



THE BRONC  
RIDER'S BABY

Judy Duarte

 *Cherish*™

**Judy Duarte**

## **The Bronc Rider's Baby**

Серия «Rocking Chair Rodeo», книга 2

Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

### **Аннотация**

A pint-sized Texas surprise! Nothing—not even a bucking bronc—can unnerve Nate Gallagher . . . until he lays eyes on the tiny newborn who's been entrusted to his care. The former rodeo champ isn't ready for fatherhood. Heck, the precious baby girl may not even be his. Still, he aims to step up and give her a home at the Rocking C. That is, if pretty social worker Anna Reynolds decides Nate's daddy material after all. Making sure that father and infant daughter bond is Anna's job. But what about the fiery bond forming between Anna and Nate? Can Nate become the family man Anna believes he can be? Because she's this close to gambling her future on the rugged cowboy daddy!

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"I wasn't expecting you so soon."

Nate glanced at the baby, then touched a little foot that peeked out from her blanket. The flicker of a smile crossed his face.

As if sensing that Anna was watching him, he straightened and caught her eye. They gazed at each other for a beat, long enough for her to realize a little dust and perspiration did very little to lessen his sexy appeal. In fact, it made him even more manly, more...

Oh, wow. It seemed to be getting awfully warm in here.

"Do you want to stay with the baby?" he asked. "Or would you rather go outside and talk to me?"

"Let's take a walk," she said, liking the sound of it.

Nate nodded, then swung out his arm in a gallant "after you"

manner.

Anna started toward the door, but when she walked past the handsome cowboy and caught a whiff of an alluring scent of leather and musk, she wasn't so sure being alone with him was such a good idea after all.

\* \* \*

**Rocking Chair Rodeo:** Cowboys—and true love—never go out of style!

The Bronc Rider's Baby

Judy Duarte



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Since 2002, *USA TODAY* bestselling author **JUDY DUARTE** has written over forty books for Mills & Boon Cherish, earned two RITA<sup>®</sup> Award nominations, won two Maggie Awards and received a National Readers' Choice Award. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she enjoys traveling with her husband and spending quality time with her grandchildren. You can learn more about Judy and her books at her website,

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To Gail Duarte, my “twin” sister-in-law,  
who took me to the World’s Oldest Rodeo.

And yes, it actually was my first rodeo!

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[Chapter One](#)

Nate Gallagher had run with the bulls in Pamplona and ridden some of the toughest broncs in rodeos all over the country, but he'd never faced anything as scary and as unnerving as this.

What in the hell was he going to do with a premature baby girl? He'd bet he had champion belt buckles at home that weighed as much or more than she did.

The neonatal nurse, who'd just finished strapping little Jessica into her carrier, pointed to a white plastic bag bearing the hospital logo. "I've packed some bottles and formula for you to take home. Are you ready to go?"

Hell no. His heart was pounding so hard he thought it might break out of his chest, and he was sweating like crazy. But he'd be damned if he'd show any sign of fear.

"Yep." He reached for the baby carrier that would fit into the car seat base he'd secured in the backseat of his pickup, amazed

that it felt just as light now as it had when he'd brought it into the Brighton Valley Medical Center. If he hadn't glanced inside where baby Jessica was dozing, he'd never know she was there. But she was there—and leaving the safety of the hospital to go with him.

Oh, man, this was happening way too fast. It had taken every bit of his courage to sign her release forms moments ago. Sure, she'd gained a pound or two since her birth. But why couldn't they have kept her a little longer, until she'd grown bigger—like the size of a kid entering kindergarten?

If they had, he'd feel a lot better about dealing with her. At least she'd be able to talk and tell him if he was doing something wrong.

“Mr. Gallagher?” a soft, feminine voice said from behind him.

As he turned, he caught sight of a petite blonde in his peripheral vision. He might consider the attractive woman worth his full masculine attention if he'd met her in a bar, throwing back a shot of tequila with her friends. But here in a hospital, holding a patient file in her hands? All bets were off.

“Yes,” he said.

“I'm Anna Reynolds.”

Was he supposed to know her?

She must have sensed his confusion because she added, “I'm the social worker assigned to your case.”

Just the words social worker and case were an unsettling reminder of the years he'd spent in foster care and enough to

stop him dead in his tracks. The only reason he'd stepped up and claimed paternity was to keep the tiny girl out of the system.

The woman—Anna, Ms. Reynolds or whatever he was supposed to call her—offered him a warm smile, no doubt meant to disarm him. “It’s standard procedure.”

For whom? The hospital? Or for the state of Texas?

He clutched the plastic handle and pulled the carrier close to his side, as if he could prevent anyone from taking the newborn away from him, his grip as tight as his gloved hand once held the braided leather rein on the back of a bronc charging out of a bucking chute.

“I’ll be stopping by your house regularly for a while,” she said.

Again with the smile. He had to admit it was a nice one. A pretty one. Under any other circumstances, he would look forward to having regular visits from the attractive blonde. But not when he knew she’d be checking up on him. Not when she had the power to remove little Jessica from his home.

And how weird was that? He was scared spitless to take custody of a child, a newborn, no less. Yet at the same time, he was hell-bent on keeping that baby safe.

And far, far away from Kenny Huddleston, the man responsible for her mother’s death.

