learn that he came just as he was. And that would have her leaving soon enough.

Callum Shepard's house was a disaster. Well, perhaps not a disaster, but it was clear it was a bachelor's house and that he couldn't be bothered with housework. Dirty dishes were piled in the sink, a basket piled with dirty clothes was left in the hall and bits of newspapers were scattered over what sparse furniture he had. "Sorry about the mess," he offered again, but his voice was missing any sort of sincerity. He wasn't sorry at all, she realized. And more than ever she was certain that she could leave Alberta and go back home to Ontario with a clear conscience after today. Nell certainly did not belong here.

Along with the guilt came an intense wave of relief. Because while she'd felt all along that telling Callum about Nell was the *right* thing, it certainly wasn't the *easy* thing. Growing up without a father had affected Avery profoundly and she didn't want that for Nell. But telling Callum was risky, too. Crystal had named her guardian but a biological father could challenge that arrangement, couldn't he?

But Callum Shepard had no interest in being a father. That was as plain as the nose on her face. And Avery wanted to keep Nell with her for always. Setting the guidelines was the second reason she was here in Cadence Creek.

She perched on a corner of the couch, the only space free of papers or random clothing that hadn't been put away. With Nell tucked in the crook of her arm, she sat her purse on her knee and took out her wallet. "Here," she said, handing out the plastic-covered card. "This is her birth certificate."

He took the card from her fingers and looked at it a moment before handing it back. "That doesn't prove anything."

"You're listed as the father."

"She could have put anyone's name on there."

Indignation burned through Avery's veins and she fought to keep her voice down. "But she didn't put anyone's name. She put *yours*. And you know the dates add up. Crystal wouldn't lie about something like that." She shifted a little. Truth was, Crystal had been going to leave it blank. One of the last conversations they'd had was when Avery had finally convinced her to name Callum as the father on record.

He took a seat in a chair across from her and rested his elbows on his knees. "I beg your pardon because this is going to sound harsh, so let's just get it out of the way, shall we? Yes, I had a weekend fling with your sister. But it wasn't one-sided. She was just as willing as I was. And as far as her not lying about something like that, what makes you so sure? She certainly kept the existence of her baby a secret. A lie of omission is still a lie, you know. Why not lie on the birth certificate as well?"

Her mouth opened and closed a few times as she struggled to find the right words to respond.

"I know that probably makes you angry," he continued, "but there it is."

The baby started to squirm in her arms and Avery shifted Nell's weight, hoping to keep her quiet a little while longer. She'd done what she'd set out to do. She'd told him. She'd given him a chance. Nothing else was required to keep her conscience clean. "That's it, then?"

"Was there more you wanted from me? Child support, perhaps?"

The cool tone of his voice eradicated any hope of them dealing with this amicably. He thought she was a lying money grubber even though he hadn't put it in those exact terms. Her nostrils flared as the words of a crushing setback trembled on her tongue. There was no point stirring up any more of a hornet's nest, not when she was close to having what she wanted. She held Nell closer. "There's nothing I want from you, Mr. Shepard. I just thought you deserved to know you had a daughter. I didn't agree with Crystal's stance to not tell you. Now that I have, I'll be on my way."

On her way. Like it was a short drive around the corner to go home. It hadn't been easy to find him and in the end someone she knew had broken a few rules as a personal favor to get his contact information. Avery had taken a week off work—unpaid—in order to fly out here because how did you deliver this sort of news by phone or in a letter?

On one hand she'd half hoped that Callum would own up to his responsibilities so they could come to an agreement. In her mind she'd worked up a whole proposal for how she would raise Nell

as her own but promise Callum he could be involved in his daughter's upbringing. It had been quite inspired, actually, covering almost any contingency she could think of. The perfect plan so that Nell would have a loving home with her but would also grow up knowing her father—something Avery and Crystal had never had.

The speech was going to go to waste, but the end result was the same. Nell was going home with her. If Callum wasn't interested, that was his business. She would do everything to make sure Nell had a full, happy life.

She slid her purse strap over her shoulder and stood, tucking Nell's blanket closer around her. Nell's tiny dark eyes were open—at first they'd seemed blue but now Avery was sure they were going to be brown, like Callum's. Avery blinked against sudden tears and made her way out of the cluttered living room to the front door again.

"Wait."

Her hand was reaching for the knob when his voice stopped her. She turned around to find him standing in the space between the living room and kitchen, indecision marking his face.

"Why?" he asked quietly. "Why did you disagree with her about telling me?"

"Why do you think?"

He frowned. "If I really were the father, wouldn't Crystal have wanted to at least ask for financial support?"

Avery studied him. "She said you were very clear during your...brief time together, that as far as you were concerned weddings were all a sham and you never wanted to have either a wife or kids."

Whatever feeling she'd sensed behind the dark depths of his eyes was quickly shuttered away. "And you didn't agree with her?" he asked.

Did it really matter if he believed her? Perhaps it was better if he didn't. She could walk away free and clear without having to give up her daughter. That's what Nell was to her now. Avery had had her since birth and the love she had for her was so pure, so deep...

