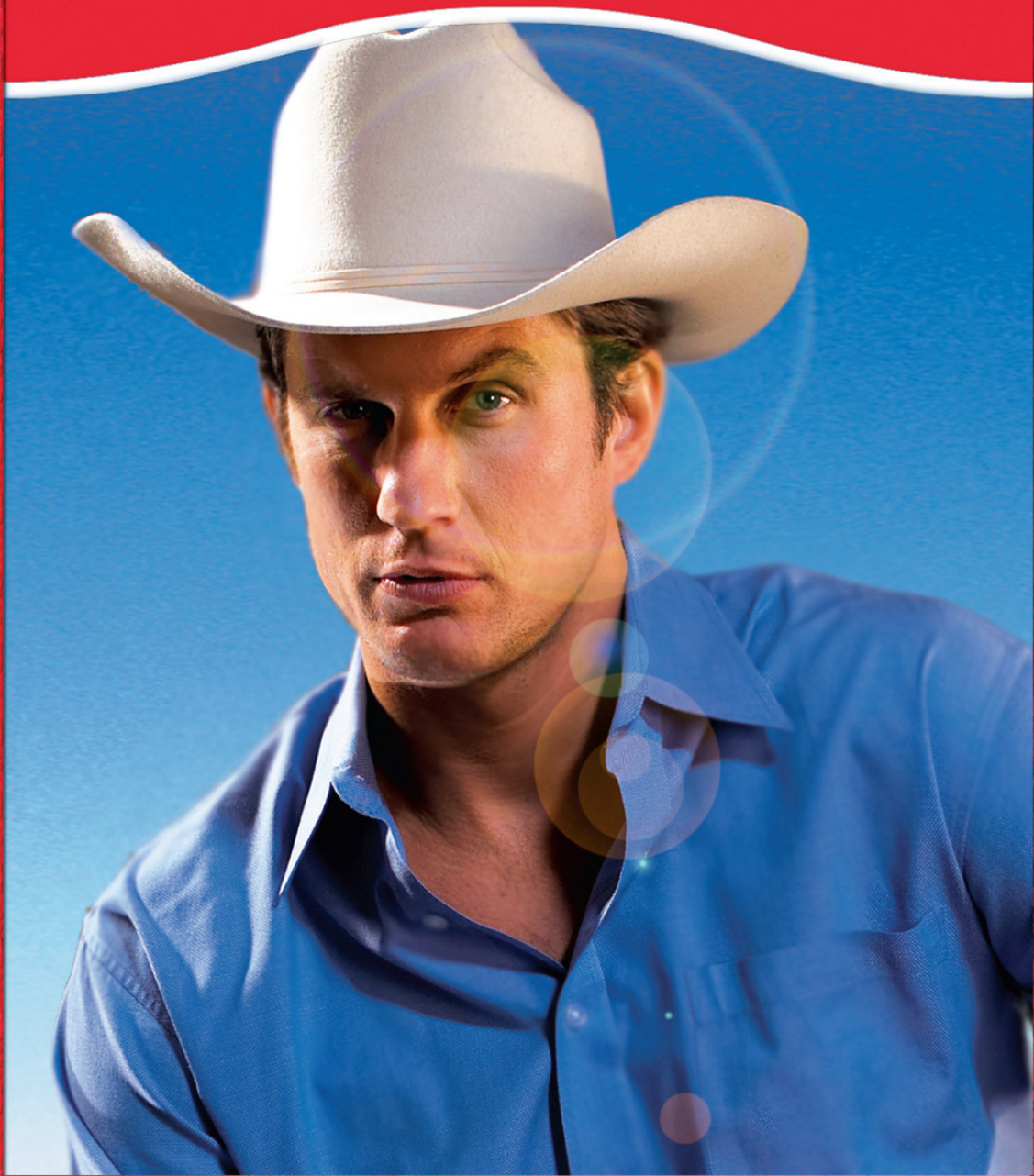


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The Texan's Convenient Marriage

Peggy Moreland



Vintage Desire

Peggy Moreland

The Texan's Convenient Marriage

«HarperCollins»

Moreland P.

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SHE WAS PREGNANT WITH HIS BROTHER'S BABY Mack McGruder was there to pay her off...another one of his ne'er-do-well brother's women, claiming paternity. But Addy truly was having a McGruder heir...at that exact moment. HE OFFERED HER AN IN-NAME-ONLY MARRIAGE At her side during the birth, Mack knew he couldn't just abandon her. So he offered Addy a name for her baby and a hands-off marriage, though secretly he desired her. BUT HE WANTED MORE Together in his grand Texas home, the temptation was unbearable. If Mack took what he truly wanted, would having Addy be worth the price he'd have to pay?

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“Why Would You Want To Help Me? You Don’t Even Know Me.”

Mack kept his gaze fixed on hers. “I know more than you might think. I know that the father of your baby isn’t going to be around to take care of you or the child.”

Addy’s jaw dropped, then closed with an angry click of teeth. “You don’t know any such thing.”

“Yes, I do,” he replied calmly. “If his past actions are any indication, you’ll never hear from Ty again.”

Her eyes widened. “You—you know Ty?”

“He’s my half brother.”

“You mean, you knew about me and the baby before—”

“Yes, that’s why I dropped by your house. I was there to offer you money.”

Steam all but came out of her ears. “Well, you can tell Ty to keep his damn money. I don’t want it.”

“The money’s not Ty’s. It’s mine.”

“Well, I don’t want your money, either, Mack McGruder.” She pointed a stiff finger at the door. “Get out. And don’t bother coming back.”

The Texan's Convenient Marriage

Peggy Moreland



www.millsandboon.co.uk

PEGGY MORELAND

published her first romance with Silhouette in 1989, and continues to delight readers with stories set in her home state of Texas. Winner of the National Readers' Choice Award, a nominee for Romantic Times BOOKclub Reviewer's Choice Award and a two-time finalist for the prestigious RITA[®] Award, Peggy's books frequently appear on the USA Today and Waldenbooks bestseller lists. When not writing, you can usually find Peggy outside, tending the cattle, goats and other critters on the ranch she shares with her husband. You may write to Peggy at P.O. Box 1099, Florence, TX 76527-1099, or e-mail her at peggy@peggymoreland.com.

To my daughter, Hilary. Thanks for your willingness to read my work, your encouragement when I need it most and for the smile you put in my heart.

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Prologue

War is fear cloaked in courage.

—William Westmoreland

Smoke hung in the air cloaking the darkness, its acrid scent burning the noses of the soldiers hiding in the tall grass. Some had taken advantage of the lull in activity and had stretched out, eyes closed, their guns held at the ready across their chests, their packs pillowed beneath their heads. Others were hunkered down, watching...and waiting.

