



THE BRAVO BACHELOR

CHRISTINE RIMMER



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Christine Rimmer
The Bravo Bachelor

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One visit to her ranch had landed him in the delivery room! All Gabe Bravo wanted was to convince Mary Hofstetter to sell him her land. But the young widow had barely told him to hightail it off her property before going into labour. Being an honourable Bravo bachelor, he stayed by her side, even after her little bundle of joy appeared. There was no denying Gabe had declared himself permanently single, and proud of it. But with his feelings for Mary growing deeper, he was torn: walk away from mother and child, or do what he'd sworn he'd never do – fall in love!

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“You didn’t want me to feel that I had to stay.”

It really wasn’t fair. The man was always a couple of steps ahead of her. He came closer. So gently he cradled her face between his hands. Gabe’s palms were warm against her cheeks and he smelled of some light, tempting aftershave. “Well, I *want* to stay.”

Mary wrapped her fingers around his wrists. At her slight tug, his hands dropped away. And something scary happened within her—a sadness, a longing. She wished that he would touch her again, deliberately, the way he’d just done. Tenderly. The way a man will touch a wife.

Or a lover...

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The Nanny Solution by Teresa Hill

An Ideal Father by Elaine Grant

Not Without Her Family by Beth Andrews

Christine Rimmer came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been everything from an actress to a salesclerk to a waitress. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves, who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day.

She lives with her family in Oklahoma. Visit Christine at www.christinerimmer.com.

The Bravo Bachelor

BY

Christine Rimmer



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For Tom and Ed, the sweetest guys I know—well, on four legs, anyway.

Chapter One

That March morning, Mary Hofstetter dragged herself out of bed at dawn. It was going to be a beautiful, sunny day and Mary felt lousy. Her back ached. All night, the baby had played football with her rib cage. She'd gotten maybe two hours' sleep.

Mary trudged outside to feed the two aging horses, the chickens and the goats. Inside again, she prepared breakfast; she brewed herb tea, made toast and whipped up a protein shake.

The plan was to go straight to the computer once she'd eaten. Instead, she started cleaning. Nesting instinct, she told herself. After all, she was due in three weeks. She whipped the kitchen into shape, made her bed, dusted her bedroom and the living room. After that, she cleaned the shower and mopped the kitchen floor.

By then, it was a little after ten and the work that really needed doing could no longer be put off. Strangely, in the past month or two, as her stomach had gotten bigger, her mind had gotten... dreamier. This was normal, she knew from her reading on pregnancy and childbirth, and would pass eventually after the baby came. Too bad that knowing she would someday have her focus back didn't help her meet her deadline now.

With a sigh of resignation, Mary sat down at the computer in the corner of the living room. Her two thousandword article on canning summer fruit was due at *Ranch Life* magazine the next day. She'd have the article finished and e-mailed in by five if it killed her. Which, considering how tired and unfocused she was, it just might.

She booted up the PC—and stalled some more, fiddling with stuff on the desktop, straightening the tape dispenser and the stapler, moving the coffee mug full of pens from the left corner to the right. Another sigh and she made herself bring up the document she'd started yesterday.

Enjoy Summer's Bounty All Winter Long.

"Blah." Mary made a face at the title. And then she yawned. From the rug near the fireplace, her dog, Brownie, lifted her head and yawned, too. "I know, I know," she told the dog. "Bo-ring."

Then she scowled at the screen again. And shook her head. Later, if she finished with time to spare, she could stew over the title. Right now she needed to get some serious words on the page. She started typing.

Four sentences later, she heard the crunch of tires on gravel out in front. Brownie lifted her head again, gave a halfhearted "Woof," and then dropped her head back to her paws.

Mary wasn't expecting company, but hey, any excuse to get up from that desk sounded wonderful to her.

Groaning softly at the effort, she put her hands on the desktop and pushed herself to her feet. She arched her back to get the kinks out and then waddled over to the front window to see who'd dropped by.

Her visitor was still inside the car. It was a Cadillac SUV, that car. Black as a polished patent-leather shoe, with pricey gold rims that gleamed proudly in the Texas sun. It looked more than a little out of place in her dusty front yard.

Mary rubbed the base of her spine with one hand and supported her heavy belly with the other as she watched a tall man emerge from the fancy vehicle. Dark glasses covered his eyes. Though the vehicle blocked most of his body, she could see he wore a western shirt.

But the guy was no cowboy. If he were, he wouldn't be driving an Escalade with shining gold rims. And he certainly wouldn't be hauling out a briefcase and laying it on the roof of the car. Plus, something about the arrogant set of those broad shoulders spoke, loud and proud, of money and privilege. He stood for a moment without closing the door, his dark-gold head turned toward the house. Bright morning sun sparkled like stars on the lenses of his sunglasses.

Mary knew by then why he'd come. The Bravos must have sent him. Her tired shoulders slumped. So much for a nice diversion. She would rather be back at her desk, racking her fuzzy brain for a fascinating way to describe sterilizing canning jars, than dealing with the man who'd just taken off his sunglasses and tossed them casually to the seat of his pricey SUV.

He shut the driver's door, grabbed the briefcase and came around the front of the vehicle. Mary dug her fingers into the aching muscles at the base of her spine and wished he would just turn around, open that door again, get back in that beautiful car and drive off. How many times does a woman have to say "no" before the big-money types take the hint and go away?

As he mounted the steps to her front porch, she actually considered not answering his knock. After all, she was feeling like a beached whale, she'd already told the Bravos "no" three times and meant it—and she had work that truly did need doing.

But then, with a certain bittersweet sadness, she thought of Rowdy. Rowdy had always been the soul of politeness. Though he was fourteen years older than she was, he'd called her "ma'am" for weeks after they met—until their first date, as a matter of fact. A gentle, soft-spoken, old-fashioned man, he would always take off his hat in the presence of a woman.

Rowdy would never have given those Bravos what they were after. But he *would* do them the courtesy of answering the door and telling them "no" straight to their faces. Again.

So when the rich man knocked, Mary answered.

She pulled the door open and there he was, so handsome and fit-looking, he might have been a model. Or even a movie star. He had a sexy smile ready—a smile that only wavered slightly when he got a look at her ginormous stomach. Apparently, if someone back at the BravoCorp highrise in San Antonio had told him that the Hofstetter widow was pregnant, they'd failed to mention *how* pregnant.

He gestured for her to open the glass storm door that still stood between them. With a sigh, she flipped the lock and pushed it open a crack. He took the handle and pulled it the rest of the way until it caught and held wide.

"Mary Hofstetter?" He had a voice to match his looks. Deep and manly. Smooth as melted butterscotch.

She drew her shoulders back and forced a smile. "Yes?"

"I'm Gabe. Gabe Bravo." Well. Darned if they hadn't sent a real Bravo this time. He took out a card and handed it over.

Without giving it so much as a glance, she stuck the card in the back pocket of her jeans and got right down to the business of getting rid of him. "I'd invite you in, but I've got work that won't wait. And there's really no point in us talking, anyway. I'll only be telling you what I've told the others you sent. I don't care what the offer is, I'm not selling. So you have a nice day." She granted him a nod, parsed out a tight smile and started to shut the door.

"Mary." He spoke softly, but with clear command. His tone made her hesitate with the door half-closed. Sky-blue eyes reproached her—and somehow managed to gleam with wry humor at the same time. "You haven't even heard what I've come to say."