And that was why she knew she couldn't lie, even though telling the truth complicated everything and risked the very relationship she cherished most. When it came to Nell, Avery had to know that every decision she made was true and honest. When the time came for Avery to explain about Nell's parents, she wanted to have a clear conscience. No white lies, no glossing over of the truth. Avery had been brought up that way and it had sucked. If there was any way at all that Nell could know her father, Avery wanted to make that possible.

"Crystal and I grew up without a father," she explained quietly. "He took off when I was only eighteen months old—I have no memories of him. He left my mother pregnant with Crystal. We didn't have a bad life—I'm not saying that," she hurried to assure him, though it hadn't exactly been ideal either. "But to say I didn't wonder what it would have been like...that something wasn't missing..."

She met his gaze. He was watching her curiously and she realized that despite his radical change in appearance, the dark depths of his eyes were the same. Mysterious and magnetic all at once.

"Even the divorce kids in school spent time with their dads and I didn't even know where mine was or what he looked like," she explained. "I don't want Nell to have those same feelings because her mother wasn't strong enough to tell the truth when it mattered."

"You're not her mother."

The words were like a slap, and at that moment Avery knew he'd never understand. She rubbed her hand along Nell's back, feeling the warmth through the blanket. "Oh, yes, I am. In every possible way that counts."

She opened the door, feeling the warm July air puff against her face. The sun was just starting its descent and this side of the yard was awash with golden light. Nell twisted her head irritably, trying to get the glare out of her eyes.

Avery shifted her so that her small head was tucked safely into the curve of her neck and made her way down the steps.

“Miss Spencer.”

She turned around. “What?”

He’d come outside in his stocking feet and stood at the top of the steps, hands on his hips. He really was intimidating looking with his scruffy beard and semi-wild hair and muscular build that Avery knew came from years of military training and now, apparently, manual labor.

Intimidating and manly and innately sexy all at the same time. That much hadn’t changed, either. Avery clenched her teeth together. Like that really mattered.

“Where are you staying tonight?”

“I don’t know.” Truth be told, she’d come straight here from the airport, wanting to get the conversation over with first. She’d probably go back to Edmonton and find a room there. Was the town of Cadence Creek even big enough for a hotel?

“There’s a bed-and-breakfast in town. That’s probably the nicest. Otherwise there’s a hotel out closer to the highway.”

Avery held back a snort. His concern was so touching. Not like *he* was putting himself out and offering any hospitality. She got the feeling that Callum Shepard was in it for one person and one person only—himself, and anyone else be damned.

“Thanks,” she answered, and turned her back on him.

It took a minute to get Nell buckled into her car seat and Avery could tell that the baby was growing more restless. They’d have to find a place to relax and soon, because Nell was going to need a diaper change and a bottle and some playtime.

Without saying another word to Callum she started the car and turned it around, heading back out the driveway.

When she looked in her rearview mirror, he was still standing on the steps, watching them leave.

## CHAPTER TWO

EVERY HAD SURMISED that twenty-four hours might not be enough time to work things out with Callum, so when she'd booked her return flight she'd left a full day between arrival and departure. Since Callum wasn't at all interested in Nell, she called the airline and asked about switching to an earlier flight. Unfortunately, because it was high season, everything was sold out. She could put herself on the standby list, but traveling standby with a baby didn't sound like her favorite way to spend a day. They'd just make a mini vacation of it, then spend the full day in Cadence Creek and then head back as planned.

They stayed at the bed-and-breakfast and now, in the bright sun of a July morning, she had the window to their room open. A perfumed breeze wafted in from the flower gardens and Avery could hear birds singing in the bushes as they perched on the edge of the birdbath nestled among the plants. She'd enjoyed a full breakfast in the dining room and now Nell was buckled into her seat, staring at a bar of brightly colored toys.

Nell had been so good last night. They'd checked in and Avery had changed her, mixed up a bottle and fed her. Then they'd taken a bath together in the big tub and Avery had put her to bed in the portable playpen she'd brought as a second piece of luggage.

Traveling light wasn't an option with infants, but she wouldn't have it any other way. Despite the change in bed, Nell had only woken once in the night to be fed, and the bed-and-breakfast owners had moved a rocking chair into the room when they'd seen she had a baby. All in all it had been extremely comfortable.

"Come on, pumpkin. We've got a whole day to kill. Why don't we explore a little? There must be something to do in this town."

She'd had time to think about yesterday's events. While she was sad that Nell wasn't going to grow up knowing her father, the knowledge that Callum wasn't going to challenge her custody of Nell put a new spring in her step. She put a lace-trimmed bonnet on Nell's tiny head and once outside the bed-and-breakfast, she placed her in an umbrella stroller. They made their way through the small town, sticking to the few streets that had sidewalks and a selection of stores. It really was a cute little community with definite Western flair. False-fronted shops lined the streets and hanging flower baskets decorated the lampposts.

