

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHERRYL WOODS

THE COWBOY AND HIS WAYWARD BRIDE



AN ADAMS DYNASTY NOVEL

Sherryl Woods
The Cowboy and
His Wayward Bride
Серия «And Baby
Makes Three», книга 10

Аннотация

Don't miss this fan-favorite tale of long-lost love and second chances from New York Times bestselling author Sherryl Woods. Rugged rancher Harlan Patrick Adams has never forgotten his childhood sweetheart, Laurie Jensen. After all, she admitted she loved him...and then left him with no explanation. But then he discovers a photograph of her, clutching a tiny baby...a little girl who has his eyes. Harlan Patrick is going to go to the mother of his child. He'll knock down her door, if that's what it takes. Demand some answers. Claim what is rightly his. Even if it means getting down on one knee and begging her to marry him.

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Chapter One

Pure, gut-deep exhaustion had settled over country-music superstar Laurie Jensen weeks earlier, and now it seemed she was walking around in a haze from dawn to dusk. A new baby who didn't know the meaning of a full night's sleep, a concert tour, publicity demands and the burden of keeping a secret from the one person in the world with whom she had always been totally, brutally honest—all of it had combined to take a terrible emotional toll.

She sat in her fancy dressing room long after her concert had ended and the fans had drifted away. With the sleeping baby nestled in her arms, her own eyes drifting shut, she relished the momentary silence, welcoming it just as she had the applause earlier.

Bliss, she thought. The quiet was absolute bliss.

Of course, it didn't last.

“Laurie, you ready?” her assistant called out in a hushed tone with an accompanying rap on the door. “The limo’s outside to take us back to the hotel.”

Even the soft tap and whispered reminder were enough noise to wake the always restless baby, who began to fuss, then settled into a full-throated yowling that gave Laurie a splitting headache.

“Shh, sweetheart. Everything’s okay. Mama’s here,” she soothed, gathering up her purse and easing toward the door.

As the baby quieted and finally began to gurgle contentedly, Laurie did a quick survey of the room to be sure she'd left nothing behind, thankful once again for Val's efficiency. Her assistant handled everything from toting diaper bags to making complex travel arrangements with total aplomb. She'd even been known to tuck Amy Lynn into the crook of her arm and feed her while answering Laurie's fan mail with her free hand.

Often, observing her whirlwind assistant at work, Laurie wished she were half so competent, even a quarter so adept with the multiple demands facing her. There were times—and tonight was one of them—when she felt thoroughly overwhelmed, when she wanted nothing more than to run straight back to Texas and into Harlan Patrick's waiting arms. Assuming he was still waiting for her after all this time and after she'd made it clear that her singing career was what she wanted most in this world.

What was wrong with her? Was she completely out of her mind trying to tackle the demands of motherhood and a singing career all on her own? Especially when she knew with absolute certainty that the baby's father would have flown to her side in a heartbeat if only she'd told him about Amy Lynn?

But that was the trouble, of course. Harlan Patrick Adams would have taken the news that he was a daddy as reason enough to demand that she marry him at once, return to Los Piños, Texas, and be a rancher's wife. There would have been no ifs, ands or buts about it.

She'd known the man since she was in kindergarten. She

knew how he operated. A bulldozer did gentle nudging by comparison. Oh, she knew Harlan Patrick, all right. They'd exchanged birthday presents at five, their first awkward dance at thirteen, their first real kiss at fifteen.

Harlan Patrick had flirted with typical Adams abandon with every girl in town, but there'd never been a doubt in anyone's mind that Laurie was the one he loved. With single-minded determination, he'd been asking her to marry him for years now. And she'd been saying no, while practically everyone in the universe told her she'd lost her mind.

Unlike the music business, Harlan Patrick Adams and his love were a sure thing, her mother had told her repeatedly. His family was the richest and most powerful in Los Piños, practically in all of Texas. He could give her stability, the kind of rock-solid future most women dreamed of, the kind her mother had always craved.

Unfortunately, Laurie's dreams tended toward a world that no one, not even an Adams, could guarantee. From the time she'd learned the words to an old Patsy Cline hit, she'd wanted to be a country-music sensation. God had blessed her with the voice for it. Whether it was the church choir or the school chorus, Laurie had always been the star soloist. The applause had been wonderful, but she would have sung for the sheer joy of it. And maybe, at one time, she would have been content with that.

But over the years Harlan Patrick had unwittingly fed her obsession by seeing to it that she saw concerts by every country

superstar who appeared anywhere in Texas. He'd even wrangled a backstage meeting with a few. Laurie had discovered her destiny.