"I've heard enough from those other men you sent."

"But since then, we've rethought the offer. There's more now."

"Doesn't make a bit of difference."

He put on a hurt look. "How can you say that?"

Mary looked at him straight on. "Easily."

"You're making a big mistake. You don't know yet what we're willing to do to come to a satisfying solution to this problem."

"But, Gabe, I don't need to know. For me, there is no problem. I'm *already* satisfied."

"Come on." He wrapped his hand around the door frame, a supremely casual move. "Let me surprise you." His eyes were alight with humor, as if he *dared* her to shut the door now—and crush his tanned fingers with their buffed-smooth nails. "Please."

She stared into those gorgeous eyes and found herself thinking that maybe a surprise wouldn't be half-bad—and then she blinked and shook her head. “Seriously. I've already decided. I don't want to sell. Now, I really do have to—”

“You'll never be sure unless you hear me out.” He slanted her a sideways look, mouth curved in a hint of a smile, as if they shared a secret, just the two of them.

She knew the guy was working her, knew she should simply say “no thank you,” ask him to move his hand and shut the door the rest of the way. But she didn't. Nervously, she guided a few stray strands of hair away from her eyes, tucking them behind her ear. “No, really. I'm sorry you drove out here for nothing. But I just.. .don't have time right now.”

He refused to give up. “I promise you,” he coaxed. “It won't take long. Don't make me go back to my board of directors without being sure I've done all I can to change your mind.” Another smile, a hopeful one.

Mary couldn't stop herself from smiling in return. What was it about him? She'd allowed the first guy they'd sent into the house. It had seemed only right to hear the offer before giving her answer. Once was enough, though. She hadn't let the other two past her front door.

But *this* guy...well, he did have a way about him. All smooth and sociable. Too good-looking to be real, much too slick—and yet somehow, he still managed to come across as down-to-earth. As if the two of them were longtime friends and he was just stopping by to see how she was getting along.

“I could make a pot of coffee, I guess...” The words came out almost of their own accord at the same time as she found herself stepping backward, opening the door wide.

“Mary.” He granted her another of those I'm-your-bestfriend smiles. “I think you must have read my mind.”

Chapter Two

Gabe followed the Hofstetter widow through her living room, taking it all in—the worn, mismatched furniture, the scuffed hardwood floor, the scraggly-looking mutt sleeping in the corner, the cluttered desk and ancient PC. And the widow herself, in baggy jeans, red Keds and a white shirt shaped like a tent that billowed out over the giant bulge of her belly.

The floor plan was a simple one. An alcove near the front door held a narrow stairway and a half bath. The living room opened onto the single dining area, with a small U-shaped kitchen to the right of a square table. As he reached the table, he saw that a door opposite the kitchen led into a shadowed bedroom. He could see a rocking chair with a red bag hooked over the backrest, a pine night table and a section of a bed with a pine headboard.

“Have a seat.” She gestured at the table as she turned to the kitchen nook.

Gabe took the straight-back chair she offered and watched her as she loaded up a coffee filter with grounds from a can and filled the reservoir with tap water. Her giant stomach pressed the tiled counter as she worked. And her brown hair needed a cut. She had it tied back in a sloppy ponytail from which limp strands escaped along her nape and around her face.

Once she had the coffeemaker going, she lumbered on over and took the chair opposite him, lowering herself into it with a soft grunt of effort. “All right,” she told him once she was seated. “Coffee’ll be ready in a minute.”

“Thanks, Mary.” He made his voice sincere and respectful, with just the right easy touch of warmth. Gabe was a master at reading people, at gauging how they saw themselves and how they wanted to be treated. It was part of his job as the family lawyer and so-called “fixer,” the one they sent in when things weren’t going as planned. Most women, whatever their age or marital status, liked a little harmless flirting from a man. They liked to be noticed and appreciated.

Not this woman. She preferred her interactions simple and direct and she didn’t flirt with strangers. Gabe had known that at the door, the moment he gazed into those big brown eyes with the weary dark circles beneath them.

“You might as well go ahead and...” She stopped in mid-sentence. Wincing, she laid her hand on the side of her giant stomach.

Alarm had him sitting up straighter. “What is it, Mary?” Was she going to drop the kid right there at the table? “Is something wrong?”

She let out a long breath and patted the air between them with her palm. “No. It’s fine. It’s nothing. A cramp. Please. Can we get on with this?”

“Absolutely.” He preferred to start out with at least a few minutes of conversation, to establish a better tone—less dry and rushed, more casual. And friendly. Most people found it hard to say no to a friend. But she wanted him to move it along. So he pretended to do that. He got out his laptop. “This’ll just take a minute...” He aimed the back of the screen her way and punched a few keys, to make it look like he was setting things up.

She said, sounding really tired, “You know, you can stall all you want to, trying to figure out the most effective way to come at me, but it won’t do you any good.” She had leaned back in the chair and rested her hand on the swell of her stomach. Her eyes were closed and she spoke with the drowsy voice of someone seriously in need of a long nap. “I meant what I said to you at the door. *And* what I said to those three other guys you sent before. It makes no difference how much you offer me, I will never sell the Lazy H.”

Never say never, Mary. “Why not?”

She opened her eyes and frowned at him. “It doesn’t matter why not—except to me.”

He studied her face for a moment, thinking that his job here would be easier if she were a little needier and not quite so smart. “Here’s what matters,” he told her. “Sell that overgrown hundred and

twenty acres out there to Bravo-Corp at the price I'm going to offer you this morning and you'll be a wealthy woman. You—and your baby—will never want for anything for the rest of your lives. You can go to bed and get some rest when I leave because you won't have to work. Not today. Not ever again.”

With another soft grunt, she sat a little straighter. “There are worse things than not having a lot of money. And better things than being rich. Things like a place you love to be. Like having good people to care for, who care for you. This ranch is the place I love to be. And as for having to work, well, isn't that a lot of what life's about? It's true I'm pretty beat today, but I like to work, most of the time. And if I sold out to BravoCorp so you could carve the land my husband loved into pricey half-acre lots, well, I'd never forgive myself.” The coffeemaker sputtered. She glanced toward the sound.

“Let me.” He half-rose.

“No.” She waved him off and pushed herself upright. “I'll do it. I don't mind at all.” She went on over there and got down a mug. “Milk and sugar?”

“Just black.”

She filled the mug and brought it to him, her belly leading the way. “There you go.” Resting one hand on the back of his chair, she set the mug beside his laptop. He found himself staring at her throat, for some reason. Her skin looked soft. A loose curl of hair curved against her cheek. She smelled of soap and lemons—and she had seen the laptop's screen. “Well, what do you know, Gabe? I think it's finally all ready to go.” She glanced at him, those tired, dark eyes suddenly dancing.

Too damn smart, he thought. Too smart by half.

He pulled the nearest chair closer. “Sit down here.” He patted the seat. “Where you can see.”

She sent him a look of ironic good humor. “It's not going to matter if I can see that screen or not.”

“Sit down, anyway. Listen to what I have to say, watch what I have to show you.”

With reluctance, she did. “All right, Gabe. Hit me with the pie charts and the tricolor graphs.”

He sipped his coffee, made a sound of approval. “So many fancy ways to make coffee now. But I still prefer it fresh out of a can, brewed in a regular coffeemaker. Or boiled on an open fire, with eggshells at the bottom of the pot to cut the bitterness.”