Following Kenny’s brutal assault, Beth had gone into premature labor and later died of a brain bleed.

He wondered if the court had ordered the social worker’s involvement. “Does this have anything to do with Beth?”

“No, it doesn’t. Although I’m sorry for your loss.”

Nate nodded, accepting the condolences, although he couldn’t actually say he was grieving for Beth. Not that he didn’t care. He did. But he was more saddened by the child’s loss of her mother.

In truth, he really hadn’t known Beth all that well. If he had, if they’d been closer, he might have been able to talk her out of going back to Kenny and marrying him. Or, at least, he might have convinced her to leave the guy before that fatal beating.

“The hospital sends me out to check on the families of preemies or seriously sick babies,” the social worker added. “The parents usually have a lot of questions and concerns when they take their little ones home after a stay in the NICU.”

She had that right. He’d be stressed and concerned even if Jessica had been born the size of a teenager. He glanced at the tiny girl, who didn’t look a thing like him. But then again, she really didn’t resemble Beth, either.

When he returned his gaze to Ms. Reynolds, he tried to manage a disarming smile of his own. “I won’t be taking her home right away. We’re going to stay on the ranch where I work. I’ll have plenty of help there.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you’ll have some support.” She opened the file she was holding and jotted down a note.

What had she written? Was it something about his judgment, his competency, his ability to parent?

If she weren’t so pretty—and if she didn’t have any power over him—he wouldn’t even consider making an excuse to escape her

attention.

“I understand that you were recently granted custody,” she said.

It had taken a few days to get that ironed out, thanks to the help of an attorney, an overworked foster system and his friend’s connections.

“The baby is mine,” Nate said. “I’m her...father.” At least that’s what Beth had claimed.

Nate had his doubts, though. They’d only dated a short while. And the two times they’d had sex he’d used protection. If he had to guess, he’d say there was a far better chance that the child was Kenny’s.

“Do we have the address of the place where you’ll be staying?” Ms. Reynolds asked.

“Yep. You sure do. Are you familiar with the Rocking Chair Ranch?”

“I’ve heard about it. From what I understand, it’s a home for retired cowboys.”

Nate nodded his agreement.

“What’s your connection with the place?” she asked.

Would she find him lacking if he admitted to being a ranch hand, to just being a cowboy? Maybe, but she was going to find out soon enough. “I’m employed there.”

“What kind of work do you do at the retirement home?” she asked.

“The Rocking C is also a working cattle ranch.” Nate glanced

down at the sleeping infant in the carrier. “I guess it’s going to be a nursery now, too.”

Again the social worker smiled, reminding him of sunshine, warm breezes, spring flowers and all that was right in the world. But things were far from right. Even before this, his once-stellar career had been shot to hell.

And now he was going to be...a father.

“Are you a cowhand?”

He hoped she didn’t have any objections to that line of work, although he couldn’t rest on his laurels any longer, so he didn’t tell her what he used to do, what he couldn’t do any longer.

“My grandfather had a couple of friends who are living there, so they put in a good word for me. But don’t worry. I can support a baby. I’ve also managed to sock some cash away.”

At that she glanced up, her brow furrowed. “I’m not concerned about that. Of course, if you had any financial concerns, I could give you a few referrals to social services.”

He’d rather die than rely on someone else’s generosity ever again. “I won’t need anything like that.”

She smiled and gave a little shrug. “That’s good to know, but I’m just a phone call away.” She glanced down at her paperwork. “I assume we have your number.”

“Yep.” He nodded at the file in her hand. “It’s all there. But you might want to make a note that the cell phone reception on the Rocking C is almost nonexistent, so if you need to get a hold of me, you’d better call the ranch office.”

“All right.” Again she glanced down at the open file in her hands.

When she looked up, Nate noticed the unique color of her eyes. They were a honey brown. He supposed you’d call them hazel, with specks of gold and green.

But it doesn’t matter what color the social worker’s eyes are.

He returned his focus to the baby and a sudden need to escape what felt more like an inquisition than helpfulness. “Well, I hate to cut this short, but I have to get out of here. She eats every hour or two, so I want to get back to the ranch before she needs another bottle.”

“Do you mind if I walk you out?” Ms. Reynolds asked.

Actually, he could use all the support he could get. And if she were anyone else, he’d let her catch a ride all the way to the ranch. But she wasn’t someone who could help.

Still, even though he felt compelled to duck out of the hospital and leave her in his dust, he nodded his agreement, accepting what he couldn’t change.

After they both removed the disposable covering the NICU visitors had to wear over their clothing, as well as the goofy-looking paper booties that went over their shoes, Nate and the attractive social worker exited, leaving the safety of the incubators and nursing staff behind.

As they walked along the corridor to the elevator, the soles of his boots created an interesting harmonic cadence with the click of her heels.

“It’s a big day,” she said. As if noticing the worry that was probably etched on his face, she glanced at the baby and added, “Taking home a newborn for the first time can be both exciting and a little unnerving.”

He wouldn’t say it was exciting, but it was certainly unsettling enough to make the toughest cowboy quake in his Tony Lamas. Rather than admit to any uneasiness, let alone a fear of failure, he didn’t respond either way.