Somehow, though, he'd never taken seriously her desire to be up there on the stage, earning her own applause. For him, the gestures had been an indulgence. For her, they had been an inspiration. He'd thought time, a little coaxing and a few breath-stealing kisses would change her mind. She'd found his inability to recognize and accept her dream more annoying than her mom's.

After all, Mary Jensen had had a tough life. She was practical to the very core. Harlan Patrick, however, was supposed to be Laurie's soul mate, the man in whom she'd confided her hopes and dreams all her life. The discovery that he'd merely been indulging what he called "her little fantasies" had brought on one of the most heated fights they'd ever had.

Why hadn't he been able to understand that singing was simply something she had to do with the gift God had given her? He'd let her—*let her*, she thought indignantly—sing in the neighboring towns if that's what she wanted, but Nashville had been out of the question. His ultimatum had been phrased in a generous, condescending tone that had set her teeth on edge. As if the decision were his to make, she'd thought as she turned on her heel and walked out of his life for good.

In one way she was grateful. It had made it easier to say goodbye, to head for Nashville without looking back. She'd dug

in her heels, too, even when the going had been tough and she'd been waiting tables to make ends meet. Knowing that he'd welcome her back with an I-told-you-so smile had driven her to stay the course.

It had been two long, lonely years before she'd been discovered by her agent, but then things had happened so quickly it had left her reeling. She'd captured the Horizon Award for up-and-coming stars with her first album, a Grammy and a CMA Award with her second. She'd gone from a show-starter for the superstars to a concert tour of her own that had broken box-office records. In no time, it seemed, every single debuted at the top of the charts and every album went gold.

Only then, with rave reviews and money in her pocket, had she gone back to Los Piños. It was the only time she'd seen Harlan Patrick in the five years since she'd left. She was home just long enough to discover that the chemistry between them was as explosive as ever and that he was every bit as bullheaded as he'd been the day she walked out. He'd actually thought that she'd be ready to walk away from it all now that she'd proved to herself she could do it, as if it had been some cute little game she'd been playing. The man could infuriate her faster than anyone else on earth.

Then, just a few weeks after their reunion, she'd discovered she was pregnant. From that moment on, all she'd been able to think about was keeping the baby a secret from Harlan Patrick. She'd been able to walk away from him not just once, but twice.

Could she do it again, especially with a baby in the picture? She wasn't sure she'd have the strength or even the will.

For the first few months of her pregnancy, it had been simple enough to avoid his calls and keep the secret. She was either in Nashville or on the road and she was extremely careful that no one—not even the very discreet Val—had any idea she was going to have a child. Val knew only that she had no desire to speak to one Harlan Patrick Adams, which pretty much assured that there wasn't a chance in hell he'd get through to her. Eventually he'd gotten the message and given up. Not even Harlan Patrick was stubborn beyond all reason. Nor was he a masochist. It hadn't taken all that long for the Adams pride to kick in and assure her of a reprieve from his pestering.

When Laurie could no longer disguise her expanding waistline, she had scheduled five months in seclusion at her home on the outskirts of Nashville. She'd let Val and no one else in on the secret and let her assistant run interference.

"She's working on songs for her next album," Val had told any and all callers, including Laurie's agent. That had kept him, if not the media, satisfied.

Now she had Amy Lynn to remember her childhood sweetheart by, and it was both the most miraculous blessing on earth and a painful reminder of what might have been. When she thought of how Harlan Patrick would have adored their precious child, she hated herself for keeping silent. And yet, what choice had she had?

None, she assured herself. Handsome as sin, but stubborn as a mule, Harlan Patrick had given her none. The man didn't know the meaning of *compromise*. He'd made it impossible for her to do anything other than exactly what she had done.

After Amy Lynn's birth, she had scheduled recording sessions for the next two months. There'd been a short break, barely long enough for her to catch her breath while the album had been rushed to market, followed by the grueling pace of a concert tour set to coincide with the album's release.

By then, those closest to her knew about the baby, but they'd all been sworn to secrecy and they had united to protect both Laurie and the baby from the glare of the spotlight. It couldn't last forever, but it had to last long enough that Harlan Patrick wouldn't connect her child with that last visit to Los Piños.

It meant sneaking in and out of concert halls and clubs, using hotel back doors and heavily tinted limo windows, but the worst of it was over. One more month, mostly in small towns and out-of-the-way clubs to which she owed a debt, and they'd be home again. She could drop out of sight completely there, live in seclusion with her daughter. Just thinking of it was enough to have her sighing with relief.

They were halfway down the hall when Val muttered a curse. "I left that package of autographed pictures in the office. Wait for me at the back door, and I'll check the alley before you go out."