She folded her arms on top of her stomach. “Go out camping a lot, do you?”

“My family owns a ranch not far from here, Bravo Ridge. I've spent a lot of nights outside around a campfire, mostly when I was growing up.”

“Brothers and sisters?”

“Six brothers, two sisters.”

“Big family.” She seemed surprised.

“That's right.”

She asked, “You the oldest?”

“No, second born.”

“So why don't you build your fancy houses on your own ranch?”

Had he seen that one coming? You bet he had. He sipped more coffee and told her why his family ranch wouldn't do—even if the family *had* been willing to let it go. “Bravo Ridge is too far from a major highway. The plan is to build a top-quality San Antonio bedroom community that's just far enough out to be considered in the country. With energy and oil prices so high, access and reasonable commute times are going to be key.”

“Plus, it's your family ranch, right? Your...heritage. Your history. No way you'd let some developer build tract homes on it.”

She had it right. He changed the subject. “Mary. Please.

Not tract homes. Each house will be one of a kind. It's a fine plan we've put together.” He gestured toward the glasstopped back door. It opened onto a patio—he could see the rusting metal patio cover. Beyond that, across a rough patch of drying grass and a wide dirt driveway, there was a barn and a few other rundown outbuildings and pens. “Your land will be put to good use.”

“My land is already put to good use.”

He spoke gently again. “You’re a freelance writer, Mary, not a rancher. We both know you barely have time to take care of the few animals your husband left you. With the baby coming, it’s only going to get more difficult for you.”

“I’ll manage.”

“Your land is overgrown.”

“I like it that way.”

It’s dangerous that way, he thought. *A damn wildfire waiting to happen*. But she might take such a remark as some kind of veiled threat and that wasn’t the tone he was going for. “I’m only saying that the land itself would be better served if it got more care.”

Now she was studying him. “More care, huh?”

“That’s right.”

“You know, I can see why they send you in to make the impossible happen, to.. .how did they put it in the *Godfather* movies?”

He saluted her with the mug and reluctantly provided the words she was looking for. “Make them an offer they can’t refuse?”

“That’s it.”

So much for avoiding any hint of a threat. “The Bravos are hardly the Mafia, Mary.”

“Of course you’re not.” She rubbed the side of her big stomach, frowning. “But you *are* used to getting what you want.”

“And so are the people we deal with. We do our best to make every transaction a win-win.”

She pulled a face at that. And then she shrugged. “Anyway, as I was saying...” Her brows drew together and she slid her hand around behind her to rub her lower back. “I can see why they sent you. There’s something about you. It’s partly your looks.”

“Thanks. I think.”

“I’m just stating a fact. It never hurts to be good-looking when you show up to try and charm a person into doing something she’s repeatedly refused to do. And you *are* charming.”

“I try.”

“Well, it’s working.”

“Good to know.”

“Plus, you seem...so calm. And patient. And interested, too. Interested in me and my welfare.”

“I *am* interested, Mary.” It was true. Not so much in her welfare. But in *her*. She wasn’t what he’d expected. To bend her to his will, gently, so that in the end she decided she *wanted* to sell, would be a challenge. And challenges interested him. But the truth was, even if he *hadn’t* been interested, he would have said he was and made her think he meant it.

She smoothed another lock of hair behind her ear. “I mean, we both know you’re only trying to manipulate me into signing away my ranch.”

“Ouch.”

“But yet you seem so *relaxed* about it. As if you don’t really care if you make it happen or not, as if you’re just enjoying sitting here in my kitchen with me, drinking regular coffee that came out of a can.”

“I *am* enjoying this, Mary.” He leaned closer. Her scent drifted to him again: Ivory soap and citrus. He lowered his voice. “That’s my secret. I enjoy making things.. .work out.”

“Work out for BravoCorp, you mean.”

“And for you, Mary. Believe it or not, I’m on your side.”

She didn’t roll her eyes, but she did make a small sound of disbelief.

He sat back in his chair. “Ready for the presentation?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Mary couldn't hold back a laugh when the name of the housing development appeared on the screen.

Gabe punched the pause button. "What? You don't like the name?"

"Bravo River? There's no Bravo River on my property. There's no river at all."

"True. But there's a nice, wide creek."

"Skunk Creek, you mean?"

"That's the one. We'll change the name."

He wouldn't be doing any such thing, since he was not getting his hands on the Lazy H. But she'd already told him that about a hundred times, so she kept quiet. He punched the key again and the show continued.

In spite of herself, Mary was impressed. The presentation started with a great little movie. There was stirring music and a narrator who sounded like Robert Duvall.

The movie showed how BravoCorp, its architects and builders would respect the land when they built on it, designing each house to fit the terrain of the lot it would stand on, so that existing trees and geological features would remain, as much as possible, the way nature had created them. The houses themselves would employ green technology, using renewable resources, incorporating solar energy. There would even be Bravo River buses available between the development and San Antonio, so people could use mass transit rather than driving their cars and contributing to greenhouse gases and the oil crisis.

A montage of images showed the housing development taking shape, and then an aerial tour showed how it would look when it was completed. And even though she would never let it happen on her land, Mary had to admit, it was going to be beautiful when they finally found a place to put it.

He also had the pie charts and graphs she'd expected. They detailed how great Bravo River was going to be for the area, for the economy, for everybody—especially Mary. Now not only were they offering her a whopping price for the Lazy H, they were throwing in a percentage of the project's profits.

If there was any chance that Mary might have changed her mind, she would have done it after seeing Gabe's presentation. But there was no chance, as she'd made more than clear. She was only waiting for him to finish so she could say "no." Again.

Finally, the theme music swelled and the BravoCorp logo filled the screen.

Gabe gently reached out and pulled the laptop shut. "Let me answer your questions and then we'll—"

"No," Mary said. "Really. I don't have any questions."

"Well, all right." He bent to his briefcase and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Let's go over the particulars."

Mary felt the strangest twinge in her back right then—like a big rubber band snapping. Swallowing a gasp at the unpleasant sensation, she spread her legs to make room for her stomach and leaned forward, trying to stretch the weird feeling away. She rubbed the base of her spine some more. As she rubbed, she repeated what she'd told him way too many times already.

"Seriously, Gabe. It's not going to happen." She massaged the achy spot, but the ache only seemed to spread, slithering out from her spine on both sides. She bit back a groan as the twinges moved from beneath her ribs to the sides of her belly and kept going, encircling her giant waist like a belt, and then yanking tight. Somehow, she managed to speak in an even, clear tone in spite of the pain. "I've made it more than clear that I'll never sell."

Gabe behaved as if he hadn't heard her. He set the stack of papers on the table and rapped his knuckles on them. "I think we should go through these. What can it hurt?"

"But there's no point." Trying hard to ignore the pains and keep her voice firm and reasonable, she explained, "I will raise my child here. I love it here. I'm not leaving—and besides, my husband

loved this place, too. I swear Rowdy would turn over in his grave if I ever gave up his beloved Lazy H to be carved into little plots, each with its own spacious and gracious McMansion on it.”