Thankfully, she let the subject drop as they rode the elevator down to the lobby. Once they’d walked out the double glass doors and stepped onto the hospital grounds, the sun was shining warm and bright. The birds chirped overhead, and the water fountain bubbled and gurgled as if it was a perfect Texas afternoon, but Nate knew better. He looked down at the sleeping infant. How could something so small cause so many uncertainties?

“Do you need any help getting that carrier into its base?” she asked.

“No, I’ve got it.”

“Okay, then I’ll let you go. I have a home visit to make.”

So he wasn’t her only... Her only what? Patient? Client? Case? Either way, that was a bit of a relief.

“Thanks for your concern,” he told her. “I’m sure we’ll be just fine, Ms. Reynolds.” He hoped his assurance worked, even though it was a line of bull.

She extended a manicured hand to him. “Please call me Anna.”

His grip was gentle, but he couldn't help comparing the softness of her skin to his work-roughened calluses.

The afternoon sunlight danced upon the long, white-gold strands in her hair, tempting him to touch it, to watch it slip through his fingers and...

He shook off the inappropriate thought. Anna Reynolds was a beautiful woman, no doubt. In another world, in another life and time, he would have tried to wine and dine her, to date her and see where that might lead.

But even if they were now on a first-name basis, there was no way he'd think of the social worker assigned to his case in a romantic way.

Not when she had the power to take Jessica away from him and place the tiny, fragile baby in foster care.

\* \* \*

Two days later, after leaving the Brighton Valley Medical Center, Anna made the forty-five-minute drive to the outskirts of Wexler, where the Rocking Chair Ranch was located. Her GPS told her she was getting close, but the actual driveway wasn't clear.

When she spotted a small mom-and-pop grocery store along the way, she stopped to purchase a bottle of water and a granola bar.

"How's it goin'?" the friendly clerk asked as she totaled the sale.

That was exactly what she planned to ask Nate when she

arrived—without the Southern twang, of course. “Not bad.” For a workday.

Anna pulled a twenty-dollar bill from her purse. “I’m heading to the Rocking Chair Ranch. Do you know where it is?”

“It’s about a mile from here. Just look for a long line of mailboxes along the right side of the road. After that you’ll see a yellow sign that points out the entrance. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” She took her purchases to the car. After opening the granola bar and taking a couple of bites, she continued the drive.

Sure enough, just ahead she spotted a string of mailboxes, most of them rusty or dented. Fifty yards farther, she saw the sign. Black cursive letters announced that she’d reached the Rocking Chair Ranch, a red arrow pointing the way.

She flipped on her blinker and turned onto a long, graveled road. Several horses grazed in a pasture that was enclosed by white fencing, the weathered rails in need of a fresh coat of paint.

Moments later she spotted a red barn, several corrals and a sprawling ranch house. In the shade of a big wraparound porch, several elderly men sat in wooden rockers flanked by clay pots filled with red-and-pink geraniums. It was a peaceful setting, and she could see why a retired cowboy or rancher would feel comfortable living here.

She wasn’t exactly sure where to park her car, but decided upon a space next to a silver-gray pickup. Then she shut off the ignition, grabbed her purse and briefcase and made her way

toward the house. As she strolled over the uneven path to the front porch, she was glad she'd chosen to wear flats today instead of heels.

Along the walkway, she passed an old tree stump that appeared to have been there for years. A patch of orange-and-yellow marigolds encircled it, making it a rather odd but nice lawn decoration. About ten feet away, in the center of the grass, sat a wooden cart filled with daisies.

As she bypassed a ramp that provided handicap access and approached wooden steps, the men in rocking chairs noted her arrival with a smile. When one tried to stand, she motioned for him to remain seated. The others seemed more interested in watching the activity in the nearest corral, where a cowboy worked with an Appaloosa gelding.

But it wasn't just any cowboy. It was Nate Gallagher.

Anna slowed to a stop and watched the man gentle the nervous horse with a skill that seemed inborn. His movements were a sight to behold. With those broad shoulders and narrow hips, his black Stetson angled just right, he was a sight.

He filled his boots, those worn jeans and a chambray shirt as if they'd been made with him in mind.

Back at the hospital, his handsome appeal had been hard to ignore, but she'd noted a nervousness about him.

That certainly wasn't the case now. He was clearly in his element on the Rocking C, where he moved with both strength and grace, his self-confidence apparent.

As Anna continued to watch him work, glued to the way he spoke to the horse, an array of Western movies and their male stars flashed in her mind. Yet Nate stood out from all of them.

Because he was real, Anna decided. In fact, he was so authentic, she could easily imagine him walking down an Old West street, a leather holster slung low on his hips, two Colt 45s at the ready. She'd never been attracted to cowboys before, but there was something fascinating about this one, something sexy and alluring.

He glanced her way for a moment then returned his full attention to the gelding. He obviously knew what he was doing with the horse, but how was he doing with little Jessica?

For that reason, romantically speaking, Nate Gallagher was strictly off-limits.

“Can I help you?” a male voice asked from behind.

She glanced over her shoulder to see an elderly cowboy with a thick head of white hair and a warm glimmer in his eyes. She slowly spun around, switched her briefcase to her left hand and greeted him with the customary shake. “I’m Anna Reynolds, a social worker with the Brighton Valley Medical Center. I came by to visit Mr. Gallagher and the baby.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Sam Darnell, the Rocking C foreman. I’ll let Nate know that you’re here. In the meantime, why don’t you go in the house? Joy, the ranch cook, has the baby. Last I knew, they were both in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.” Yet instead of going inside, as Sam had

suggested, Anna said, "I imagine having a baby around is a bit of an adjustment for everyone. How are things going?"