Antonio Rocci, or Romeo as he was called by his friends, wanted to sleep but couldn't. Fear kept his eyes open and his ears cocked for any sound of movement in the inky darkness. In the distance, red embers and thin curls of smoke marked where a small village had once stood. Reconnaissance had reported that Vietcong soldiers had infiltrated the village and were using the area to store artillery. Earlier that day, while the sun was still up, an air attack had taken place. Constructed mainly of grasses and bamboo gathered from the surrounding countryside, the hooches that had once formed the small village had gone up like dry kindling. All that remained were burning embers and the cloying smell of smoke.

When morning came, it was the job of Romeo and the other soldiers in his unit to go into the village and search for the cache of artillery and ammunition reportedly hidden there. A side duty was checking for survivors and counting the dead. Bile rose in Romeo's throat at the thought of what he might face, and he quickly swallowed it down. It's war, he reminded himself. It's either us or them, and he'd a hell of a lot rather it be them.

"Romeo?"

He jumped at the voice, then forced the tension from his body when he realized it was Pops, their team leader, who had spoken.

He set his jaw to steady his voice, hide the fear. "Over here."

He heard a slight rustle of grass, and angled his head, watching as Pop's shadowed form moved closer.

"You okay?" Pops whispered.

Romeo released his grip on his gun long enough to drag his arm across the nervous perspiration that beaded his forehead, then settled his finger over the trigger again. "Yeah, but I'd feel a whole lot better if I knew we were the only ones out here."

"Yeah," Pops agreed soberly. "I hear you."

Silence settled between them, as both continued to watch the darkness.

Romeo would never admit it, but he felt safer, less vulnerable with Pops at his side. Older than most of the others in the unit, Pops—the nickname given to Larry Blair by the rest of the team—had already completed one tour of duty in Vietnam and was working on his second. Romeo couldn't imagine why anyone would willingly sign on for another tour. From the day he'd arrived in country, he'd felt as if he'd been dropped down into the bowels of hell and couldn't wait for the day he could board the plane that would carry him home.

"Pops?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you ever regret signing on for a second tour?"

"No sense regretting what you can't change."

Romeo angled his head to peer at the man whose opinion he respected as much as he would his father's. "Do you ever get scared, Pops?"

"Yeah," Pops admitted quietly. "It's the soldier who fears nothing that gets himself killed. If you use fear to your advantage, it'll keep you alert, on guard, prepared. Give in to it and it'll make you helpless, weak."

Romeo considered that for a moment, but found little comfort in Pop's advice. He'd always considered himself brave, even cocky. Now he wondered if he had a bright-yellow stripe running down his back.

"Is being afraid the same as being a coward?" he asked hesitantly.

"No. A coward runs and hides."

"Some of the guys think Preacher's a coward."

"Well, they're wrong. Preacher just can't bear the thought of taking a human life. It's his beliefs he struggles with, not cowardice."

Romeo considered that a moment, then shook his head sadly. "Hell, it doesn't matter if you're a hero or a coward. We all die just the same."

Pop pulled a package of gum from his pocket. "Don't think about dying," he warned, and offered a piece to Romeo. He unwrapped one for himself and folded the strip of gum in two, before popping it into his mouth. "Think about living, about what you're going to do when you get home."

Romeo gulped, thinking about what he'd left behind, what would be waiting for him when he returned. "Have I ever told you why I joined the service?"

"Can't say as you have."

"I got a girl pregnant."

He felt Pop's gaze and, for once, was grateful for the darkness so that Pop couldn't see his face, his shame. "She was putting pressure on me to marry her. I figured the army was as good a way to get out of it, as any."

If Pop had an opinion, he kept it to himself, which Romeo appreciated. He wasn't looking for absolution...or a lecture. What he wanted was a sounding board, someone who would listen.

"It was wrong," he admitted with regret. "Running away, I mean. Even if I didn't want to marry her, I should've at least agreed to share responsibility for the kid. It's mine, a part of me. I shouldn't have left her to deal with it alone." He glanced over at Pops. "Do you think it's too late?"

Pop frowned in confusion. "For what?"

"To provide for the kid. I was thinking maybe I could send her some money."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate it," Pop replied.

"Yeah," Romeo said, warming to the idea. "And when I get home and get a real job, I could send her a set amount every month. Kinda like the child support my dad had to pay my mom after they divorced."

"Sounds fair," Pops agreed. "A man should take care of what's his."

Romeo frowned, as a new thought rose. "But what happens if I don't make it home?" He glanced over at Pops. "Who'll take care of my kid then?"

Pops clasped Romeo's shoulder, gave it a squeeze. "Don't talk like that. You're going to make it home. We all are."

Though Romeo appreciated the reassurance, he knew Pops was blowing smoke. There were no guarantees. Not for any of them. And if he did get killed, what would happen to the baby he'd fathered? He didn't have anything of value to leave behind. No savings, no property. Hell, he didn't even own a car. He'd sold his old heap to his cousin, before he'd left for 'Nam.

"Pops?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember the deed that rancher tore up and gave to us the day before we shipped out?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"The old man said he was going to give us his ranch when we got home. My portion of the deed is in my footlocker back at camp. If something happens to me, would you see that my kid gets it?"

"Nothing's going to happen to you," Pop maintained stubbornly.

"But if something does, promise me you'll send it to Mary Claire Richards. Tell her it's for the baby."

There was a long pause of silence, before Pop said quietly, “Consider it done.”

One

Addy pressed the heel of her hand against the ache building between her eyes. Another five minutes on the phone with her mother and it would surpass the one that had throbbled low in her back all day.

Drawing in a deep breath, she searched for patience.

“I know you don’t like to talk about my father,” she began, choosing her words carefully. “But this is important. A lady called. Stephanie Parker. She said her father served with mine in Vietnam.”

“So what if he did?” her mother snapped. “Thousands of American soldiers went to Vietnam.”

Ignoring her mother’s bitterness, Addy forged on, determined to get through this conversation without screaming. “Stephanie told me that her father sent her mother a letter from Vietnam with a torn piece of paper inside. She thinks Tony might have had a similar piece and sent it to you.”

“The only thing Antonio Rocci ever gave me was you and that was an accident.”

Addy didn’t flinch at the jab at her illegitimacy. She’d had the circumstances surrounding her birth thrown in her face so often over the years that hearing it no longer had the power to sting.

“This paper may be valuable,” she persisted. “Do you remember Tony sending you anything like that?”

“That was over thirty years ago! How am I supposed to remember something that happened that long ago? I don’t even remember what was in yesterday’s mail.”