Gabe Bravo didn’t miss a beat. “You’re not getting it, Mary. We’re not talking about any cookie-cutter McMansions. Each home at Bravo River will be one-of-a-kind. And constructed with care and concern for the land and the environment.” His blue eyes changed, grew soft with sincerity. “And I am so sorry that you’ve lost your husband.” He really did sound like he meant it. He coaxed, “Mary. Come on. I can’t believe your husband would want you to pass up an offer like this, especially considering that you’re about to have a child. I know if Rowdy were here, he would be thinking that his baby should have all the good things money can buy. His baby—*your* baby—deserves a broadened horizon. That means the choice of elementary and high schools. And college. When the time comes, you’ll be able to foot the bill for the very best in higher education without having to think twice. Mary, if Rowdy were here, I know he would surprise you with what he would do for you and your baby, with the choice that he would make, the choice for your future, for the kind of security you’ll have with a fortune in the bank.”

Mary masked her increasing discomfort and put on her sweetest smile. “Since you never knew my husband, how can you possibly know what he might have wanted? And the truth is, I love this place as much as Rowdy ever did. Maybe more. I’m doing all right and my baby will be just fine, thank you. And now, well, I’ve enjoyed visiting with you, Gabe, but seriously. I have to get back to work.”

He looked at her steadily. “Are you kicking me out, Mary?”

“That’s right, Gabe. I am.”

He slipped the papers in the briefcase. His laptop followed. He slanted her a look as he snapped the latches shut. “You know I’ll be back, right?”

“And after this, I won’t be offering any coffee. You won’t get past the door again, so don’t waste your time. Please.”

“Don’t worry, Mary. I never waste my time.” Briefcase in hand, he rose.

Mary pushed herself upright, too, with effort. The weird cramping was worse than before. And all at once, she was sweating, at her hairline, on her upper lip and under her arms.

And the cramps really were bad. They scared her, shooting around her distended belly from the now-constant pain in her back. It hurt so much, she had to grab the back of the chair to keep from crumpling to the floor. A soft cry escaped her.

“Mary.” Gabe’s voice came to her. He sounded really worried. Gabe Bravo. Mr. Smooth. Worried. Somehow, that scared her more than anything. More than the sudden sweat dripping down her face. More than the horrible, squeezing pain. “Mary, what’s wrong?”

She couldn’t talk, couldn’t answer. She clutched the chair back, groaning.

And then something shifted down low inside her. A dropping sensation, as if someone had bounced a boulder on the floor of her womb. She let out a guttural cry as she felt the wetness in her panties. It couldn’t be...

But it was.

Her water had broken.

Chapter Three

Handsome, clever Gabe Bravo was looking at her strangely.

He said her name again, with urgency. “Mary!” His briefcase hit the floor with a smack as he lunged to catch her before she fell. She collapsed against him, moaning.

So embarrassing. To be groaning like this, holding her belly, sweating profusely—and leaning on this rich, slick stranger. But she couldn’t help it. If she didn’t let him hold her up, she would be on the floor.

Sagging in his strong arms, she felt the wetness as it dripped out of her. Not a flood. Uh-uh. More of an ooze. A slimy dribble. Mary shuddered at the icky feel of it.

“You’re shaking,” Gabe said. “What the hell is going on?”

She looked up to meet his worried eyes. “My, um, my water just broke. I think I have to go and have my baby...”

His bronze brows drew together. “Now?”

“Yes. I think so. Now.”

“You’re serious.”

“I certainly am.” Another cramp took her, this one worse than the last. Stronger. More overwhelming. “Aungh...” All she could do was clutch her belly with one hand and his arm with the other and groan like something not quite human.

He didn’t leave her. He stayed there, holding her up as the cramp crested and finally began to recede. When the pain eased, as she panted and sweated in the aftermath of it, he said, “Come on. Let’s get you comfortable.”

“Comfortable?” She looked at him with horror. She didn’t even know him, and he was going to make her comfortable? *Rowdy*, she cried inside. *Oh, Rowdy. I need you. I need you so bad. Why aren’t you here?* What she said was, “I...no. I’ll be fine. Really. And you need to go.”

“Come on,” he said again, as if she hadn’t spoken. He started for the living room, guiding her along, his arm around her waist, keeping her upright at the same time as he urged her forward.

“Did you hear what I said?” She tried to jerk away.

He held on. “I heard you. And I’m not leaving. Not until you’ve called for help.”

Okay. He had a point. She was in no condition to be left alone. And as she shuffled away from the table, she realized she didn’t dare let go of him, after all. Another cramp might come. She would end up on the floor.

The short walk, as she clung to him, stumbling along, panting, still leaking fluid under her jeans, seemed to take forever. When they got there, he helped her to sit, holding on to steady her as she lowered herself.

Halfway down to the sofa cushions, she let out a yelp. “No! I don’t think I can...really, I can’t...” What was she saying? She had no idea. “Oh, I’m so scared. This isn’t supposed to be...not now. Too early. I have three weeks yet...”

“Shh,” he said, so softly. “Mary. It’s all right. Whatever’s going on, you’ll get through it. You will. You’re going to be fine...”

“Fine?” She stared at him, frantic, sweat in her eyes. “Fine?” She spat the word at him.

“Yes. Fine.” His blue gaze didn’t waver. “Now, come on. Sit down. You can do it. Come on...”

And somehow, she did do it. Clutching his arm like a lifeline, she allowed him to guide her the rest of the way down.

“Good,” he said softly, when at last she was seated. “Now, let’s take off your shoes and you can stretch out.”

“No!” She slapped his gentle hand away and pressed her legs together in an attempt to hide the dark stains on her jeans. While she was staggering here from the kitchen, the fluid had run all

the way down into her Keds. She was not taking off her shoes, all wet and sticky, in front of a man she'd met less than an hour ago.

Mary groaned low again. The groan deepened to an animal growl as the next cramp struck. She grabbed his hand tight again, suddenly needing the contact. So what if she didn't know him? He was there and that was everything. Curling over herself, one hand under her belly, the other holding tight to Gabe Bravo, she moaned long and loudly.

Somewhere in the middle of that one, he said, "I'll call an ambulance."

"No." She clutched his hand for dear life, squeezing it till she heard the finger joints pop. "Wait. Stay. You have to...one minute..."

When the cramping passed that time, she panted out instructions. "Phone. Over there. On the desk." He got it and gave it to her. "Doctor," she said, wheezing like a winded horse. "Calling my doctor..."

"All right. Great idea." He stood there beside her, waiting, as she autodialed the number.

Dr. Breitmann came right to the phone. She told him about her water breaking and he asked how far apart her contractions were. When she said she could hardly tell as there hadn't been that many, he chuckled.

"You're going to be fine, Mary," the doctor said. "Just head on over to the hospital. I'll meet you there and we'll see what's going on."

"I'm..." She turned away from the stranger looming over her and spoke low into the phone. "I'm all wet."

"You can go ahead and change." Dr. Breitmann said. "And clean up a little, if you wish. Not a bath. But you can wipe off with a damp cloth and then use a sanitary napkin. Amniotic fluid will probably continue to escape."

"Ugh," she said in response to that bit of news.

"You'll be okay," he reassured her again. "We don't want to fool around with this, but it isn't what you'd call an emergency."

Surely she hadn't heard right. "It isn't?"

"Mary, in spite of what you see in the movies, it can sometimes be days before delivery after the water breaks."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. So take a deep breath and calm down."

"All right. Yes. I will."

"Just get yourself ready and come on to the hospital."

When she hung up, Gabe was still looming above her. He demanded, "What did he say?"