"As good as can be expected, I suppose. Little Jessie isn't much bigger than a peanut, but Joy says she's taking to the bottle just fine. She's also going through the diapers, which I suspect is a good sign."

Anna smiled. "Yes, that's a very good sign." But there'd been more behind her question than that. She'd also wanted to know how Nate was doing. Was he adjusting to fatherhood? Was he bonding with his daughter?

In spite of the air of confidence he'd tried to project when he'd taken the baby home from the hospital, she'd sensed his discomfort and uneasiness. But she didn't blame him for that. Suddenly being responsible for a newborn could be daunting under the best of circumstances, but it was even more stressful and worrisome when the baby was premature.

She stole another peek at the handsome cowboy, her gaze lingering longer than it should.

"When you wanted to know how 'things' were going," the white-haired foreman said, "I guess you were actually wondering about how Nate was doing."

She returned her focus to Sam. Normally, she kept her worries to herself, but she didn't think complete honesty would hurt in this situation. "From what I understand, he just learned about the baby's existence a couple of months ago. And since... Well, with the mother's death, he has to deal with this all alone."

“He’s not alone,” Sam said. “He’s got everyone here to help out.”

That was good. Wasn’t it?

Still, she was pretty astute herself, and something seemed off. She just wasn’t sure what it was. Maybe it was the fact that there were so many people here, including a bunch of old cowboys with who-knew-what kind of backgrounds.

Concern twisted into a bulky knot in her chest. No, something about this setup didn’t feel right.

She hoped Nate was prepared for and even looking forward to being a father, but in spite of what he’d implied at the hospital, she hadn’t been convinced. And she knew from experience what happened when a man didn’t step up and take on a paternal role. Her own father certainly hadn’t wanted to be a daddy. He might have tried to do the right thing and married Anna’s mother when she’d gotten pregnant, but the couple had been young, and their marriage had been in trouble from the start. They’d fought from sunup to sundown, and eventually her dad had run off, abandoning his wife and child.

But this wasn’t about Anna or the man who’d disappointed her. It was about human nature, and that’s what had her worried.

She shook off the unpleasant memory and focused on the case at hand. “I’d better go inside. I’d like to look in on the little ‘peanut.’”

Sam didn’t respond, but then why would he? She’d already started for the house before she’d completed her last sentence.

When she reached the porch, where the two oldsters sat, she offered them a casual “Hello” then opened the screen door and stepped inside. Before she could scan the living room, a long, appreciative whistle sounded from out on the porch.

“Now that’s what I call a pretty little gal,” one of the men said. “You think she’s applying for a job here?”

The other chuckled. “It’d sure be nice if she was. I like living on a ranch, but you can’t beat the pretty feminine scenery.”

Anna probably ought to consider that a compliment, but that was another thing that made her uneasy. She didn’t know anything about these men. Not that she expected them to be doddering old fools, completely oblivious to those around them. But was this really a good place to raise a baby?

She was just about to venture into the house, assuming she’d have to find the kitchen on her own, when she spotted a gray-haired man sitting in a brown vinyl recliner. He was holding a bottle and a small bundle wrapped in pink flannel.

So she approached the elderly resident and asked, “How’s little Jessica doing today?”

He looked up and grinned, his tired eyes sparking with mirth. “She’d probably be a whole lot happier if Joy was feeding her, instead of an old coot like me. But I’m getting the hang of this.”

“I can see that.” Anna offered him a smile of her own then introduced herself and told him why she’d come.

“You probably ought to talk to Joy or to one of the women,” he said. “I’m just a temporary babysitter.”

She'd like to talk to everyone here—the residents, the cook, the nurses. She'd especially like to talk to Nate. But apparently, until he was able to come inside to meet with her, the “temporary sitter” would have to do.

“How about her daddy?” Anna asked. “How's he adjusting to bottles and diapers?”

“Like most rodeo cowboys, I s'pose. He can handle a wild horse a hell of a lot better than he can a tiny baby.” The old man may as well have waved a big red flag in front of the social worker.

“Is that a fact?” Anna had known that Nate worked on a ranch, but she hadn't realized he was also involved in the rodeo. But neither of those things had anything to do with him being a good father, one who was devoted to his daughter and eager to spend time with her. “I'm sure he'll get used to having a baby around before you know it.”

The oldster chuckled. “I sure hope so. When he brought her home a couple of days back, he was as skittish as a colt in a thunderstorm. I'd be just as helpless. So it's a good thing he's got Joy and the nurses to help him day and night. 'Course Joy never had any kids of her own, but that don't matter. Women are just naturally maternal.”

Anna suspected there were a lot of people in the old man's generation who believed that, but parenting wasn't just a woman's job. These days a lot of men quickly settled into their daddy roles and took an active interest in their newborns.

She just hoped that Nate wasn't skirting his emotional responsibility and letting everyone else take care of the baby. She'd really like him to step up and take part in his daughter's care.

"You want to feed her?" the gray-haired sitter asked. "I'm doing okay now, but I gotta tell you, when Joy handed her to me and asked me to feed her while she fixed our lunch, my heart started thumping and bumping like the pistons in a beat-up jalopy."