“A torn piece of paper, Mom. That’s odd enough that you should remember.”

“If you called to talk about him, I’m hanging up. I’m missing my shows.”

Before Addy could say anything more, the dial tone buzzed in her ear.

“The baby and I are doing fine, but thanks for asking.”

Scowling, she slammed down the phone, furious with herself for letting her mother’s lack of concern get to her. Mary Claire Richards-Smith-Carlton-Sullivan was a neurotic, self-centered woman who raced from one bad marriage to the next, fueled by a bitterness she’d clung to for more than thirty years and oblivious to anyone else’s needs, including her daughter’s.

With a sigh Addy swept a stray lock of hair from her face and told herself it didn’t matter. She’d survived thirty-three years of her mother’s disregard. Why should she expect her to show any concern now?

She stooped to untie her shoelaces but froze when she caught a glimpse of her reflection on the patio door. Straightening slowly, she stared, barely recognizing the woman who stared back. Her stomach looked as if she’d swallowed a soccer ball, her feet and ankles so swollen they looked like an elephant’s, and her long, black hair—which she usually considered her best feature—was wadded up in a frizzy knot on top of her head. Add to that lovely image nurses’ scrubs in a putrid shade of green and a well-worn pair of Reeboks and she was almost glad Ty wasn’t around to see her now.

Grimacing, she reached to untie her shoelaces again. “As if I’d let him past the front door,” she muttered under her breath. Ty Bodean was a lying snake and she was better off without him, even if it did mean she’d be raising her baby alone.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth as she eased the shoe off her swollen foot, thinking what all that meant, what lay ahead of her. Money was going to be a problem. Eighteen months ago, she’d bought the house, which had depleted her savings and shackled her to a mortgage payment that already stretched her monthly budget to the limit. At the time she’d made the purchase, it had seemed a wise investment. She’d always wanted to have her own home, and the previous owner had offered it to her at a ridiculously low price. Of course, when she’d agreed to buy the property, she hadn’t been pregnant and had no plans of becoming pregnant in the near future. An unforgettable—albeit brief—affair with Ty Bodean had changed all that.

The second problem—which was tied directly to the first—was child care. She hated the thought of her baby being raised by strangers, but as the major and only breadwinner in the family, there was no way she could quit her job and stay at home with her baby.

The third problem was raising a child in a single-parent home. Again she had no other option, but she was determined to do a better job of it than her own mother had done in raising her.

The reminder of her mother sent her thoughts segueing to the father she'd never known and the phone call she'd received concerning him. She frowned thoughtfully as she considered the torn piece of paper Stephanie Parker had mentioned.

Could it really be valuable? she asked herself, then sputtered a laugh. Even if it was, which she seriously doubted, she couldn't cash in on something she couldn't find. She supposed she could paw her way through the trunk her mother had left in her garage for safekeeping. If it was anywhere, it would be there.

But not tonight, she thought, heaving a weary sigh. She'd put in a long, back-breaking eight-hour shift in Emergency, and she wasn't doing anything more strenuous that evening than propping up her feet and watching TV.

Bracing a hand against the counter for support, she lifted her foot to tug off her remaining shoe. As she did, a pain knifed through her midsection, stealing her breath. Eyes wide, she hugged an arm around her middle and sank slowly to her knees. With a hand propped on the floor to keep herself upright, she forced herself to take slow, even breaths, and tried to think of a logical explanation for the pain. It couldn't be labor, she told herself. Her due date was still almost two months away. It had to be Braxton Hicks, she decided. False labor. She'd experienced similar pains before. None as severe as this, but she knew it would soon pass, just as the others had.

But as she knelt, waiting for the pain to lessen, it grew stronger, more intense, as if a vise had been clamped around her middle and cinched up tight. Sweat broke out on her brow, beading her upper lip. She couldn't move, could barely breathe. She glanced up at the counter and the phone just out of reach, and gulped back the nausea, the fear, knowing she had to call for help. But who? She hated to call 911, if this turned out to be false labor. She worked in Emergency. She knew how much manpower and time was wasted on expectant mothers who were convinced they were in labor.

She'd call her neighbor, she decided. Mrs. Baker would stay with her until she could determine that this was the real thing and not a false alarm.

As she lifted a hand to the counter to pull herself up, another pain, nearly blinding in its intensity, dragged her back down to her knees. Moaning, she curled into a ball, trying to smother the pain. She felt a gush of moisture between her legs and watched in horror as a dark stain spread from the crotch of her scrub pants, soaking her to the knees.

She squeezed her eyes shut against the sight, knowing all too well what this meant.

"Oh, God, please," she prayed tearfully. "Don't let me lose my baby."

Mack climbed from his car and checked the number on the house against the return address on the envelope he held, then tucked it into his shirt pocket and studied the house. Its modest appearance and old-fashioned charm surprised him. Similar trips in the past had taken him to ultramodern condominiums in singles' neighborhoods and upscale apartment high-rises, but nothing even close to this. This house seemed almost... well, homey. From the border of impatiens that lined the sidewalk, to the baskets of ferns that swung lazily from hooks on the porch eaves, it looked like a place where a family might live.

Reminded that it was his own family who was responsible for him being here, he swore under his breath and started up the walk, anxious to get the unsavory task over with. Reaching the door, he rapped his knuckles against wood painted a warm, cheerful red, then rocked back on his boot heels and waited.

After a full minute passed without a response, he lifted a hand and knocked again. Frowning, he strained to listen for any sound coming from inside that would indicate that someone was home. He

heard a female voice call out, but wasn't sure what was said. An invitation to come in, he wondered, or simply a signal to let him know she was on her way to the door?

Figuring it was the latter, he waited, listening for the sound of footsteps from inside. When he heard nothing but silence, he tried the door and found it locked. Frowning, he glanced to his left and noticed a set of windows. Though covered by blinds, he crossed to peer through them, hoping they would offer him a peek inside. A narrow gap between the slats provided him with a slim view of the living room. Finding no sign of life, he shifted his gaze to a hallway beyond that led toward the rear of the house. A flutter of movement on the floor caught his attention and he pressed his nose against the glass for a better look.

"What the hell," he murmured, as he stared at what appeared to be an outstretched hand, its fingers clawing against the hardwood floor. Was the woman drunk and had fallen? he wondered. Had she OD'd? Either possibility wouldn't surprise him, considering the crowd Ty ran with. But it was the other possibilities that came to mind—attempted burglary, possible rape victim—that had him leaping off the porch and running around to the rear of the house. His heart thumping wildly, he cleared the back porch steps in one leap and shoved open the door.

Braced for a possible attack, he stepped cautiously inside. "Ma'am?" he called. "Are you okay?"
"Help me...please."