There was an old-fashioned general store that carried daily necessities as well as a selection of penny candy and knickknacks; a small department store dealing with household items and mostly work clothing and a hardware store. Farther along she found a craft shop that was charming, and they spent several minutes browsing inside. Avery knew she shouldn't, but she walked out with four balls of soft rose-colored yarn and a new pattern. She could tuck the yarn into the corners of her suitcase, and the pattern would knit up a sweet sweater and cap for Nell to wear when the weather turned chilly this fall. Avery looked down at the baby in the stroller and felt her heart swell. Autumn was her favorite time of year, and this year she and Nell would cozy up together during the longer evenings and she could knit to her heart's content.

They stopped at a bakery and Avery paid closer attention. This was her world—sugar and flour and butter and all the other mysterious, wonderful things that went into baking. The plain storefront window and shelving showcased a good selection of what she guessed to be high-quality items—good home-cooking if she were any judge. The bread was golden-brown and looked beautifully light, the pies were heavy with fruit, the crusts perfectly fluted and the meringue on the lemon ones stood a good two inches thick, the swirled peaks golden. There were cookies, squares, and cakes, too, but the cakes were boring: vanilla and chocolate, plainly decorated, without a bit of creativity. There was no fondant or sugar flowers, just buttercream piped through various tips. And only one lonely tray of chocolate cupcakes. Nice, but lacking in imagination and technique for sure.

She bought a cupcake and ventured back outside to eat it. Two stores away she spied a bench and she pushed the stroller to it, locked the wheels, handed Nell a rattle to keep her occupied and finally bit into the cake.

It wasn't bad. Not imaginative by any stretch, but the texture was good. A higher grade of cocoa would make a big difference. It wasn't quite to The Icing on Top standard, but then Avery made her living at the boutique bakery, specializing in cakes and cupcakes to order. She was always looking for new variations to experiment with, and loved how every day she always made something new. Lately her favorite had been making custom decorations for the tops of cupcakes. Her favorite so far had been the tiny mortarboards she'd done for June graduations, complete with gold leaf tassels. For one party she'd done red velvet cupcakes with white buttercream to match the red-and-white school colors. They'd been a huge hit. And last month had been insane with weddings. More and more brides were choosing cupcakes over a traditional wedding cake. The lemon chiffon cakes with edible flowers on top were to die for.

She'd just licked the last of the frosting from her fingers when a shadow fell over the bench. She angled her face up to see Callum standing over them. At least this time his shirt was neatly tucked in and his hair had been combed...sort of. It still hung past his collar, giving him a rough and ready appearance, and he hadn't shaved, either. She usually didn't go in for facial hair, but she had to admit his rugged appearance made him seem both a little dangerous and incredibly sexy.

Her heart began to pound faster as she looked up into his eyes. Not because it was him, she assured herself, but because she hadn't planned on seeing him again and having him appear out of the blue felt like trouble was on its way. She should have known better than to let down her guard—should have known it had been too easy yesterday.

"Hello," she said quietly.

"Hi. I stopped by the bed-and-breakfast looking for you. Jim and Kathleen said you'd decided to have a look around town."

Her heartbeat quickened even more. "So you came looking for me?"

"Yeah. I did."

The sidewalk traffic was sparse and while Avery didn't want anyone eavesdropping on their conversation, there was a small comfort in being in a public place. "Do you want to sit down, Callum?"

She'd used his first name, she realized. Up until now it had been Mr. Shepard. Even this small familiarity seemed intimate and she made a point of breaking eye contact, looking down at Nell. She fussed with the baby's outfit even though everything was perfectly fine.

"You don't want to go somewhere more private?" he asked, and her pulse skipped.

"There's no one around, and Nell likes it outside. See how contented she is?"

Some "ba, ba" sounds came from the stroller, along with rattles from the toy as Nell batted her hands up and down.

The shadow disappeared as Callum moved to the side and took a seat on the bench.

Avery looked over at him. He was staring at Nell, his face unreadable. Like he was looking for something and not finding it. She waited a moment or two and then nudged. "Is there something you wanted to talk to me about?"

He sat back, resting his hands on his jeans. "About yesterday..."

"I believe you made your thoughts clear."

"I was shocked."

"Clearly." Nell dropped the rattle and Avery picked it up, dusted it off and gave it back to her.

"Wouldn't you be?" he asked quietly. "If someone showed up on your doorstep with news like that?"

"So you no longer think I'm a con artist out to scam you?"

"I never called you that."

She looked him square in the eye. "You thought it."

He looked away first this time. “Yes, I did.”

Last night she’d had time to consider his response. Yes, he’d been rude and boorish but she put herself in his shoes and understood the skepticism. Then she’d spent too much time wondering at the change in him. The man she remembered had been friendly and fun, though at times he’d stood away from the others, looking lonely. But he’d been impeccably groomed with not a hair out of place, and he’d lit up when Crystal walked into a room...

“Look, Miss Spencer...Avery.” He, too, dropped the formality and it did something funny to her insides, hearing him say her name like that.

He sighed. “Why did you come? What did you expect me to say?” He paused. “How did you really see all this playing out?”

“Which question do you want me to answer first?”

“Whatever explains it best,” he replied.

She waited for a couple of ladies to pass by. They paused and smiled down at Nell—she really was an angel—before carrying on their way.