She told him—though really, it was none of his business. "I...have to clean up a little. And then I have to go to the hospital. I'm going to be fine. Thank you for...being so great about this."

"Not a problem."

She waited, figuring he would get the message and get out. But he only looked at her, not budging, leaving her no choice but to tell him outright, "So, then. You should go."

"Not until the ambulance gets here. Give me the phone and I'll—"

"Uh-uh." She pressed it to her chest. "You should go."

From a pocket, he produced one of those devices that does everything but your laundry. "As soon as the ambulance gets here."

She grabbed his hand before he could dial 911. "No ambulance. I don't need one."

The look in his eyes said he thought she was out of her mind. But he did put the device away. "Are you saying you have someone to drive you?"

She groaned and hunched over her stomach as the next contraction began. He waited, standing close beside her, as it crested and finally eased off. Once she could think again, she raised her gaze to his. "No ambulance," she repeated, in case he hadn't gotten the message the first two times she

said it. An ambulance would cost more than she was ready to pay. She had insurance to cover the hospital and the birth, but not an optional ride with the EMTs. “Dr. Breitmann said this wasn’t an emergency, so an ambulance isn’t necessary.”

“Looks pretty damn necessary to me.” His square jaw was set.

“You’re not the decider on this. You need to—”

“Forget it.” He glared down at her. “I’m going nowhere. Not until your ride gets here.” He gestured at the phone she still clutched in her hand. “Go ahead. Call them. Tell them to get over here, fast.”

Mary shut her eyes and sucked in a slow breath through her nose.

He pressed her, as determined about this as he’d been about his pricey housing development. “You *do* have someone to drive you, don’t you?”

She drew herself up. “Of course, I have someone who’s supposed to drive me. My mother-in-law, Ida.”

“Good. Then call her. I’ll wait with you until she arrives. How far away is she?”

Mary gulped. “Well...”

“Where is your ride?” He said each word slowly, as if he doubted her ability to comprehend the question.

And she was forced to confess, “Ida’s in St. Louis. Her sister’s been sick. And please don’t look at me like that. I do have a ride. It’s all arranged. It’s just...I’m not due for three weeks. Ida was going to be home before the baby came.”

He sat down next to her on the sofa and touched the side of her face, guiding a sweaty tendril of hair out of her eye. Funny, but it didn’t bother her at all that he did that. She found his touch comforting, somehow. It steadied her.

“Mary.” He said her name so gently.

She tossed the phone to the sofa cushions and let out a moan. “Oh, this can’t be happening. Not today. Ida’s gone. And I have a deadline...”

“Mary.”

She made herself meet his eyes. “What?”

“Do what you need to do. Get your stuff.”

“And clean up. Really, I *have* to clean up.”

“Fine. Do it. And then I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

She gasped. “Oh, no. It’s too much. You don’t have to. Really.”

“You won’t take an ambulance and your ride’s in St. Louis. Do not try and tell me that you’ll be driving yourself.”

“I’m not. There are, um, neighbors I could call. And there’s—”

“Mary. Stop.”

“Oh, dear Lord...” She just couldn’t think. But *he* could. He knew what to do. “Go. Get ready. And we’ll be on our way.”

Satisfied that he’d finally convinced Mary to let him take her where she needed to go, Gabe waited beside her through another of those grueling contractions.

“Help me to my bedroom?” she asked him when it was over.

“You got it. Where is it?” He helped her up again.

She pointed toward the dining area. “In there. Opposite the kitchen...”

He walked her back there to the door on the left that led into her room. She got a change of clothes and disappeared into the bathroom.

She seemed to take a long time in there. That worried him. When over five minutes had passed, he knocked on the door. “You all right?”

“Yeah. Fine. Don’t you dare come in.”

“You need to get going. Don’t fool around in there.”

“Gabe?”

“Yeah?”

“I hate you.” She muttered the words, probably thinking he couldn’t hear them. Then, louder, “Never mind.”

He smiled to himself. “Just move it along.”

Maybe two minutes later, she emerged wearing clean clothes and carrying a stack of fresh towels. “I thought we might need these—you know, in your fancy car.”

God, he hoped not. “Good thinking.” He took them from her.

“And I have a suitcase all ready,” she said.

“Where?”

“Under the bed.”

So he set the towels on the bedspread and got down on his knees to drag it out for her. “I’ll just take this stuff to the car,” he said, rising. He picked up the stack of towels and hoisted the old hard-sided suitcase in his free hand.

She hobbled over and got the big, red shoulder bag from where it was hooked on the back of an old rocking chair. “Diaper bag.” She slid it onto his shoulder.

“Back in a flash,” he promised.

She pressed her lips together and nodded, reaching out to grasp the back of the rocker as another cramp started.

“Mary...” He took a step toward her.

She made a frantic waving-off motion with her free hand. “Go. Hurry. I’ll be...” She groaned. Hard. “Fine...”

He made himself leave her, turning and racing through the house, pausing only long enough to set down the suitcase and throw open the front door.

Outside, the Escalade waited, gleaming in the sun. The sight of it stunned him. He’d climbed out of it such a short time ago, certain of his ability to bend the Hofstetter widow to his will and the will of BravoCorp.

Somehow, things had gotten away from him—gotten away, big-time. In his pocket, his BlackBerry started vibrating. He went to the back and lifted the hatch and tossed in the suitcase and the diaper bag.

Then he took out the phone and glanced at the display. It was his father. Eager for a report on his meeting with the widow, no doubt.

You don’t want to know, Dad. He let the call go to voice mail and was putting the device away when it started vibrating again. This time he didn’t even stop to glance at it, just tucked it in his pocket and carried the towels to the backseat on the far side, where he left them, neatly stacked. In case she ended up needing them—a thought that made his gut clench.

He sent a fervent glance heavenward. He wasn’t a guy who prayed much, but he prayed then. *Just let us make it to the hospital before she has that baby. Just that. It’s all I ask...*

He ran around the front of the car, across the dusty yard and up the front steps. Inside again, he found her waiting in the open archway to the kitchen, slumped against the wall there. She was panting, staring at the floor. But when she heard him enter, she looked up, wiped her sweating brow and forced a smile.

“Got my purse...” She touched the strap over her shoulder and smiled wider, a smile that wobbled only a little.

“Good.” He strode toward her. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Wait.”

He stopped in mid-step. “What now?”

“Brownie.” The dog sat by the sofa. At the mention of her name, she stretched and wagged her tail. “She has a doggy door, in the laundry room off the kitchen. But if you could check her water

bowl and pour her some food.” She gestured weakly over her shoulder. “Food’s in the cabinet next to the sink...”

He detoured around her and did what she asked. The dog came right over to sniff the bowl and eat a few lumps of dry food. He petted her on the head and then put the bag of food back in the cabinet.

“Okay,” he said, shutting the low door and rising. “Time to go.”

He went to her and wrapped an arm around her, noting abstractly that the lemon and soap scent of her had changed. Now, she smelled like...cleanser, of all things, a sweet sort of smell.

They hobbled to the door and out. She stopped to lock it, and the storm door as well, then leaned on him as they went down the steps and out to the car. He had the door open and her up in the backseat before he remembered he’d left his briefcase where he’d dropped it, halfway under the table, on the kitchen floor.

Too bad. He’d have to come back for it later. Right now, the goal was to get Mary to the hospital. ASAP.