The voice, weak and thready, came from the opposite side of the room.

He quickly rounded the island that separated the room and found the woman lying on the floor, her back to him. From her sprawled position, it appeared she had heard his knock and had tried to drag herself to the front door.

He dropped to a knee behind her and laid a hand on her arm. "Are you hurt?"
"I—"

Moaning, she curled tighter into herself.

"My...water...broke," she managed to gasp out between breaths.

A chill skated down Mack's spine. He had known the woman was pregnant but hadn't realized she was that far along. "How far apart are the contractions?"

She dragged in a breath, slowly released it, then rolled to her back and looked up at him.

"Continuous." She wet her lips. "Please...help me." Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over dark lashes. "I don't want to lose my baby."

He set his jaw against the fear in her eyes, the desperation in her voice. He didn't need this nightmare, he told himself. He could walk out the door right now, tear up the check he'd brought along to end whatever responsibility the woman felt his family owed her, and no one would ever be the wiser.

Her hand closed over his, her fingers digging deeply into his skin. "Please," she begged. "You've got to help me."

He hesitated a moment, then swore under his breath and pushed to his feet. With his mouth slanted in a scowl, he snatched the phone from its base and punched in 911.

Mack paced the waiting area of the Emergency Room, his stomach in knots, his palms slick with sweat. His uneasiness wasn't due to his concern for the woman who had been wheeled away by EMS thirty minutes earlier. It was the hospital. He hated them. The antiseptic smell. The sterile decor. The constant pages over the PA system for doctors and nurses and the dreaded words "code blue." He didn't know what had possessed him to come here. He'd done what the woman had asked of him. He'd called 911, then stayed with her until the ambulance arrived. He'd done his duty. If she lost her baby, it was no skin off his nose. It wasn't his kid.

He dropped his head back with a groan, unable to believe that he would even think such a thing. He didn't wish the woman ill. And he sure as hell didn't want her to lose her baby. He knew what it was like to lose a child. The grief, the guilt, the hole it left in your heart, in your life.

"Mr. McGruder?"

He whirled at the sound of his name and found a nurse standing in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Ms. Rocci is asking for you.” She opened the door wider. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you the way.”

He hesitated, knowing it was a mistake to see the woman again, to get involved any deeper than he already was. He should leave. Go back home where he belonged. Forget about Adrianna Rocci and her unborn child.

Instead he found himself following the nurse down a long hall.

She glanced over her shoulder. “You’re a bit of a hero around here, you know.”

He frowned, uncomfortable at being tagged as such. “I’m no hero.”

“You are to us. You came to the aid of one of our own.” At his confused look, she explained. “Addy works here. If you hadn’t happened along when you did, there’s a chance she would’ve lost her baby. Maybe even her life.”

Before he could think of a response, she stopped before one of the curtained-off cubicles, pushed back the drape and held it aside.

When he hesitated, she gave him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry,” she whispered. “She’s resting more comfortably now.”

Taking a deep breath, he stepped inside. The room was so small the curtain brushed the backs of his legs when the nurse dropped it into place. The woman— Addy, he remembered the nurse calling her—lay on a gurney parked no more than a foot from where he stood, a sheet draping her from chin to toes. A white identification bracelet circled her left wrist and an IV needle was taped to the back of her hand. He followed the tube to a bottle hooked to a stainless steel pole wheeled close to the bed, then shifted his gaze to her face.

With her eyes closed and her hands folded over her swollen stomach, she looked serene, peaceful. Thinking she was asleep, he eased closer to the bed and was relieved to find that there was more color in her face than there had been when the attendants had loaded her into the ambulance.

She wasn’t beautiful, he thought as he studied her, but she wasn’t homely, either. Her complexion was dark, as was her hair, a testament to her Italian surname, he supposed. Her cheekbones were high ridges, her neck long and graceful.

As he stared, trying to remember the color of her eyes, her lashes fluttered up. Brown, he noted. Her eyes were brown.

She smiled softly and reached for his hand. “I can’t believe you’re really here. I was sure that I had imagined you.”

Her voice was husky, barely more than a whisper, but he heard the wonder in it. “The nurse said you wanted to see me.”

She gave his hand a grateful squeeze. “To thank you.” She closed her eyes, gulped. When she opened them again, a single tear slipped from the corner and slid down her temple to disappear into her hair. “I don’t know what would’ve happened to me and my baby if you hadn’t come along when you did.”

He averted his gaze, unsure what to say. When he glanced back, she was studying him curiously, as if only just now wondering at his identity and why he was at her house.

“Do I know you?”

He hesitated a moment, then figured she’d never make the connection. “John McGruder, though most folks call me Mack.”

“Mack,” she repeated, as if testing the sound of the name, then smiled. “That’s a good, strong name. It suits you.”

Before he could think of a response, her eyes slammed shut and she arched up high off the bed, her fingers digging into the mattress.

Panicking, he glanced around for a call button. “Should I get the nurse?”

She released a long breath, then opened her eyes and forced a reassuring smile. “No. I’m okay. The doctor was able to stop the labor, but he said I should expect a few more pains.”

He blew out a long breath of his own, relieved that it hadn’t lasted any longer than it had. “Does that mean you get to go home?”

“No. In fact, an orderly is on his way right now to take me up to Labor and Delivery.”

“But I thought you said the doctor was able to stop your labor?”

“He was...for the time being. But I have to stay in the hospital. They need to be able to monitor the baby’s vital signs, plus keep me off my feet.”

“How long will you have to stay?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Until the baby’s born. My actual due date isn’t until July 15, but Dr. Wharton says he doubts I’ll make it that long.”

He did the math in his head and shuddered, knowing he’d go nuts if he had to stay in a hospital bed for six weeks. “Is there anyone I can call for you? Family you want notified?”

She shook her head. “The only family I have is my mother, and she lives in Hawaii.”

He pulled a pen from his pocket. “Give me her number, and I’ll give her a call. She’ll probably want to catch the next plane out.”

“You’re sweet to offer, but it isn’t necessary. She wasn’t planning on coming for the baby’s birth. Me going into labor early won’t change her mind.”

He pressed the pen against the paper. “Why don’t you let her decide that?”

She hesitated a moment, then sighed. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to let her know what’s going on. Her name is Mary Claire Sullivan and her number is—”

Mack jotted down the number she rattled off, then slipped the paper and pen back into his pocket. He glanced uncertainly around. “Well, I guess I better get out of here before they run me off. Is there anything I can get for you before I leave?”

She lifted a brow. “About six more weeks of pregnancy?” Smiling, she flapped a hand. “Just kidding. I’ll be fine.”