“I meant what I said about you having a right to know,” she began, fighting to keep her voice even. “And Nell has a right to know about you, too. But I also meant what I said about not wanting anything from you. I didn’t come here looking for money or...material support. Crystal gave me guardianship of Nell and we have a good home together. It’s not big but it’s comfortable and cozy. I love her as my own. I want to watch her grow up and when she’s old enough I want to be able to tell her the truth about her parents.”

“You mean like how she has a dad who couldn’t be bothered with her?”

Avery’s gaze snapped to him in surprise. Damn him, she still couldn’t read his expression. Was he saying he believed Nell was his now? Or merely speaking in generalities? She took her time coming up with a response. After all, she didn’t want to antagonize him. She was walking a precarious line.

“That would rather be up to you,” she said softly. “But perhaps more accurate would be a dad who cared enough to see she was brought up in a home where she was wanted and loved.”

“You want me to give up my rights.”

She could feel his eyes on her, penetrating like they were boring a hole right into her skull. “Do I want to legally adopt her? Of course. This isn’t about denying you anything, Callum. It’s about a secure future for Nell.” She made herself face him. “Just yesterday you were certain you didn’t have any rights. Have you changed your mind?”

His eyes were dark and rich, like the deepest espresso she used in her mocha fudge recipe. They were the kind of eyes that a woman could get lost in if she let herself. The kind that held dark secrets. A man like Callum Shepard was a broody, wounded warrior that a lot of women would see as a personal challenge. The kind that would make a woman want to be the one to break down the walls and get to the man underneath.

Assuming, of course, they didn’t get their hearts broken first. Avery certainly couldn’t afford a challenge like that. That sort of thinking almost always ended in disaster. She’d seen way too many relationships fail because one of the people involved felt they could “fix” the other. She liked to think she was smarter than that.

“Her hair,” he said softly, but the built-in roughness to his voice made it sound deep and husky and sent delicious tingles along the back of her neck.

“What about it?”

“It’s dark and curly. Like mine.”

Her lips dropped open. “Seriously? That’s what convinced you? I’m a liar but the hair doesn’t lie?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “You’re insulted. Not as much fun to be on the other side of judgment, Miss Spencer?”

Nell began to fuss, brilliant timing as it saved her from answering. Avery made herself busy by unclipping the T-strap securing the baby and then lifted her out, put her on her knee and held her snugly while her free hand straightened the frilly dress, smoothing it over white bottoms that covered her diaper in a profusion of ruffles. Content to be cuddled, Nell shoved her fist in her mouth and gnawed on it happily.

"I'm going to suggest something and I don't want you to get offended again." Callum leaned back, resting against the bench.

"I can't promise that," she responded. "But let's hear it anyway."

"I'd like a paternity test."

The words made it sound all so real, which was ridiculous because Avery knew she wouldn't have come all this way if it weren't real to begin with. Last night she'd been angry but strangely relieved that he'd wanted nothing to do with Nell. How terrible did that make her? She was well aware that the feelings of relief were based on what was best for *her* and not best for Nell. She would have given anything to have known her father as she was growing up. How could she be relieved that Nell wouldn't have that, either? It was beyond selfish.

A paternity test would prove that Nell was his. Then how far would he push things? Would he demand custody? Parental rights, certainly...

"You still don't believe me," she answered shakily.

He sat up and leaned toward her a little. "Look, it's not personal. It wouldn't matter who was sitting here right now, I would still have my doubts. I would still want concrete proof. I don't take *anyone* at their word, okay? Words change. Proof? That doesn't change."

"And when you have that proof? What then?"

"I don't know. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

He could have the power to take Nell away. Avery had been well aware of it before she'd even set out on this trip. It was why she'd put it off for so long. She just hadn't been able to make herself do it, to plant the seeds of her own destruction. Because losing Nell *would* destroy her.

Nell was the only family Avery had left. Years ago she'd still had her mother, but Laura had moved to Vancouver and rarely ever contacted the two girls, she was so involved in her own life. They'd been abandoned not only by one parent, but by both. With Crystal gone, there was no one. Except Nell—Avery's reason for getting up in the morning—and usually several times during the night, too. Especially lately. "She's all I've got," she whispered.

Maybe she shouldn't have come. Maybe she should have just let it lie. Just her luck she had an overactive conscience.

"Relax," he said. "You saw my place. Do I look like the kind of guy prepared for full-time fatherhood? What would I do with a baby and a farm to run?"

He leaned forward, close enough that she could see the fine lines in the corners of his eyes, and how his dark brown irises had tiny flecks of gold close to the pupil.

"I have no intention of taking her away from you," he said with surprising gentleness. "If that's what's worrying you."

Tears pricked the back of her eyes and she blinked them away. "But you still want proof," she whispered hoarsely.

"I *need* proof."

"I fly back to Ontario tomorrow."

"Surely you can change your flight."

Of course she could. But it wasn't as easy as all that. "I do have a job, you know. I took a week off, but I have to be back..."