Anna's smile deepened. "You look like you're doing just fine, Mr....?"

"Mayberry," he said. "But call me Rex."

When the screen door squeaked open, Anna glanced over her shoulder to see who'd entered the house. The moment she spotted Nate, her heart skipped a couple of beats then sputtered back to life, thumping and bumping like those same pistons in Rex's jalopy.

Nate removed his battered Stetson, which had left a damp impression mark on his light brown hair, and held it in front of him. "Sam said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yes, I do. Is now a good time?"

"I guess so."

But not really? Most new parents were pleased to know someone from the hospital had stopped to check on them, but she suspected he felt threatened by her arrival. And that sent up another red flag, one she'd have to keep in mind while she was

here today and during her follow-up visits.

“Maybe I should have called first,” she said.

He shrugged a single shoulder. “I just wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

He glanced at the baby then touched a little foot that peeked out from her blanket. The flicker of a smile crossed his face—a good sign, no?

As if sensing that Anna was watching him, he straightened and caught her eye. They gazed at each other for a beat, long enough for her to realize a little dust and perspiration did very little to lessen his sexy appeal. In fact, it made him even more manly, more...

Oh, wow. It seemed to be getting awfully warm in here.

“Do you want to stay with the baby?” he asked. “Or would you rather go outside and talk to me?”

She glanced at Rex, who was studying them as if they were actors on a stage. Maybe it would be best if they didn’t have an audience.

“Let’s take a walk,” she said, liking the sound of it. She suspected Nate would feel better and be more relaxed outdoors. She certainly would.

“You got this, Rex?” Nate asked. “The baby’s not too much for you? I can ask Joy to come out here and relieve you.”

“Nope.” The elderly man glanced down at the baby and smiled. “We’re doin’ just fine.”

Nate nodded then swung out his arm in a gallant, “after you”

manner.

Anna started toward the door, but when she walked past the handsome cowboy and caught a whiff of an alluring scent of leather and musk, she wasn't so sure being alone with him had been such a good idea after all.

## Chapter Two

Nate followed Anna outside and onto the porch, where Gilbert Henry and Raul Santiago sat in their rockers. The creaks they were making as they swayed back and forth in their chairs slowed to a stop, their attention undoubtedly captured by the attractive social worker.

It was no secret around here that, back in the day, both of the retired cowboys had been ladies' men. Before the accident, Nate had been one, too. But not anymore. Even if he'd adapted to the life changes he'd been forced to make—the dashed dreams and altered career path—there was a five-pound two-ounce change that had turned him from a carefree bachelor to a man dead set on becoming a good father—or at least one that was adequate.

He just hoped that Ms. Reynolds—or rather Anna—realized how hard he was trying.

While he was determined to keep the attractive social worker in a professional light, it was a struggle. Every time he looked at her, he focused on her appearance. And now, as they stepped off the porch, he couldn't seem to keep his eyes off the gentle sway of her hips or the way that long blond hair swished and shimmered down her back.

He didn't need to glance at Gil or Raul to know what they were thinking. He sensed their interest and imagined they were sporting grins and winking at each other. He was also prepared for the ribbing he'd get, as well as the advice they'd offer him as soon as Anna left the ranch.

If she were any other beautiful woman, he wouldn't need any prodding or pushing. He'd never been shy. But Anna was different.

As she moved away from the shady porch and into the light of day, the platinum strands in her hair shimmered. Some women might pay good money to have highlights like that, but he'd bet a month's pay that Anna was a natural blonde.

He followed her to the lawn and waited while she placed her purse and briefcase on top of the old tree stump.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Nowhere in particular. I thought we should talk in private."

Nate doubted that she'd want a tour of the ranch, so he wasn't sure which direction to go, but definitely away from Gil and Raul. As he started toward the outbuildings, Anna fell into step beside him.

"Jessica looks good," she said.

Nate thought so, too, although he had no idea what signs might indicate she wasn't healthy or thriving. Rather than admit his lack of experience or reveal his incompetence, he said, "I'll sure be happy when she gains a few pounds."

"That shouldn't take very long. You'll be surprised at how

quickly she'll grow."

It seemed as though it might take forever, but Anna was probably right. The same thing happened with a colt or a calf. The more they nursed, the bigger they got. It was just going to take a little while. Hopefully, he could spend that time here on the Rocking C, where he had plenty of help.

"She'll be toddling around before you know it," Anna added. "And then you'll have other things to worry about."

"Like what?" The minute he uttered the worry-laced question, he wanted to temper it somehow. He hadn't meant to reveal any insecurities he might have—and not just about infants, but fatherhood.

"For one thing," she said, "making sure the electrical sockets are protected from little fingers. And watching her closely so she doesn't climb up on something and fall. You'll also have to keep medications and cleaning supplies out of her reach."

Crap. There was so much he didn't know. "Maybe I'd better get some books on the subject."

"That will help, but during each stage of development, the pediatricians are pretty good at pointing out the things you should be concerned about in terms of health and safety."

"Thank God for that." The moment those words rolled off his tongue, he wished he could reel them back in before she realized how afraid he was that he'd slip up, that Jessie might be better off in someone else's care.