He shifted uneasily from foot to foot, anxious to go, but reluctant to leave her alone. “You take care of yourself, okay?”

She reached for his hand and gave it another grateful squeeze. “Thanks, Mack. For everything. I owe you one.”

As Mack stepped through the Emergency Room doors, he pulled his cell phone from the holster clipped at his waist and punched in the number Addy had given him, wanting to make the call to her mother before he hit the road.

When a woman answered, he asked, “Is this Mary Claire Sullivan?”

“Who wants to know?”

Mack scowled at the woman’s suspicious tone.

“Mack McGruder. I’m calling for your daughter. Addy,” he added, thinking she might have more than one. “She went into labor earlier this evening and was rushed to the hospital. The doctor was able to stop the labor, but she’s going to have to remain in the hospital until the baby is born.”

“Are you the one who got her pregnant?”

Startled by the unexpected question, he gaped, then scowled again. “No. I’m just passing on information. Figured you’d want to make arrangements to come and stay with her.”

“If she thinks I’m going to fly all the way to Dallas to hold her hand, she’s got another think coming! Nobody sat by my side while I was giving birth to her. No siree. I sweated out twelve hours of labor all by myself. Twelve long hours,” she added. “And even if I wanted to come, which I don’t, I’ve got a husband to see after. I can’t go flying off and leave him to fend for himself. You tell Addy that she’s the one who got herself into this mess, and she’ll have to see it to its end. I’ve got troubles enough of my own to deal with, without taking on hers.”

Stunned, Mack stood slack-jawed. How could a mother be so callous about her own child? So uncaring? “If it’s the cost you’re worried about, I’ll arrange for your flight.”

“A man who’d offer to do that either has a guilty conscience or money to burn.”

Mack ground his teeth. “I’m just trying to be helpful. I’d think you’d want to be with your daughter at a time like this.”

“She got pregnant without my help. She can deliver without it, too.”

“But she’s your daughter!” he shouted, unable to contain his frustration any longer. “She needs you.”

“I did my duty by Addy. I raised her, didn’t I? And without any help from the sorry SOB who fathered her.”

Mack wanted to curse at the woman, strangle something, preferably her. How could anyone, much less a mother, be so cold-blooded?

“I’m sorry I bothered you,” he muttered, and disconnected the call before he gave in to the urge to tell the woman exactly what he thought of her. Scowling, he stuffed his cell phone back into its holster at his waist, then dragged his hands over his hair. Lacing his fingers behind his head, he glanced over his shoulder at the Emergency Room door and envisioned Addy lying on the gurney, probably worried out of her mind about her baby, and without a soul to lean on for support.

Dropping his arms, he headed for the parking lot, telling himself it wasn’t his problem. He’d done his duty. He’d called the ambulance for her, made sure that she’d arrived safely at the hospital. He’d even called her mother for her.

He did an abrupt about-face and marched back to the Emergency entrance. Once inside, he quickly spotted the nurse who had taken him back to see Addy and motioned her toward him.

“Leaving us?” she asked, smiling.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve got a good four-hour drive home.” He fished a business card from his wallet and handed it to her. “I’d appreciate it if you’d give me a call if there’s a change in Addy’s condition. My cell number is there at the bottom. Call day or night. Doesn’t matter. I’ll answer.”

She hid a smile. “And you claimed you’re not a hero,” she scolded.

“More like a janitor,” he grumbled, and turned for the door.

“Janitor?” she repeated in confusion.

He paused in the open doorway and glanced back. “Yeah. Seems I’ve made a career of cleaning up other people’s messes.”

Two

Addy thrust her head back against the pillow and clenched her teeth, sure that the pain was going to rip her apart. In spite of her efforts to suppress it, a low animal-like groan slid past her lips, and she began to pant, determined to stay ahead of the pain and not give in to it.

Busy adjusting an intravenous drip, Marjorie glanced her way. “Bad?”

Gulping, Addy nodded. “Did you call Dr. Wharton?”

Satisfied that the fluids were transferring at the proper rate, Marjorie took Addy’s hand and held it between her own. “He’s on his way.”

Addy gulped again. “He better hurry.”

Her expression sympathetic, Marjorie stroked Addy’s damp hair back from her face. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but you’re a long way from delivering.”

Groaning, Addy closed her eyes. “I can’t be. The pain is already unbearable.” She opened her eyes and looked at Marjorie, tears blurring her friend’s image. “You’d tell me if something was wrong with the baby, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course I would,” Marjorie assured her.

Addy searched her friend’s face, trying to determine if she was telling the truth or just saying that to keep Addy from becoming more upset. Unsure, she looked away. “You should go back down to Emergency. You’re on duty.”

Marjorie glanced toward the door and worried her lip. “I really should. There was a bus wreck on the interstate. The call came in just before I came up to check on you.”

Addy pulled her hand from Marjorie’s. “Then go. They need you more than I do.”

“But I hate leaving you alone,” Marjorie fretted.

“I’ll be okay. Really.”

“I’ll call Mack,” Marjorie said, already digging in her pocket for her cell phone. “He gave me his number and said for me to let him know if there was a change in your condition.”

“No, please,” Addy begged. “He’s done enough for me already. Promise you won’t call him.”

Marjorie eyed Addy stubbornly for a moment, then sagged her shoulders in defeat. “Oh, all right,” she said, and shoved the phone into her pocket. “I’ll come back and check on you again as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Marjorie.”

Addy waited until the door closed behind her friend, then covered her face with her hands and gave in to the tears that had threatened since her labor had started again. She couldn’t lose her baby, prayed God would keep it safe. She wanted this baby so badly, needed it. In spite of all the sacrifices she would have to make to support and care for it, she wanted this baby to live.

And while she was praying, she added a thanks for Mack’s unexpected appearance at her house and the steps he’d taken to protect her baby’s life.

Even as the prayer formed, she lowered her hands from her face and frowned, wondering about Mack and realizing that, although she’d asked him his name, she’d failed to ask him why he’d been at her house.

There were any number of plausible explanations, she reminded herself. He could be a bill collector or a solicitor. Her frown deepened. But that didn’t make sense, as she didn’t have any outstanding bills and solicitors were prohibited in her neighborhood. She supposed he might have become lost and simply stopped to ask directions, which wasn’t unusual, as her neighborhood was made up of a tangle of streets that baffled even the most gifted map reader.

Whatever his reason, she thought, dismissing her concerns as unnecessary considering his kindness to her, she wished he was still with her. She knew it was stupid, foolish even, to yearn for someone she didn’t even know. But while he’d been with her, both at her house and in Emergency,

she'd felt safe, more in control, better capable of handling the pain, of facing whatever happened. Not so alone.