"A few days," he suggested. "Enough time to set up the test and have it done. You don't even have to stay and wait for the results. Once they're in, we can discuss things over the phone."

She looked down at Nell, whose attention was focused on a bright blue button. Her chubby fingers pulled and played with it, and Avery bounced her knee a little bit, making the baby look up and giggle with a toothless grin. She could afford a few days but that was all. When she wasn't working she wasn't earning money, and there were two of them to support now.

Besides, she didn't want to play difficult. It was a simple and logical request considering the circumstances. If she refused, he could get nasty about it and have a court-ordered test if he wanted to, because whether or not he wanted to be a dad, for some reason he really wanted to know definitively one way or the other.

"A few days, but that's all. We can stay here at the B&B. I'll leave the arrangements for the test up to you, though. I've never done this before. I'm guessing you'll have to contact your local doctor and set something up."

"It's not something I have experience in, either," he pointed out. "But I'll look after it. Give me your cell number so I can call you about the arrangements."

She reached into her purse and took out a business card, flipped it over and wrote her number on the back. Nell grabbed at the pen, but Avery diverted her hand and reached into the diaper bag at her feet instead, and pulled out a teething ring. "Here, sweet pea. This is better for you to chew on than a pen."

She gave him the card and he flipped it over. "The Icing on Top?" he asked.

"I'm a baker," she replied. "I decorate cakes. Mostly cupcakes."

"Cupcakes," he repeated, making it sound as if it were the silliest job in the world.

Despite the improved tone to today's meeting, it was clear to Avery that Callum had very little respect for her. It began with his skeptical attitude and continued with the assumption she could simply change her schedule to suit him and the dismissive tone when he asked about her job. She needed to be careful not to antagonize him, but she wasn't going to go along with absolutely everything just because he suggested it.

She checked her watch. It was getting close to noon, and well-behaved as she was, Nell was going to start getting hungry soon. Avery knew from experience that leaving it too long would send the baby into full-on meltdown. "Is there a restaurant nearby? Somewhere that we can sit down, where they'd heat a bottle for me?"

He shrugged. "The Wagon Wheel diner is around the corner. It's a run-of-the-mill family place, but the food's good."

"She's going to be hungry soon. I'd rather stay a step ahead than deal with a cranky baby." Politeness seemed to demand that she ask. "Would you care to join us, Callum?"

He stepped back. "Thanks, but I don't think so. I like to keep to myself. And showing up with you and the baby... This is a small town. The gossip mill would be running before we'd even ordered."

The rebuff felt like a slap. He couldn't even call Nell by her name, instead referring to her as "the baby." And he didn't want to be seen in public with Avery—not for this conversation and certainly not sharing a meal. She shoved the pen and teething ring into her purse and made short work of strapping Nell back into the stroller. She stood and put her hands on the handles. "We won't keep you, then."

"Yes, I need to get back. Work to be done."

His precious work. Of course.

"Call me when you have an appointment time." She lifted her chin. "If you could do that right away, I'd appreciate it. I do have to adjust my travel plans."

"Yes, ma'am."

He turned and walked away from her. She watched him go, the way his long stride ate up the ground and the pockets of his faded jeans shifted with the movement.

The man she remembered from the wedding had been tall and smiling, purposeful but with an easiness about him—like he might actually know how to let loose and have fun. What had happened

to cause such a difference in him in such a short time? Because this version of Callum Shepard was abrasive, grouchy and had a very large stick up his posterior.

Except there'd been the gentle way he'd said he didn't want to take Nell away from her. Like he understood.

And the way he insisted on proof as if he'd been lied to before.

Nell started to cry and Avery turned away from the sight of Callum walking away. Callum's reasons didn't matter. She'd go through the formality of a test for his peace of mind and then she'd go back to Ontario and get on with raising Nell.

The movement of the stroller on the sidewalk temporarily soothed the baby as they headed in the direction of the diner. She had to remember one important fact when it came to Callum. He'd had a fling with her sister when they'd barely known each other. And never, in either of their meetings, had he asked what had happened to Crystal, how she'd died.

What kind of guy did that?

She didn't like the answer.

## CHAPTER THREE

CALLUM HUNG UP the phone and sat at the kitchen table for a moment, trying to make sense of his thoughts. Avery hadn't answered her cell, so he'd left a voice mail giving her the time of the doctor's appointment. It would take a day or two to get the test in, so he hadn't been able to get an appointment until midmorning on Friday. Avery probably wasn't going to be happy about that, but it was out of his hands.

If she could just understand his reasons for asking for it in the first place...

But she didn't nor would she. There was no sense bringing up the past when it couldn't be changed. He'd learned his lesson and was smart enough not to get caught in the same trap ever again.

Now he'd lost the better part of the day. He'd planned to put the cows in the west pasture until milking time and it hadn't happened. Then there was the load of hay he'd bought from the Diamond brothers over at Diamondback Ranch. It needed picking up.

Not to mention the fact that he ignored the house most of the time. He'd put on his last pair of jeans this morning and had thrown a load of laundry in the machine out of pure necessity. He knew the place looked bad. It hadn't taken Avery's turned-up nose yesterday to tell him that.