Anna's steps slowed, and as she turned to face him, she

used her hand to block the sun from her eyes, which were almost a golden-brown hue today. “When’s her first doctor’s appointment?”

“Monday at four o’clock. They told me it’s just to check her weight.”

“Would you like me to meet you there?” she asked.

Hell, he’d love to have someone go with him—anyone. But did he really want that to be a social worker?

What if the baby hadn’t gained any weight? What if Anna thought Jessie would be better off living with someone else?

Kenny might be locked up, but he had some sketchy family members, and maybe one of them would try to gain custody. From what Nate had heard, several of them had done time for various crimes such as assault, drunk and disorderly conduct or driving while under the influence.

“That’s nice of you to offer,” he said, “but it’s not necessary.”

When Anna didn’t respond, he stole a peek at her, saw her forehead creased ever so slightly.

Hoping she didn’t think he was skirting her, he added, “It’s not that I don’t want you to come. You can certainly meet me there if you want to.”

“We’ll see how my day goes,” she said. “I’m usually off by four o’clock—unless something comes up.”

They continued to walk along the lawn-flanked path to the corral where he’d been working with that new gelding a few minutes ago.

“So how are you doing?” Anna asked.

Him? He was nervous as hell and afraid he'd drop little Jessie or do something wrong. He also hadn't been able to sleep worth a damn because he kept waking up to check on her and make sure she was still breathing. But he didn't want to reveal any sign of weakness, so he chuckled and made light of it. “Me? I'm fine as frog's hair.”

She laughed at his response. The lilt of her voice was enough to make him relax for the first time since she'd arrived. “Now, that's cute.”

He hadn't meant to be cute. Was she a big-city girl laughing at his country ways? “It's just a saying I picked up from one of the retired cowboys who lives here.”

She shifted slightly as if trying to avoid the sunlight from shining in her eyes. “Today, while I had lunch in the hospital cafeteria with a coworker, your name came up.”

So much for relaxing around her. Why had his name come up? Had they been discussing him—and his case?

“One of the aides said you used to be a patient, that you had a run-in with a wild horse. And one of the cowboys mentioned you were involved in the rodeo.”

He'd been more than involved. He'd actually made a name for himself—until his injury. And until the doctor's diagnosis brought about a real reckoning on many levels. “I've still got friends who're on the circuit, but I gave it up.”

“Why?”

Did it really matter? He shrugged a single shoulder. “I had more than a little ‘run-in’ with a bronc last year, and the doctors said I couldn’t ride anymore. So I landed this job.”

Her brow scrunched. “That sounds like a big change of pace.”

It had been a huge change. And a real blow to his ego. Giving up the rodeo had been tough because, if he wasn’t a star or a champion, who was he? But if there was one thing he’d learned to do in life it was to roll with whatever punches fate dealt him.

“I’ve adjusted,” he said. “Besides, working as the assistant foreman on the Rocking C pays the bills.”

“So you rode broncs when you were on the circuit?” Anna asked.

Nate had never been one to toot his own horn, so he didn’t mention the buckles he’d won. Instead, he just nodded and said, “Yep.”

“No wonder you seemed so competent working with that gelding.”

Horses, broken or not, he could handle. It was only little babies that made him uneasy.

And pretty social workers.

He shot a glance her way. Damn, she was attractive. And in spite of his better judgment, he was drawn to her. Her floral scent—gardenia maybe?—snaked around him and seemed to hold him captive. Just walking next to her was a pleasure.

But Anna Reynolds wasn’t like the buckle bunnies who’d once hovered around him, hoping for a date, a kiss or...a whole lot

more. She wasn't here to flirt or...whatever. She had a job to do—and possibly an assessment to make.

“What is it that you wanted to talk to me about?” he asked, hoping she'd cut to the chase and he could get his mind back on his work. “Is there a problem?”

“No, not that I see so far.”

“Then why are you here?”

“It's my job to check up on you and the baby. Would it be easier for you if I came back in the evening next time?”

“Actually, this isn't a bad time. I'm sorry if it sounded like I was...” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “I was just a little surprised to see you this afternoon. That's all.”

She blessed him with a pretty smile, one that he'd be thrilled to see if they'd met in a bar or honky-tonk, like the Stagecoach Inn. But could he trust that she didn't have any ulterior motives, other than to answer his questions and help him adjust to fatherhood? He'd been in the foster care system. He knew better than to take kindness at face value. Maybe he ought to try a little charm on her, knock her a little off balance.

“It's nice of you to come all the way out here to check on us,” he said, adding a carefree smile that was more fake than real.

“I'm just doing my job. Do you have any questions for me? Not just about babies, but about the social services available to you?”

He had plenty of questions. And the longer he was around little Jessie, the more he seemed to have. Like how much formula

should she be taking at one time? Or why did it take so long to get a burp out of her? And was she going through too many diapers?

Instead, he said, “There’s a nurse on duty at the ranch at all times, as well as the housekeeper. So they’ve been very helpful.” In fact, they were far more capable of caring for a baby than he was.

Not that he expected Joy, Shannon and the other women to do it all for him. He hadn’t left Jessie completely in their care. Hell, he practically hovered over her whenever he was in the house.

When Anna didn’t smile or appear to be the least bit relieved by his admission, he added, “You don’t need to worry.” Especially about me. “We’re doing fine.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Gallagher. I’m a little confused. I realized you mentioned staying here for a while—before taking her home. But do you have a place of your own?”