She opened her hands to look at them, remembering how sure his grip had felt on hers, how firmly he'd held her hand. How strong he'd seemed, so in control. He didn't even know her, yet he'd followed the ambulance to the hospital, stayed with her, even offered to call her mother.

Why couldn't she have fallen for a guy like Mack? she asked herself miserably. She bet he wouldn't have stolen from her or lied to her as Ty had done. And he probably wouldn't have run the way Ty had when she'd told him she was pregnant.

Gulping back the regret that crowded her throat, she closed her eyes and willed her body to relax and her mind to clear, knowing she had to keep her thoughts focused so that she could deal with the next pain when it came.

There'd be plenty of time for regrets later.

A thick band of clouds blocked what light the moon might have offered, leaving the interstate a black ribbon that stretched for miles and miles in the darkness. But Mack didn't mind the darkness or the lack of traffic he encountered. In fact, he welcomed it. It gave him time to think.

And Adrianna Rocci—or Addy, as her friend had called her—had given him a lot to think about.

An unplanned pregnancy. An irresponsible boyfriend. A mother who ranked right up there with Joan Crawford on the nurturing scale. And now her baby's life was in jeopardy. How much more could the woman take, before she snapped?

It wasn't right, he told himself. No one should have to go through something like this alone. She should have a husband or, at the very least, family with her to offer emotional and physical support. Hell, the woman was going to be all but tied to a bed for the next six weeks! Who would take care of her house? Get her mail? Pay her bills? Who would sit with her to help pass the time? Hold her hand when she was scared? Stand at her side during the birth?

He narrowed his eyes at the dark highway ahead, wishing he could get his hands on Ty. Castration came to mind as sufficient punishment, but even that seemed too kind. Getting a woman pregnant, then abandoning her... It just wasn't right. Yet that was Ty's style. Hit and run, love 'em and leave 'em, that was his standard modus operandi. In Mack's estimation, Ty was immature, irresponsible and a royal pain in the ass. Unfortunately, women seemed to find him irresistible. And why wouldn't they? he asked himself. Ty was a good-looking man, smooth talking, fun loving. It was in the integrity department that he came up short. Just like his old man.

Mack scowled at the reminder of his stepfather. Jacob Bodean was nothing but a two-bit con artist out trolling for a free ride, when he'd met Mack's mother. Recently widowed and still grieving over the loss of her husband, his mother had been an easy mark for a scumball like Jacob. Playing on her weakened emotional state, within two months Jacob had sweet-talked her into marrying him. Another fourteen months and Ty had been born.

It had taken Mack's mother six years—and the loss of a large chunk of the fortune Mack's father had left her—before she'd figured out that Jacob was only interested in her money and was going through it as fast as he could write checks. It had cost her another chunk of money to get rid of him and to win custody of Ty. Mack often wondered if she wouldn't have been better off washing her hands of them both.

But Ty is blood, he told himself, as his mother had often reminded him and, like it or not, he was now Mack's responsibility. On her deathbed, his mother had made him promise that he would look after his half brother. The trust fund she'd set up for Ty prior to her death, naming Mack as executor, had added a legal obligation to the moral one he'd already assumed.

Both had been stretched mighty thin over the years.

Mack had bailed Ty out of more trouble than he cared to think about and was sick and damn tired of mopping up a grown man's messes. For God's sake, he thought, his anger with his half brother

building. Ty was thirty-four years old! It was past time for him to settle down and take care of his own damn mistakes.

Mack drew in a long breath and slowly released it, telling himself that working up a steam over Ty wasn't going to help Addy's situation. And Addy definitely needed help.

He patted his shirt pocket, remembering the check he'd planned to offer her, in hopes of buying Ty's way out of yet another paternity suit, if that's what she'd had in mind. But after finding her lying on the floor already in labor, he hadn't been able to bring himself to broach the subject. How could he, when she was worried sick she might lose her baby?

But he had to do something, he told himself. He couldn't just leave her hanging out there alone. She'd seemed like a nice person, nothing at all like the other women Ty associated with, who had greedily snatched up the money he had offered them. Yet, what options did Mack have other than to offer her money? He sure as hell couldn't force Ty to do the honorable thing and marry the woman and give the baby his name. Even if he could, he certainly wouldn't be doing Addy any favors, saddling her with a man like Ty.

His cell phone rang, and he quickly plucked it from the console, where he'd laid it, and flipped it open. "Mack," he said.

"This is Marjorie Johnson. The nurse from the Emergency Room?"

He tensed at the hesitancy in the woman's voice, knowing the call had to be about Addy. "Has something happened to Addy?"

"Her labor started again. The doctor says he can't stop it this time. I wanted to stay with her, but I'm on duty and don't get off for another five hours."

He glanced at the illuminated clock on the dash and quickly calculated the time. "I can be there in less than two."

"Oh, thank you," she said in relief, then added in a rush, "But please don't tell her that I called. When I suggested it, she insisted that I not bother you. Said you'd done enough for her already."

He saw an exit sign up ahead, and took it.

"Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me."

Mack headed straight for Labor and Delivery and the room number the attendant at the information desk had given him.

The room he entered was larger than the tiny cubicle he'd left her in during her stay in the ER. There was also more equipment on hand, all of which was humming and blinking, busily monitoring her vital signs as well as those of her baby.

She lay facing the dark window, her back to him. From his vantage point, if he hadn't known better, he would never have suspected she was pregnant. Her shoulders and hips appeared slim beneath the bedcovers, her waist a shallow dip between the two.

He thought for a moment that she was asleep, then heard a low groan and watched as her fingers curled around the edge of the mattress. He waited until they slowly relaxed, then said quietly, "Addy?"

She glanced over her shoulder, and her eyes widened in surprise. Shifting awkwardly to her back, she stretched out a hand. "Mack."

Her voice was no more than a whisper, but the relief in it resonated through him and settled somewhere near his heart. He crossed to the bed and gripped her hand within his.

"I thought you were going home," she said.

"I was," he admitted, then shrugged. "Decided I didn't want to miss the birthday party."

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Did Marjorie call you?"

Mindful of his promise, he avoided her question by asking one of his own. "How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess." Tears filled her eyes and she shook her head. "I'm scared, Mack. More scared than I've ever been in my life."

He chafed her hand between his. “Everything’s going to be all right.” He tipped his head toward the row of equipment and teased her with a smile. “Hell, there’s enough technology in this room to send a man to the moon and back. Getting a baby here safely ought to be a snap.”

She glanced toward the machines and winced. “It does seem a bit much, doesn’t it?”

“What I want to know is, do all patients get this kind of preferential treatment or is it reserved for hospital employees?”