He'd probably been foolish to buy this place. He should have taken a job instead of trying to run everything solo. It was just...the idea of taking orders from someone again was so repulsive that he couldn't see himself doing it. And he'd chosen the farm because the most uncomplicated time in his life for as far back as he could remember had been working summers on his uncle's farm on the lower mainland. Nothing had been complicated when he'd been cutting hay or feeding calves or laughing—a lot.

It was the laughter he missed the most.

He knew everyone in Cadence Creek thought he was plumb crazy for wanting to raise dairy cows in the heart of beef country. Maybe he was. But for him the only real cow was a Holstein, and it made him happy. Five o'clock in the morning came early, but the time he spent in the milking parlor with the radio on was the best part of his day. Calm, quiet. Just him, the cows and country music.

And when George Grant had decided to retire and sell off his quota, it had seemed like the perfect opportunity.

Callum pushed away from the table and took his plate to the sink. It was full with dirty dishes. God, what a disaster. He had to do something, especially if Avery Spencer came around again.

He picked up the phone and dialed the only person he'd trusted since moving to the area: Tyson Diamond. Ty and his brother Sam ran the biggest ranch around but you'd never know it. Friendly, down-to-earth and always ready to offer advice or a willing hand, the brothers had eased Callum's way as he'd taken over Grant's farm. And neither of them had asked too many questions, either.

Ty answered on the first ring. "Tyson Diamond."

"Ty, it's Callum."

"Hey, brother." Callum suppressed a smile; Ty had an easy-going way about him that his older brother, Sam, didn't and it showed, even in the simple greeting. There was a scuffling noise and then the sound cleared. "What can I do for you?"

"I need your advice. Or maybe your wife's advice."

"Clara? She's up at the house. I can get her to call you. What's it about?"

"I need a hand and thought she could recommend someone." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I need someone to help me clean out this pigsty. I can't afford anyone really expensive..."

Ty's laugh came over the line. "You're calling for a maid."

"Just temporarily. To help me get caught up."

"You should talk to Angela. She might have someone at the women's shelter who's looking for a job or even just a few extra hours somewhere. If that'd be okay, I'll pass the info along."

“That’d be fine. And the sooner the better.”

“Any particular reason?”

He thought of Avery looking down her nose at the state of his living room, then pictured her clear blue eyes as they’d stared into his this morning. “Uh, not really. Just needs to be done, and I don’t have the time to do it.”

“Nothing to do with the woman you were seen with in town this morning, then?”

This was exactly why he’d wanted to talk privately instead of on a bench in the middle of Main Street. “Honestly, you’re a worse gossip than the women.”

Ty’s laugh echoed in his ear. “No gossip. I passed you on my way to the hardware store, but you were talking and didn’t notice. But you’re awfully sensitive about it...”

The teasing note in Ty’s voice reminded Callum of what it was like to have friends, and the thought sent a spear of pain through him. “If you could pass on the request, that’d be great.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. No problem. Got that load of hay for you here, too, whenever you’re ready. We can deliver it on the weekend if you like.”

“Thanks, that’d be great. Gotta run.”

He hung up and wiped his hand over his face. Tyson reminded him of Pete, and maybe a little of Matt and the others. Always good for a laugh or a favor.

Except they weren’t anymore. Callum’s fingers tightened on the edge of the table. They’d all followed their orders—all except Callum. He’d been sleeping off a night of drunkenness in the brig. Because of it, the section had gone out without him. When the IED went off, he’d been safe and sound. They hadn’t, and he’d had to live with that ever since.

On Friday morning Avery splurged on a long-distance call to her boss, Denise. Working at The Icing On Top was a dream job, and she wanted to reassure Denise that she’d be back to work as planned in a few days. Denise had been incredibly sympathetic to Avery’s situation, giving her whatever time she needed after Crystal’s death. Instead of applying for parental leave and trying to make do on a reduced salary, Denise had even allowed Avery to bring Nell to work at the bakery. Once Nell was older, Avery knew she would have to put her in day care, but for now, during these first precious months, Avery was able to keep Nell with her. She was getting quite good at decorating with the baby in the Snugli carrier, and she kept the playpen in the back office and a baby monitor in the bakery kitchen. When the time came for Denise to expand, Avery wanted to be first in line to manage the new location.

She owed Denise a lot, and the last thing she wanted to do was take her generosity for granted. She wanted to reassure Denise that she’d be back to work first thing after her return.

Denise’s voice sounded stressed on the other end of the line as she finally answered on the sixth ring. “Hey, I was going to call you today,” she said.

“Is something wrong?”

“Not wrong, per se. Just...you don’t have to hurry back this week after all. The bakery’s going to be closed for a few weeks for repairs.”

“Repairs? What happened?” Avery sat heavily on the bed as she counted the missed wages in her mind.

“A fire at the pizza place next door. We’re okay—just some damage to the front awning which is easily replaced. But the electrics are a mess and there’s a fair bit of water damage. There’s no way we can reopen until that’s taken care of.”

“Oh, Denise. I’m so sorry.” She knew what having to close would do to a bottom line.