He got in without noticing he’d left his Ray-Bans on the seat. They snapped as he sat on them. He swore and pulled them out from under him. Both lenses had popped out. He tossed the pieces onto the empty seat beside him and started up the engine.

In the back, Mary groaned and panted. He waited until she seemed to quiet—which meant she was between contractions—before he asked, “Where are we going?”

A breathless sound escaped her. “You...know Wulf City?”

It was blessedly close, maybe ten miles from there, just south of New Braunfels off I-35. “I know it. The name of the hospital?”

“Wulf City Memorial.” She rattled off an address.

He punched the information into the dashboard GPS. A moment later, the electronic map showed him where to go and the canned voice began giving instructions. He drove the SUV in the circle of driveway that went around her house. Her dog was sitting on the back patio, looking kind of lost.

He heard Mary whisper, “See you later, girl,” as they left the mutt behind.

In the backseat, Mary was hardly aware that they were merging onto the highway. She had one hand, whiteknuckled, on the armrest. The other was down low, holding her belly, her legs spread wide, all modesty forgotten.

She had a faraway awareness that Mr. Smooth, Gabe Bravo, had practically carried her, leaking, moaning and panting, to his fancy car. She probably should have been mortified.

But by then, she was pretty much beyond mortification. Actually, between the excruciating, never-ending contractions, when she could think again, she was grateful. That he was there. That she hadn’t ended up doing this impossible job alone.

Her heart hurt, knowing that Rowdy wasn’t behind that wheel instead. That he’d died before he even knew they were finally going to have the baby they’d been trying for since they got married. When she closed her eyes, she could still see his beloved, craggy face and hear his rough voice.

Oh, she did miss the way he would call her “sweetheart,” so shyly, with that look of adoration and wonder in his kind hazel eyes. She could see him as he left her that last time, kissing her at the sink and then going out the back door to check some fences, favoring his right leg, which had been injured in some long ago rodeo accident.

“Rowdy, oh, Rowdy...” She was crying, the tears streaming down her cheeks. She tasted them, salty, on her tongue. And she must have said Rowdy’s name out loud, because Gabe turned around in the front seat.

“Mary. It’s okay. Almost there...”

She dashed the tears away and tried to sit up straight. “No problem. Really. I’m doing fine back here.” Another contraction struck. Gabe turned back to the road and Mary concentrated on riding out the pain.

After the time he turned around and saw the tears running down Mary’s face as she cried for her lost husband, Gabe kept his eyes on the road. He figured if there was an emergency going on in the backseat, she would let him know.

Otherwise, better to give the poor woman a little privacy. It had to be hard to have a baby without your husband. He guessed. It wasn’t the kind of thing he knew much about. Not being a woman, in the first place—and being a total bachelor, in the second. Gabe just didn’t see the point of marriage and settling down with one woman. Well, for other guys, sure. But not for him. He liked women and they liked him. And he was real fond of variety. He never hung around one woman all that long. He enjoyed his freedom and he liked to keep his options open.

Behind him, Mary moaned in agony. And Gabe stopped thinking about how much he enjoyed being single and concentrated on getting to the hospital fast.

The ride seemed interminable, but it really wasn’t that long. Nine minutes after leaving Mary’s place behind, he was pulling into the turnaround in front of Wulf City Memorial, under a wide porte cochere. They had a wheelchair waiting in the vestibule behind the first set of glass doors. An orderly wheeled it out, another orderly at his side.

Gabe helped Mary out of the car and the orderlies settled her into the chair.

“Thank you,” she told him, hooking her purse over her shoulder. “Thank you so much...” And one of the orderlies turned the chair around and wheeled her through the doors. The other followed, with the suitcase and the red diaper bag.

Gabe knew it was time to leave her. He’d done what he could for her. No one was going to fault him if he got back behind the wheel and got the hell out of there.

He could stop by her house in a couple of days. Mentally, he catalogued the contents of the briefcase he’d left under her table: nothing in there he couldn’t do without for forty-eight hours. Everything on the laptop was on his computer at the office and most of it was on his Black-Berry, too. It would be perfect. He could visit after she got home from the hospital, see how she was doing, give her the towels that were still in the backseat, pick up the briefcase, admire her new baby. And continue with his campaign to get her to sell the Lazy H.

His BlackBerry vibrated again. He got it out and checked to see who it was: Carly Madison, his date of last Saturday night. They’d attended a dinner, a high-profile event to raise money for cancer research. Black tie. And then they’d gone to his place for a private party of their own...

And he couldn’t stop worrying about Mary.

He glanced up at the doors they’d wheeled her through. Somehow, it just didn’t seem right to him, to leave her alone in the hospital, without a friend or a relative to look after her.

He put the BlackBerry away unanswered and went to park his car. Five minutes later, he was pushing his way through the two sets of glass doors.

Chapter Four

Mary was still in reception, still sitting in that wheelchair. They'd wheeled her into the waiting area and left her there, her suitcase and diaper bag at her feet. Someone had given her a clipboard and a pen and she was trying to fill out a damn form, of all things.

He went to her. "What is going on?"

She let out a cry of surprise and almost dropped the clipboard. "Gabe. Wh.. .what are you doing here?"

"I decided it was a bad idea to drive off and leave you alone."

"But I'm not alone." She gestured with the pen, indicating the others in the reception area with her, and the counter with the clerks behind it. "There's a whole hospital full of people here to take care of me and you don't need to—"

"What is this?" He took the clipboard from her and riffled the forms clipped to it. "There must be ten pages of crap here."

"Give that back." She grabbed for it.

He held it out of her reach. "It's no time to be filling out forms. You need to be in a hospital bed. You're having a baby. Don't any of these people realize that?" He started for the front desk.

She called him back. "Gabe."

He hesitated, and made a low, disapproving sound to let her know he was listening.

"It's just procedure. Since this is happening earlier than planned, I'm not pre-admitted. So I have to fill out the forms. *Then* they admit me. And the longer you kick up dust about it, the longer until I get the paperwork out of the way and they take me to an examining room."

He dropped into the chair next to her. "This isn't right."

"Gabe." She glared at him. "Give me the..." The sentence became a groan as another contraction struck.

"Damn it, Mary." He offered his hand. She took it and set about grinding the bones.

When that one passed off, she whispered between clenched teeth, "Give me the clipboard. Now."

He saw that a compromise was in order. "How about this? I'll read you the questions and write them down for you..."

She made a growling sound. But she did give in. "Fine. Whatever. Do it."

"All right." He read down the page to where she'd stopped and then asked the next question. "Ever smoke cigarettes?"

"No."

"Drink alcohol?"

"Not in the past eight months."

"We'll call that a no..."

They were finished in about three minutes. He wheeled Mary up to the desk and the clerk took the clipboard.

The woman thumbed through the forms, nodded, and sent them a disinterested glance. "Have a seat. We'll call you in a few minutes."

Gabe opened his mouth to tell the clerk that "a few minutes" was completely unacceptable. He wanted Mary in the business end of that hospital and he wanted her there now.

But Mary tugged on his hand. "Gabe. No." He glanced down into her upturned face. The look in her eyes made it more than clear that he was not allowed to ream the clerk a new one. "I'm fine," she said firmly. "Okay? Fine."