She laughed softly. “Since I’ve never been a patient, I wouldn’t know.”

She opened her mouth to say something more, then slammed her eyes shut and emitted a low groan.

He tightened his fingers around hers. “Another pain?”

Her teeth gritted, she nodded.

He racked his brain, trying to remember the techniques he’d learned in the Lamaze classes he’d attended with his wife. “Look at me,” he ordered.

She opened her eyes and fixed them on his.

“Breathe slowly,” he instructed. “Work with the pain, not against it.”

He kept his gaze on hers while she hauled in a deep breath, released it, drew in another. Unconsciously he matched his breathing to hers, while he waited for the pain to pass. After what seemed like hours, her grip on his hand slowly relaxed and she released a long shuddery breath.

“Better?” he asked.

She wet her lips, nodded. “They’re coming faster now. Harder.”

He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “You’re doing just fine. A couple more like that one, and I’ll bet that baby will be here in no time.”

“I’m going to hold you to—”

Her eyes went wide, her body rigid.

Without thinking, he laid a hand on her stomach and felt the tautness beneath his palm and knew she was already having another contraction. “Relax,” he soothed, and began stroking his palm over her stomach.

Eyes wild, she fought him, struggling to escape his hold on her, as well as the pain.

He clamped down hard on her hand, refusing to let go. “Look at me, Addy,” he ordered sternly. “Focus. We can do this.”

She shook her head wildly. “Maybe you can, but I can’t. It hurts!”

“It won’t last forever.” He increased the pressure on her hand. “Come on, Addy. Look at me. Focus.”

She opened her eyes and bared her teeth. “I hate you,” she snarled. “You’re mean and hateful and I wish you’d get the hell out of here and leave me alone.”

Mack ignored her, knowing it was the pain talking. His wife had hurled similar accusations at him—and worse—while giving birth.

“Hate me all you want,” he told her, “but I’m staying. We’re going to get through this. Together. Now breathe.”

She tried to wrench her hand away, then jackknifed to a sitting position, her eyes wide, her fingers clamped around his hard enough to crush bone. “It’s coming!” she screamed. “Oh, God, get the nurse. The baby’s coming!”

Mack grabbed the remote control clipped to the bed rail and punched the call button. Within seconds the door opened and a nurse strode into the room. She took one look at Addy’s face and shouldered Mack aside, taking his place beside the bed.

“How far apart are the contractions?” she asked, as she checked Addy’s pulse.

Mack dragged a shaky hand down his face, more than happy to relinquish control to the nurse. “Less than a minute.”

The door opened again and a doctor sauntered in. “How’s my favorite patient?”

Mack burned him with a look. “How do you think?” he snapped impatiently. “She’s hurting like hell and needs something for the pain.”

“No!” Addy cried and fell back against the pillows, holding her hands protectively over her stomach. “No drugs. I’m doing this naturally.”

The doctor looked at Mac and shrugged as if to say “you heard the woman,” then stepped to the end of the bed and lifted the sheet to visibly check her progress.

“The head’s crowned,” he reported, then dropped the sheet and strode to the sink, his steps quicker now, his expression all business. As he squirted disinfectant on his hands, he glanced Mack’s way. “If you’re the father, you’ll need to scrub up. Otherwise—” he tipped his head toward the door “—the waiting room’s at the end of the hall.”

Addy lunged, managing to catch Mack’s sleeve. He glanced back and saw the fear in her eyes, the pleading. He set his jaw, knowing there was no way in hell he could leave her to face this birth alone.

“Where do I scrub?”

Mack sat in the chair by the window, his long legs stretched out in front of him and his head tipped back against the cushion, staring at the ceiling. Though exhausted, he couldn’t sleep. His mind was racing, his body charged with adrenaline...and all because of the tiny bit of humanity, swaddled in a blue blanket and sleeping peacefully in the bassinet across the room.

He dropped his chin to look in that direction, and his heart did a slow flip. A boy, he thought, and had to swallow back the emotion that filled his throat, weighing in at a fraction over five pounds but healthy as a horse and with a set of lungs to prove it. Though there had been concerns that the baby wouldn’t be fully developed, he’d passed all the tests like a champ, and wouldn’t have to spend any time in an incubator, as most preemies were required to do.

Unable to resist, he heaved himself from the chair and crossed to peer down at the baby. Bundled up snug in the blue blanket, only the infant’s face was visible, revealing rosy cheeks and a nose no bigger than a button. Dark fuzz covered his head, but Mack knew from experience that he’d probably lose it and what grew back might be a different color entirely. His own son’s hair had been coal-black at birth, but by the age of two, it was cotton white. He wondered what color it would’ve been if he’d lived?

Stifling a groan, he dropped his chin to his chest. He didn’t want to think about his son. Not now. Remembering made him hurt, and Mack had hurt for too many years.

Taking a deep breath, he lifted his head and stared hard, until he succeeded in shoving back the memory and was able to bring the baby into focus again.

His smile wistful, he reached to smooth the back of his fingers over the baby’s cheek, marveling at its softness, the miniature features.

“You’re one lucky guy,” he whispered to the sleeping infant. “You’ve got a helluva mother. Even when the pain was really bad, she wouldn’t let them give her anything to ease it, for fear it would hurt you.” He smoothed a knuckle across the baby’s opposite cheek. “Trust me. That kind of love is a rare thing.”

The baby scrunched up his face, as if preparing to cry.

“Whoa, now,” Mack warned and quickly lifted the baby from the bassinet. “None of that. You don’t want to wake up your mom, now, do you?”

Cradling the baby in his arms, he tiptoed back to the chair and eased down. The infant yawned, rooted around a moment, then settled back to sleep, holding one hand curled in a fist against his cheek.

Mack stared at the infant, and his heart seemed to stop, then kicked into a pounding beat. The baby’s coloring and features mimicked those of his son so closely, he could be Mack’s child. Unable to tear his gaze away, he stared, his heart thundering against his rib cage, as he wondered if this baby was an answer to the problem that had been troubling him lately.

Though he considered it morbid to think about his own death, that's exactly what he'd been doing for the better part of a year. He supposed it was a sign that he was getting old, for him to be having such thoughts—although he didn't consider forty-two all that old. But death was a fact of life, the same as living, and he was aware, especially with an estate the size of his, that he should have a will in place, no matter what his age or state of health. Having one drawn one up was easy enough. All he had to do was call his lawyer. What kept him from making the call was his lack of an heir. Most men named their wives or kids as their beneficiaries, or a combination of the two. But Mack didn't have a wife or children...at least, none that were living.