“I know. But that’s what insurance is for.” Denise paused. “How are things going, anyway?”

“I really don’t know.” Avery sighed. “Callum is very different from the guy I remember, and he’s not too keen on Nell. I haven’t seen him in a couple of days. We’re going for a paternity test in a few minutes.”

“Well, that’s sort of what you wanted, right? Full custody without a bunch of drama?” Denise’s voice was hopeful. God bless her, Denise always tried to look on the bright side.

Avery shrugged even though Denise wasn’t there to see her. “I don’t really know what I want. I want Nell to know her father like I never did, but I want to have her all to myself, too. Trying to figure out how to have it both ways is proving a challenge.”

“Well, if anyone can do it, you can. You remember that. You’re way stronger than you think. Not everyone could have stepped in and done what you’ve done the last few months. Keep your chin up and I’ll be in touch when I know more about a reopening date.”

“Will do. And thanks,” she added warmly. “For everything.”

“I know, I know. Boss of the year.”

Avery could picture Denise’s crooked smile. “Decade. Century, even.”

After they hung up Avery let out a big breath. She was still trying to process the news when Callum’s truck pulled up outside the bed-and-breakfast. Nerves churned in Avery’s tummy. She hurried to grab the carrier and diaper bag so he didn’t have to wait. When he met them on the walkway below the veranda, he hesitated only for a moment before turning and heading back to where his vehicle was parked.

Still avoiding any eye or physical contact, then. She didn’t know why they were both so tense. It was just a swab test. No results would be had for at least a week. And she was in no doubt of the results, after all. Crystal might have kept secrets, but she wouldn’t have lied to Avery about that.

Avery carried the car seat to the waiting vehicle, a crew cab half-ton built for function but without a lot of bells and whistles. Once the belt was fastened securely, she stepped up into the front seat. “This thing is huge.”

“It does the job,” he replied, starting the engine. Avery felt weird sitting there with him, enclosed in the cab with no escape, with the scent of his aftershave filling the air. It was just her dumb luck that she’d thought him handsome from the beginning. It made her feel awkward, and she hoped he didn’t pick up on it. How embarrassing.

Thankfully it only took a few minutes to get to the small, neat building that housed the doctor’s office. Callum hopped out and then came around the truck and opened her door before she even got the diaper bag over her shoulder.

He let her carry the car seat with Nell in it. She bit down on her lip. To her recollection, he’d never called Nell by name, always referring to her as “the baby.”

And not once had he touched her or bothered to pick her up.

Today, Avery realized as she stepped through the door he held open, was truly a formality. Because Callum was definitely no father.

Callum’s heart wouldn’t settle down from the weird pattering that pressed against his chest. This was stupid. It was a simple test. A mouth swab and it was all over. Results in a few days that would prove...

He clenched his jaw as Avery passed by him, her light floral scent teasing his nostrils. He didn’t seem to remember her being this headstrong. She’d been a bit of a wallflower at the wedding. But the woman with him today was tough and determined. And beautiful. Her skin practically glowed and he noticed a few freckles dotting her nose, making her seem younger than he knew she must be. And when she smiled at the receptionist and announced their arrival, he caught his breath.

Her hair was back in a ponytail, but a few pale strands had come loose and framed her face. She looked pretty in a natural sort of way. So unlike her sister, who’d been fond of bright colors and painted nails and flawless makeup. There wasn’t a man alive who wouldn’t have had his head turned by Crystal Spencer. She was a knockout.

Past tense, he reminded himself as he stood beside Avery. And Avery was as different from her sister as night and day. Oh, there was a resemblance he could see now, in the tilt of her nose and the

shape of her eyes. But there was something different about her, something easier. Simpler. Crystal had been a bombshell, but Avery was the girl next door.

In her own very natural way, Avery Spencer was stunning.

He was still reeling from that realization when they sat to wait in the quiet waiting room. Callum closed his eyes briefly. Confidentiality be damned; before the day was out people would know he'd been here with a woman and a baby. Even if they knew nothing about the paternity test, assumptions would start. Things had a way of spreading through a small town like wildfire.

He looked over at Nell, who was sitting on Avery's lap happily shaking a rattle shaped like a giraffe. His throat tightened. Deep down he knew what today's test was going to say. He had seen it first in the hair, but then he'd dug out an old family picture. His first impressions were correct. The resemblance was there, especially to his little sister, Taylor.

Nell was a Shepard through and through. His daughter. The very thought was enough to send his stomach plummeting to his feet. What on earth was he going to do with a kid?

This whole thing opened up too many old wounds. He couldn't stop thinking about Jane and the baby she'd had. Not to mention the fact that she'd lied so easily to his face for weeks before breaking his heart.

Dr. Lazowski called them in and the three of them entered the exam room together. No questions asked, just the quick procedure and they were done. "I'll send this off to the lab immediately," he said, writing in a chart. "And the results?"

"To my mailing address," Callum said tightly.

"And to mine." Avery stepped forward and gave him her address in Ontario. Suddenly Callum realized that this meant she was really leaving. And taking Nell with her. Just like that it was done. He wasn't even used to the idea of them being around and they would be out of his life.