Did it matter? What was she really asking? Did she want to know if he could financially support a baby? Or was she worried that he wasn’t able to provide a home for her?

“I own a house in Brighton Valley, but I’m staying here for now. Jessie has a cradle in the office, and I sleep on the sofa.” He felt as though he’d been caught in a lie, but it was the truth.

“That’s good. I was going to ask if you needed my help finding a place.”

“No, I’ve got that covered.” Did she get this involved with other people on her caseload?

“When do you plan to take her home?” Anna asked.

“Soon.” Now that was a lie. Just the thought of being alone with her scared the hell out of him.

But since Anna would undoubtedly come back to visit and would still find him at the ranch, he'd better clarify things now. “Before I take her home, I'll have to hire a nanny to watch her during the day so I can work. And I'm not ready to let a stranger take care of her yet. Besides, over the past few months, I've gotten to know the people who work with me here. They're almost like family, especially Sam the foreman and Joy the cook. The nurses are not only loving and kind, but they know what to do with a baby.”

She tilted her head and frowned—maybe from the sunlight in her eyes. Still, it prompted him to add, “I'm learning a lot from the nurses about the baby. So no worries.”

“I'm glad to hear things are going well,” Anna said, although she crossed her arms and scanned the length of him as if she wasn't quite convinced. “I'd better let you go back to work. I'll see you again in a couple of days.”

“Why?”

“It's my job. Remember?”

If she were anyone else, if she had any other job, he'd be pleased as punch to have her stop by—with or without notice. It was only the fear factor that had him uneasy, the concern that she might find him lacking as a father. And after this exchange, he had a feeling she'd pegged him as the phony he truly was.

But maybe he'd been making a much bigger deal out of her

visits than he should have been. Maybe she'd been telling him the truth when she'd said she only wanted to be helpful.

"You have my number," she said.

"You bet I do." He tapped the front pocket of his shirt. Ever since she'd given it to him at the hospital, he'd decided to carry it with him at all times.

He might not want to have a social worker checking up on him, but that didn't mean he was too stubborn to call for help if he really needed it.

\* \* \*

On Monday afternoon, after a long morning spent in meetings, followed by several visits with different parents in the NICU, Anna climbed into her car and headed to the red brick building that housed several medical offices, including Brighton Valley Pediatrics. She wasn't sure if Nate would be happy to see her or not, but she wanted to attend Jessica's first appointment.

Preemies could present a few additional problems and worries, something Anna knew firsthand. Five years ago, while she was in her last year of grad school, her mother remarried and then, six months later, gave birth to a second daughter. Kylie, Anna's sister, had been born ten weeks early and had faced several health issues. Fortunately, she was doing well now, but those early months had been very stressful and worrisome for everyone involved.

However, the real reason Anna had taken a special interest in Nate's case was because she'd recently faced the biggest failure of

her career. Last spring, little Danny Walker had been born full-term, but he'd had a serious heart defect that required surgery. Sadly, his mother never bonded with him, and as a result, Danny had failed to thrive.

The situation was complicated by the fact that there'd been both a surrogate and a sperm donor involved. So in Danny's case, no one had been fully committed to raising a fragile child.

Once Danny had gone into foster care, his health improved and he began gaining weight. His prognosis was good, and the last she'd heard, he'd been cleared for adoption. But she would always regret not picking up on the warning signs and facilitating his placement sooner. That's why Nate's case was so important to her and why she would do everything in her power to help him bond with his daughter. If he didn't...

Well, if he showed signs of not taking proper care of her or providing her the loving home she both needed and deserved, Anna would have the baby removed from his care.

As the elevator doors opened and let her out on the third floor, a little zing rushed through her bloodstream, kicking her pulse up a notch. Okay, so she had to admit that she was also drawn to the handsome daddy for another reason, one that had nothing to do with his parenting skills. But even so, that had nothing to do with her hope to see him become a great dad.

At least, she certainly hoped it didn't.

She glanced at her wristwatch. It was 4:06. She'd wanted to arrive at the pediatric office a little earlier than this. Would she

find Nate still in the waiting room? Or had he already been called back for the weigh-in?

Her question was answered the moment she scanned the room and saw the new daddy sitting near an aquarium, the baby carrier on his lap, his black Stetson on the chair next to him. He glanced up about the same time she spotted him.

He tossed her a crooked grin that darn near turned her heart inside out and stirred up a swarm of butterflies in her stomach. Okay, so her gut wasn't the only thing sending feelings about Nate to her brain. But she'd have to tuck that emotional stuff away. She wasn't about to breach any ethical boundaries by letting the sight of Nate Gallagher in those jeans and boots get to her.

Maybe she should come up with an excuse to say hello, then leave and let him visit the doctor on his own.

Yet in spite of her second thoughts, her feet seemed to move toward him on their own. So she blew off her fluttery tummy and tamped down her thumping heart.

His lips tilted into the slightest of smiles. "I wasn't sure if you'd show up."

Had he hoped that she would? It certainly sounded that way.

"I'm glad you came," he added.

Seriously? For some reason, his admission stirred up that flock of butterflies that had begun to settle down during her walk across the room.