So he wheeled her back to the waiting area, figuring if they didn't come get her good and soon, he'd be kicking some ass and taking some serious names—whether Mary wanted him to or not.

They did come a few minutes later, just as the clerk had promised, two women in scrubs. “Mrs. Hofstetter?” At Mary’s nod, the shorter of the two women took charge of the chair. “Let’s go, then.”

They wheeled her through the double steel doors and he went with them, carrying her suitcase, her purse and the diaper bag. No one seemed to question his right to be with her.

The taller of the two women took his arm as the other wheeled Mary on down the corridor. “Mr. Hofstetter?”

Since explaining the situation might get him kicked out, he simply answered, “Yeah?”

“We’ll take a brief history of your wife’s labor so far and Dr. Breitmann will examine her. After that, if he determines she *is* having the baby today, she’ll be moved to a labor room and you can stay with her there.”

He didn’t get the “if” part. It seemed pretty obvious to him that today was the day. But he didn’t ask questions. His job had been to get them to take care of her. Now that was accomplished, he was going with the theory that they knew what they were doing.

The nurse said, “Hold on to her things for now, why don’t you?” She indicated a row of chairs against the hallway wall to their left. “You can make yourself comfortable there until we come for you.”

“Uh. Right. Good enough...”

“Now’s the time to make a few calls if you need to. Let the family know what’s going on.”

For a moment, he flashed on his father’s face. Davis Bravo would be pretty damn surprised to know what was going on.

But of course, she didn’t mean *his* family. She meant Mary’s—about which he knew virtually nothing.

He faked it. “Good idea. I’ll make a few calls.”

So he sat in one of the chairs, with Mary’s stuff around him, and got out his BlackBerry, for lack of anything better to do. He checked messages. There were several, including one from his Dad and one from Carly.

He listened to the first one, left by his father.

“Gabe. I’m getting impatient here. Call me when you get this. I want details on how it went. I want you to tell me the widow has sold us that ranch. There’ll be no opportunity at lunch to—”

He clicked out of voice mail. He just didn’t want to hear it. And calling his dad back was out of the question. Davis would start right in with his twenty questions routine: *How did it go? Is she on? Why not? Where are you now? You’re what?*

Uh-uh. No, thanks. Not now. His father could wait. And he’d get back to Carly later, too. And the others. Right now, it all had to be about Mary, who was probably having a baby today, with no one from her family to be with her.

Ida, he thought. That was the mother-in-law’s name. Maybe he should try and get in touch with Ida Hofstetter and tell her what was going on.

If he only had a clue what Ida’s sister’s name was, he could call St. Louis information...

He opened Mary’s purse and felt around in there, feeling pretty creeped out about going through her personal stuff. But he did find a flip cell phone.

He checked her contacts. She had three numbers for her mother-in-law: Home, Store, Cell. He tried the cell and got sent to voice mail and left a message, giving his name and saying he’d driven Mary to the hospital, that Mary was fine, but that her mother-in-law should call Mary’s cell or his cell or the hospital as soon as possible. He rattled off his cell number then hung up.

Then he tried Ida Hofstetter’s home number, where he left a similar message. After that, he went ahead and tried the number called “Store.”

A woman answered. “Hofstetter’s Hardware. Donna Lynn speakin’.”

From Donna Lynn, who it turned out was a clerk at Ida's store right there in Wulf Creek, he got Ida's sister's number in St. Louis and Donna Lynn's promise that she would have Ida call the hospital if she heard from her.

"You give Mary a big congratulations from me, you hear?"

"Well, she hasn't had the baby yet..."

"But when she does."

"I will, Donna Lynn. I promise."

"And I'll come by, tomorrow—I mean, if the hospital says the baby's arrived."

"Great."

"Uh. Who are you, now?"

A nurse was coming toward him. "Long story. Thanks, Donna Lynn." He disconnected the call with a sigh of relief.

The nurse led him to a room with a hospital bed and a couple of easy chairs. There was a door to a bathroom and curtains on the windows. Mary lay in the bed, wearing a flower-print hospital gown.

She looked happy to see him. "Gabe."

"How you doing?"

She blew out a slow breath. "Well, it's official. Dr. Breitmann says today's the day."

He set her things on the floor by the door and went to her. "Everything's okay, then?"

She nodded. "He says I'm in labor and everything is going well."

"But you told me it was too early..."

"It's okay. It's earlier than expected, but Dr. Breitmann says it's going to be all right, that the baby is capable of survival outside the womb."

"Good."

She waited until the nurse left to whisper, "They think you're my husband. They seem to have no clue that I'm on my own."

"Why would they? I didn't see a space for 'widow' in all those reams of paperwork." He took her hand and twined their fingers together. It seemed a totally appropriate thing to do at that moment. "And besides, you're not on your own. I'm here. It's not ideal, I know. But it's better than nothing."

"Gabe." She tried to look stern. "Seriously. There is no reason that you have to—"

"Yeah, there is. You need a friend right now."

A low laugh escaped her. "We're not friends."

"Sure we are."

She squeezed his hand. "You're really impressing me, you know that?"

"I do what I have to do."

"You're being amazing. But I have to say this right up front. No matter how wonderful you are today, you'll never get me to sell my ranch."

"Tell you what." He still had her cell, so he opened her fingers and wrapped them around it.

She frowned down at it. "What?"

"Let's forget about Bravo River. At least until your baby's born."

A shy smile curved her lips. "Deal—and what were you doing with my phone?"

"Stealing the numbers out of it. I called your mother-in-law at home and on her cell. Left messages. I also called her store, where the clerk answered. Donna Lynn wishes you well. She gave me Ida's sister's number. I saved it into your phone. So you can try to reach your mother-in-law there."

"I will.. .in a minute. Take this." She shoved the phone at him, threw back the sheet and swung her bare legs over the edge of the bed.

"Mary. What the...?"

But then she groaned and curved over her belly. And he understood. It was another contraction.

He gave her his hand again to hold onto, and she got through it as she had the ones before, supporting her big stomach with the hand that wasn't clutching his, groaning as if she was about to push that baby out right then and there.

When she could talk again, she swung her feet back on the bed, covered up and took the cell back. She dialed and shook her head at him as the phone on the other end rang and rang. In the end, she left a message and flipped the phone shut. "Well. One way or another, Ida's bound to get the message that her grandchild is on the way." She set the phone on the stand by the bed.

In his pocket, his BlackBerry started vibrating.

She could hear the buzzing sound it made and slanted him a sideways look. "Aren't you going to answer that?"

About then, he realized it just might be Mary's mother-in-law. But when he got it out and checked the display, he saw it was only his father. Again. "It's nothing that can't wait." He put the phone away and pulled one of the easy chairs close. "What happens next?"

She reached for his hand. "More of the same. Hours of it."

He sat in the chair. "Having a baby is pretty damn monotonous."

She grinned at him, still holding tight to him, her fingers laced with his. "You're right. Well, aside from the screaming and the blood and the pain."

The hours went by. Nurses came and went. The doctor appeared twice, to ask Mary questions and examine her to see how her labor was progressing. Gabe wasn't really up on things like dilation and effacement, but he gathered that it was all happening pretty much as expected.

It seemed completely natural to him, to be there, holding Mary's hand, while Dr. Breitmann examined her. Natural, and important, too.

The whole process filled him with awe. And being awed wasn't like him. Not like him in the least. He found himself thinking stuff he never really thought about.