"Thanks, Dr. Lazowski," Callum said, and they were back out in the waiting room again. It almost seemed like it had never happened. Nothing felt different, except knowing that now it was over, Avery and Nell would be flying back home in a few hours to wait for the results.

What was he going to do when they came back positive? Because he was sure they were going to. He'd been trying to come to grips with it over the last few days. He had a daughter. A child—something he'd never thought would happen. Not after everything in his past. Not after Jane and definitely not after what had happened overseas.

They got back in the truck and Callum paused. "Did you want to grab some lunch?"

Avery shook her head. "Our flight leaves in a few hours, and I have to take my rental car back. I'll just get something at the airport."

He deserved that; he'd turned down her offer the other day, after all. "That's fine, then."

He refused to look at her, or over his shoulder at Nell. It was probably just as well. Even if Nell was his—which he was now very certain she was—he had no business trying to be a full-time father. She belonged with Avery. And Avery's life was across the country, in her trendy apartment working in her trendy bakery while his whole savings—and a sizable loan—sat right here on his farm.

She insisted she didn't want financial support and he wasn't making a lot of money, but he would help out. It would be bad enough being an absentee dad, but no one was going to accuse him of being a deadbeat.

It was the very least his conscience demanded. So why did he feel like he was taking the easy way out?

Back at the inn he'd barely shut off the ignition when she was out of the truck and opening the side door to get Nell. She'd clearly planned ahead because she went inside and came right back out rolling her suitcase and carrying the packed-up playpen. The umbrella stroller was snapped up and stowed in the trunk of her car in no time flat and there was nothing more to do than say goodbye.

It was not how he'd envisioned this morning going. Not with her so...cold. He didn't quite know what he'd done to set her off, but she wouldn't even look him in the eye.

She turned to face him and pasted on a smile so fake it looked plastic. “I’ll be in touch after we get the results.”

“Right. You’ve got everything?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t need...” He didn’t know how to finish the question. What was he trying to ask? Why was this so hard? He should be relieved that things were going back to normal, so why was he drawing the moment out rather than just opening the damn door for her?

“I don’t need anything from you, Callum.”

Well. That was clear, and a common enough refrain when all was said and done. Feeling helpless, he reached down and opened her car door, watched as she buckled Nell’s seat into place. He swallowed, staring down at the tiny face with the innocently blinking eyes. He slid his gaze to Avery, who refused to look at him but slid behind the wheel. When he hesitated shutting the door, she finally looked up.

“It’s time to go,” she said, a tad bit impatiently. The tone rode on his nerves.

“Did I do something this morning? Something to make you rush off like this?” He didn’t like leaving things on a sour note. Not when they were going to have to stay in touch for...

For years to come. *Years*. They would always be connected by Nell.

“Not at all,” she answered. “This morning just reminded me of our positions in this whole thing. There’s simply no sense prolonging things, don’t you agree?”

No, dammit, he didn’t agree, but couldn’t say so without getting in over his head.

“Drive carefully,” he said finally, and shut the door while she started the engine.

He watched her car go out the driveway and turn onto the dirt lane that connected to the paved road. It felt wrong watching her drive away like that, but what else was he supposed to do? She wanted nothing to do with him. Oh, perhaps she’d been curious, just like him. He hadn’t imagined the way her eyes had snapped to his now and again, or the color that rose in her cheeks when he was around. She’d blushed that morning on the park bench.

But a little curiosity was a far cry from working together to raise a kid, wasn’t it?

If she’d wanted full custody, she could have just let things stand and he never would have known the difference. Instead she’d come to find him, determined that he—and her niece—deserved to know each other.

He had to admire that. Except Miss Spencer gave him the impression that she always did the right thing, and that was a damned hard example for a flawed human being to follow.

Restless, he turned back to his truck and noticed the back door wasn’t quite latched. He went to close it and when he looked in the window he saw the small stuffed giraffe. He reached in and picked it up. The fabric was soft and it made a jingling noise as he turned it over in his hand.

The scent of baby powder and soap still clung to the interior of the truck.

His kid. And he hadn’t even held her in his arms, not once. He recalled Jane’s voice explaining why she couldn’t go through with the wedding. That the baby she carried wasn’t really his; that she couldn’t marry a man who would never be there for their family. And he heard his own voice, explaining in no uncertain terms to Crystal last spring that he wasn’t interested in a wife and kids, when the truth was a family of his own had been all he wanted until Jane walked away, taking his dreams with her.

And then he’d gotten Crystal pregnant. And now, when faced with his biggest mistake, he was the one walking away. Perhaps Avery was the one driving, but he’d done nothing to stop her.

What kind of man was he?

An idiot, that’s what.

Before he could change his mind, he shoved the giraffe in his pocket and hopped up into the cab of his truck to go after her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A VERY PULLED INTO the service station to fill up the rental before taking it back. For the past fifteen minutes of the drive, Nell had been crying. In her haste to leave Cadence Creek, Avery hadn't given her a bottle or changed her diaper.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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