Oh, for Pete's sake, he hadn't meant anything by that. He was a

new father, worried about his newborn and eager to learn whether she'd gained weight.

But even that realization didn't help. After all, Danny Walker's parents had charmed her into thinking they were glad that she'd come by to see their baby, yet their smiles and affirmations had just been a show. They'd rarely even held that little boy.

Deciding that she'd made an unfair comparison, Anna shook off the memory. "As it turned out, I was able to get off work on time." She glanced into the carrier at Jessica, who was as precious as could be in a pink sleeper that was way too large for her small size.

Her dark hair was adorned with a white bow attached to a headband, and while her eyes remained closed, her lips moved as though nursing on a bottle or pacifier.

"She's got to be the cutest baby ever," Anna said. "Did you dress her?"

"Nope." Nate, who'd been studying the newborn, looked up and added, "Even if I felt comfortable doing that sort of thing, I didn't stand a chance. Jessie's gotten pretty popular with the nursing staff."

"I can certainly see why. But you're not comfortable dressing her?" Another red flag flapped in her mind.

Before he could answer, the back door opened to reveal an older woman wearing a light blue smock with a zoo animal print. "Jessica Gallagher?" she called.

"That's us." Nate got to his feet and turned to Anna. "Did you

want to wait here or come inside?"

Right this moment, there wasn't anything she wanted more than to join him in the exam room. And for that reason, as well as those pesky butterflies in her belly, she decided she'd better let Nate go in alone. "You go ahead. I'll be here when you get back."

"Okay." He nodded toward the Stetson on the chair. "Watch my hat?"

"You bet."

But it was the new daddy holding his newborn in the carrier she was more intent upon watching as he sauntered across the floor with a sexy cowboy swagger.

Still, there seemed to be something missing, something Nate was keeping from her. And she was determined to find out just what it was.

For everyone's sake.

\* \* \*

Nate followed the nurse back to the exam room.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Okay, I guess."

She pointed to the doorway of a room that had a medical smell, one that reminded him of those days he'd spent in the hospital. The familiar scent threw him even more off balance than when he'd first arrived.

"You want me to take her out of this contraption?" Nate asked, assuming he'd have to.

"Yes. Then get her undressed so I can weigh her."

Great. Nate had changed Jessica's diaper before—several times. And once, when she'd spit up all over them both, he'd had to put her in new jammies—or whatever it was called. But that didn't mean he felt comfortable moving her little arms and legs around. Still, he supposed the old adage was true. Practice made perfect.

"I just fed her," he told the nurse. "So her weight could be up because of that. But I also changed her in the waiting room."

"It all balances out," she said.

When Nate removed all but her diaper, Jessie let out a wail as though he'd hurt her.

"Goodness," the nurse said, as if screaming, red-faced newborns with flailing arms and legs were a common occurrence. "Would you listen to that? She's certainly got a temper and a strong pair of lungs."

As the woman started toward the door with Jessie in her arms, she turned to Nate. "Are you coming with me to the scale?"

"Absolutely." The whole point of today's doctor visit was to make sure her weight was on target.

He followed her to another room, this one smaller than the other. There she proceeded to weigh an unhappy Jessie.

He held his breath as he waited to hear the result. What in the world was he going to do if she hadn't gained any weight? Or worse, what if she'd lost a few ounces?

But then the nurse looked up and smiled. "Good job, Daddy! She's up nearly six ounces since she was discharged from the

hospital.”

Nate’s heart soared as if he could take all the credit himself. And even though he’d only played a small role, he felt as if he’d just gone eight seconds on a bronc no one could ride.

He wished Anna could have been standing here, hearing the news herself, but he supposed that it was just as well that she’d remained in the waiting room. He was still a little uneasy around her and didn’t want her to pick up on his insecurities or to know how far out of his element he really was.

Five minutes later, after the doctor had examined Jessie and declared her healthy and thriving, Nate redressed her with minimal issues and secured her into the carrier. Then he returned to the waiting room feeling far more competent than when he’d arrived.

Anna, who was still seated in the same chair, set the magazine she’d been reading aside, reached for her purse and got to her feet. “How’d it go?”

“Great. She’s gained six ounces already, which is almost a half pound. So that’s a relief.”

“I’m sure it is. Now you can go home and celebrate.”

As much as he missed his privacy, he wouldn’t be going back to his house. He still wanted to stick close to the Rocking C, although he felt much better about things now.

“I guess there’s a lot to be happy about, but I won’t be celebrating the way I used to. Something tells me that having a couple of beers with my friends at the Stagecoach Inn won’t be

appropriate. But I'll probably stop by Caroline's Diner for dinner and splurge on dessert."

"That might be a lot more fun, especially with a baby."

As they started toward the door, he found himself asking, "Are you hungry?"

The question seemed to take her aback because her eyes widened and her lips parted. But before he could renege on the implied invitation, she said, "Actually, I had a light lunch, so yes, I am hungry."

He supposed it was too late to backpedal now. "Do you want to meet me at Caroline's?"

"Sounds like a plan."

Yep, he supposed it did. Hopefully, it didn't also sound like a date. He opened the door for the pretty social worker then followed her out.

Not that dating Anna Reynolds wouldn't be appealing. But Nate wasn't about to get romantically involved with someone who could stir up trouble.

Or worse, someone with the power to take Jessie away from him.

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