How he'd always been the kind of guy who skimmed along the surface of life, keeping it cool, never getting too close. He was self-aware enough to know that some people called him shallow, and self-assured enough not to give a damn what anyone thought. He liked his life just the way it was and he had no intention of changing it.

But there in that labor room, with Mary...

He was involved. *Really* involved. And it was great. Because this *mattered*, a new life coming. He wanted to help. Any damn way he could.

When they finally decided it was time to wheel Mary down to the delivery room, a nurse told him he'd have to suit up before he could go.

No problem, he said. Whatever they needed him to do. First, though, they had him take Mary's stuff into the room where she'd be staying after the birth. Once he did that, he put on the blue gown they gave him and the ridiculous hairnet, too, and he washed his hands with their special disinfecting soap.

And then they let him in to be with her. He got the top half of her, while the nurses and the doctor worked below. He held her hand when she needed it and wiped her sweaty face with a cool, wet cloth and said soothing things. He took his cue from the doctor and encouraged her when it was time to push.

And then, finally, after hours and hours of waiting, of Mary working like a trouper to make it happen, she pushed for all she was worth and Dr. Breitmann said, "This is it, I see the head..."

And Mary was panting and pushing and crying and Gabe heard himself say, "You're doing it, Mary. Come on. It's really happening..."

And she let out a low, agonized scream. Tears were running down her red, sweat-shiny, scrunched-up face as she pushed. And she let out a laugh, right then, at the same time as she was bawling her eyes out. "Lord. Gabe. I can't..."

"You can," he told her. "You are. You're doing great..."

She cried and laughed and pushed even harder and the nurse said the head was out. Mary pushed some more.

And then the doctor announced, “We’ve got the shoulders clear. The rest should be quick.”

And it was. The baby slid out in a rush after that.

Gabe heard a raspy intake of breath and the baby’s first cry, a loud, very cranky sound.

Mary said, “The baby? My baby...”

“You have a beautiful baby girl,” said the doctor.

Mary cried, “Oh! Oh, thank you. Thank you...” as if Dr. Breitmann had done all that pushing and panting. She held out her arms.

The doctor passed her the baby. Mary cradled the tiny, squalling, blood-streaked, naked child close, not even caring that the cord was still attached.

She looked up at Gabe over the baby’s head, through exhausted eyes that still managed to shine with pure happiness. “I can’t believe it. I did it. Oh, Gabe. Look what I did...”

“You did good,” he answered gruffly, around the sudden tightness in his throat. “Real good.”

She stroked the baby’s slimy, bloody head. “Virginia Mae,” she whispered, and glanced at him again. “My mom was Virginia. And Ida’s middle name is Mae.”

“I like it,” Gabe told her. “It’s a fine name.”

A few minutes later, the nurses clamped the cord and took the baby to examine her and clean her up a little. Once they had her wrapped in a blanket, Gabe was allowed to hold her, just for a minute.

She was so light in his arms, and warm. He looked down into her squinty blue eyes and something... happened inside him, something momentous and scary, a feeling he didn’t understand.

But so what? Why wouldn’t he be gone on that baby? He’d just seen her being born. Even helped, as much as he could.

“Little Ginny,” he whispered to her, and she made a happy cooing sound, as if she thought his nickname for her was just fine. He watched, fascinated, as she tried to get her fist into her little pink mouth.

By then, they were ready to take Mary and the baby to their room. They put Mary on a gurney and wheeled her down there while one of the nurses pushed the baby in a plastic hospital bassinet. Gabe trailed along behind, thinking vaguely that he probably should be getting going—but somehow, still not ready to leave Mary and the baby on their own.

Her room had two beds, but the other bed was empty, the privacy curtain pulled back. Once they had her settled, they raised the head of Mary’s bed and she nursed Ginny for the first time, easing aside her hospital gown and putting the tiny red baby to her full white breast. The baby rooted around, making funny squeaky sounds. And then Mary guided the nearly-bald head into position, lifting her breast and offering the nipple at the same time. Ginny latched on and Mary said, “Ouch! That hurts...” And then she laughed softly to herself. “Well, I think you’re catching on, aren’t you?” She stroked Ginny’s wispy hair.

Should Gabe have looked away while she fed her baby for the first time?

Yeah. Probably.

But he didn’t. By then, he’d seen most of what there was to see of Mary Hofstetter. And it just wasn’t...like that, with Mary. She was so natural about everything, so matter-of-fact. She had no false modesty.

She looked up from the baby at her breast and saw him watching her. And she smiled.

He smiled back and then her attention was all for Ginny again. Gabe watched that. The miracle of that. Mary and her baby, together.

Somewhere, a cell started ringing.

Mary looked up. “That’s mine.”

He got her purse out of the locker across the room and found the phone, which by then had gone silent.

“I’ll bet it was Ida,” Mary said.

He checked the display. “Sure enough.”

“Hand it here. I’ll call her back.”

He gave her the phone. “I’ll just get some coffee...”

She nodded, pressing the key to return the call, putting the phone to her ear with one hand, holding Ginny with the other, looking tired but happy as he slipped out.

He was just out the door when a ward clerk approached with a tray of food. “Is she awake?” the woman asked.

Gabe nodded and held the door for her.

Giving Mary a little time to talk to her baby’s grandma in private, Gabe got coffee and a sandwich in the cafeteria. He wolfed down the food, suddenly realizing that he was starving. His BlackBerry buzzed while he was sitting there. He ignored it, though the soft sound seemed to nag at him. It reminded him that he was getting a little bit overboard about this, that it was way past time he told Mary he was leaving and got back to his own damn life.

He glanced at his Rolex. Seven-fifteen. He rubbed his grainy eyes and wondered at how the day had raced by with him hardly aware it was passing. He’d missed a couple of meetings in the afternoon.

Plus, there had been a lunch he was supposed to go to, hadn’t there? With his dad, his brothers Ash and Matt and a couple of BravoCorp’s biggest investors. He knew he shouldn’t have blown that off. His assistant, Georgia, had probably spent the day going nuts, calling him over and over, wondering where the hell he’d gotten off to. He should have called her when he decided to take Mary to the hospital.

And he needed to stop putting off calling his dad. Davis was probably past being annoyed with him and starting to get worried. He didn’t want that.

But then he thought about Mary. And Ginny.

And somehow all that crap that added up to his real life...? So what about that?

Later. For all of it.

He was still hungry, so he got another sandwich, more coffee and a piece of chocolate cake. That time he ate slowly, letting Mary have all the time she needed, to talk to Ida, to eat her own dinner.

Almost an hour had gone by when he poked his head back in the door of her room. She’d switched off the lamp by the bed. Only the dim recessed light in the ceiling, turned down low, bathed the room in a dim glow. The remains of her meal waited on the swinging bed tray, which she’d pushed to the side. She seemed to be sleeping, her head turned to the far wall. He couldn’t see the baby, but figured she must be in the bassinet on the other side of the bed.

He started to duck back out again, thinking how it was time, after all, for him to go. He could slip away without disturbing either of them, and get in touch in the morning, to make sure she was doing okay.

But Mary turned her head with a sigh and saw him, her eyes half-open, a slow smile curving her soft mouth. She whispered his name. “Gabe...” And she held out the hand without the IV hooked into the back of it.

His heart strangely lighter, he slipped into the dim room and let the door shut silently behind him.

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