He'd lost his wife and son in a senseless car wreck twelve years before and had never remarried. For the first couple of years following their deaths, he'd found it hard enough to breathe, much less think about marrying again. But even after the pain of losing them had dulled somewhat, he still hadn't been able to work up the enthusiasm to ask a woman out on a date.

When asked, he claimed it was because he'd never met one that caught his eye. But the truth was, he'd never looked. Losing his wife and son had changed him, stripping him of the desire to develop attachments with anyone, especially a woman. As a result, he'd reached the ripe old age of forty-two with no family, other than his half brother, to name in a will.

He scowled at the reminder of Ty. Hell, if he left his estate to his half brother, everything Mack and Mack's father before him had worked and struggled to build would be lost in less than a year's time. Ty had the business acumen of a jackass and the attention span of a two-year-old. He looked at everything in terms of what he could turn it for and the fun it would buy him when he did.

No, he wouldn't leave his estate to Ty.

Mack focused his gaze on the baby again, wondering if the child could be the answer to his problem. He could adopt him, he told himself. Raise the boy as his own, ingrain in him the morals and integrity that the child would never learn if left up to Ty.

Ty didn't care about the kid, Mack told himself. If he did, he'd be here right now, instead of playing an adult version of hide and seek. If he'd felt any sense of responsibility at all, Ty would've been the one holding Addy's hand while the baby was born, not Mack. And it would've been Ty, not Mack, who the doctor had passed the scissors to and allowed to cut the umbilical cord, signifying the baby's official entry into the world.

The way Mack looked at it, his willingness to adopt the baby was the perfect solution to everyone's problems. The child would have a father, Ty would be off the hook, and Mack would have an heir.

There was only one problem...the baby's mother.

In spite of the bond Mack and Addy had forged during the last fourteen-plus hours, he doubted she would embrace the idea if he were to suggest him adopting her baby. In fact, she'd probably think he'd lost his mind.

"Mack?"

He jumped at the sound of Addy's voice and glanced up to find her peering at him curiously.

"Is something wrong?" she asked in concern.

Fearing she would somehow read his thoughts and know what he'd been thinking, he dropped his gaze and tucked the blanket more snugly at the baby's chin. "No. He looked like he was going to start fussing, and I thought if I held him awhile, it would give you the chance to sleep a little longer."

Her smile tender, she eased herself to a sitting position and held out her arms. "Here. Give him to me. I'll bet he's hungry."

Rising, Mack carried the baby to the bed and settled the infant in her arms.

As if sensing his nearness to his milk supply, the baby twisted his head toward her breast, his mouth open like a baby's birds.

Addy placed a finger against the infant's lips and laughed when he began to suck. "See?" she said, and began to rearrange her nightgown. "He is hungry."

She stopped and glanced up at Mack, her cheeks stained a deep rose, as if she'd just realized the intimacy of what she was preparing to do.

He immediately took a step back. "I'll wait outside," he said, and turned for the door.

"No! Wait."

He glanced over his shoulder, surprised by the panic in her voice.

Dropping her gaze, she fluttered a hand. "Just turn your back until I get him situated."

Mack did as instructed and waited until he heard her signal of "ready" before turning around. Finding her and the baby modestly covered by the blue blanket, he reached behind him to drag his chair closer to the bed.

"It's amazing how a baby instinctively knows how to nurse," he said softly, awed by the sight.

Her gaze on the infant, she smiled. "Yes, it is."

Moments passed in silence, both absorbed by the baby's movements.

"Mack?"

His attention focused on the nursing infant, he mumbled a distracted, "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

He angled his head to peer at her in puzzlement. "For what?"

"For all the mean things I said to you while I was in labor."

He waved away the apology. "I knew you didn't mean any of that stuff. That was the pain talking."

"Just the same, I'm sorry. I don't know what I would've done without you."

He choked out a laugh. "Heck, I had the easy part. You were the one who was doing all the work."

She looked down at the baby and smiled. "And look what I got for my trouble. A beautiful, healthy baby. I couldn't ask for anything more."

"He's a keeper, all right."

The door opened and Marjorie sailed in, trailing a balloon bouquet in her wake. Without so much as a how-do-you-do to Mack or Addy, she headed straight for the bed, her gaze on the baby.

"Oh, let me see that little tiger," she said eagerly, as she tethered the streamers of the balloon bouquet at the head of the bed.

Addy deftly separated the baby from her breast, rearranged her nightgown, then folded back the blanket, for Marjorie to see. "Isn't he beautiful?"

"Gorgeous," Marjorie agreed, then tipped her face up to Addy's. "Have you named him yet?"

Addy shook her head. "No. I had a girl's name picked out, but I hadn't settled on one for a boy."

"I thought you were going to use your father's name?" Marjorie said.

"Only his first name." She shrugged. "I haven't been able to come up with anything that sounds right with Antonio."

Marjorie pursed her lips thoughtfully, then swung her gaze to Mack. "What's your full name?"

Caught off-guard, Mack blinked, then stammered, "Uh, Jonathan Michael McGruder."

"What about Antonio Michael Rocci?" Marjorie suggested to Addy.

Frowning, Addy shook her head. "I want to use Antonio as his middle name."

"Then name him Jonathan Antonio Rocci. You could call him Johnny."

"Jonathan Antonio Rocci," Addy repeated, as if testing the sound of the name, then nodded. "It's a mouthful, but I like it." She glanced at Mack, her expression hopeful. "Would you mind if I gave my baby your name?"

Mind? Mack thought. Hell, he was hoping he could persuade her to give the baby his last name, as well. "I'd be honored."

The pager in Marjorie's pocket beeped and she pulled it out to check the display. "Those imbeciles," she muttered crossly. "You'd think they could run the ER for ten minutes without me."

She slid the pager back into her pocket and offered Addy an apologetic smile. “Sorry, hon, but I’ve got to scoot. I’ll try to come back later, when I’m on my dinner break.”

“Call first,” Addy warned. “I’m hoping I can persuade Dr. Wharton to release me.”

Marjorie wagged a finger at her nose. “You listen to me, young lady. You’ve just had a baby. You have no business going home to an empty house. You stay right here where the nursing staff can take care of you and the baby.”

Addy jutted her chin. “I can take care of myself.”

“But—”

“No, Marjorie,” she said, cutting her friend off. “I’m going home.”

With a huff of disgust, Marjorie turned to leave. “You try talking some sense into that thick head of hers,” she said to Mack. “She won’t listen to me.”

Mack had remained quiet during the exchange, absorbing the conversation and considering how he could use the situation to his own advantage. He knew the idea to adopt the baby was a crazy one and liable to send Addy into an apoplectic fit. But the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced it was the best solution to all their problems, both his and Addy’s.

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