It was an established routine. When Laurie had the baby with her, Val always preceded her to make sure the coast was clear,

that there were no paparazzi or overly zealous fans lurking in the shadows. Sometimes it was Val who carried Amy Lynn tucked in her arms as if the baby were her own.

Tonight, though, Laurie was thinking only of crawling into the back of the limo, resting her aching head against the smooth-as-butter leather and catching a ten-minute nap on the way back to the hotel. That was how bad it had gotten. Even ten minutes of uninterrupted sleep sounded heavenly.

She was so anxious to reach the car and settle in that she opened the door of the auditorium without waiting for Val. The instant she did, a photographer's flashbulb exploded in her face. Panic had her whirling to shield the baby, but she knew in her heart it was too late. The man had had a clear shot in that instant before she'd been aware of his presence and time to click off a few more shots while she'd been temporarily blinded by the first brilliant flash of light.

"Oh, God, no," she murmured, imagining the picture splashed across the front of every tabloid in the country. Tears slid down her cheeks even as Val exited the building, saw what was happening and took off after the photographer with fire in her eyes.

To Laurie's relief, Val caught him at the end of the alley, but all of her pleading and cajoling could not make him relinquish the prized roll of film. Nor could the swift kick she aimed at his shin or the knee she tried to place deftly in his groin, but Laurie had to admire her courage in trying. She vowed to give

the woman a raise for going way above the call of duty, even if her efforts had failed.

Defeated, Val returned to the limo. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I should have checked the alley."

"It's not your fault," Laurie reassured her wearily. "I should have waited. I was just so tired."

"Maybe he was just some local guy and the picture won't make it beyond here," Val suggested hopefully.

"Ever heard of wire services?" Laurie inquired, wishing she could believe Val, but knowing that she was doomed. Harlan Patrick was going to see the picture. Sooner or later someone would bring it to his attention, and then, no matter what conclusion he reached when he saw it, it was going to rip his heart in two.

Then, she thought with a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, all hell was going to break loose. It was just a matter of time.

* * *

"I say we buy up all the copies in town and burn them," Sharon Lynn said vehemently, tossing the offending tabloid onto her parents' kitchen table. "If Harlan Patrick sees this, he's going to freak out."

This was a half-page picture of country-music superstar Laurie Jensen with "Her Secret Love Child."

"He's finally over her," Sharon Lynn said of her brother. "He's not even playing her songs on the new jukebox down at Dolan's

anymore.”

“No, now he plays them on that boom box he carries with him everywhere he goes,” her mother said. “We have to show it to him. Maybe this will finally close that chapter in his life. He’ll have to move on once he sees she has a child.”

Harlan Patrick stood outside the kitchen door and listened to the whole conversation. His stomach had clenched and his hand had stilled on the screen door the instant he’d realized the topic. The merest mention of Laurie was all it took to get his heart to thudding dully and his forehead to break out in a cold sweat.

How the hell was he supposed to get over Laurie when she was a part of him, as vital to him as breathing? Losing her had made him question everything, every choice he’d made, even his commitment to the family ranch. There were times when the weight of the family’s expectations and his sense of his own destiny almost combined to crush him.

With his grandfather in his eighties and his father, Cody, getting older, the fate of White Pines was all but his. Ranching was in his blood; it defined who he was, but that didn’t make it any less of a burden at times. Day in, day out, 365 days a year, the demands were unceasing. The damned ranch was what stood between him and Laurie, and yet, when the chips had been down, the ranch was what he’d chosen, just as surely as she’d chosen her music over him.

His heritage over his heart. It was pitiful enough to be the heartbreaking theme of a country-music megahit. He

was surprised Laurie hadn't written it herself. She'd turned everything else they'd shared into top-ten hits. There was something downright eerie and irritating about hearing his life played out on the radio.

Thinking back, he realized that maybe he'd made the decisions he had because he hadn't believed for a minute that she'd really leave. Despite repeated warnings from his sister, his cousin Justin, his grandfather, just about everyone, he'd trusted that their love was stronger than anything else on earth. By the time he'd recognized his mistake, it was too late. Laurie had been gone and with her, his soul.

Ironically he'd gotten another chance a little over a year ago, but his pride had kicked in with a vengeance and he'd watched her run out on him all over again. Pride, as his granddaddy had told him more than once, made a mighty cold bedmate. Even knowing the truth of that, he still hadn't been able to make himself go after her. He'd called for a while, but when those calls hadn't been returned, he'd cursed her every which way and given up.

Okay, so he was a damned fool. He admitted it. She'd made things clear enough the last time he'd seen her. She'd told him flat out that she still loved him, just not enough to come home and be his wife. He'd accepted her decision. What choice did he have? He couldn't go chasing halfway around the world to be by her side, could he? What was he supposed to do? Run White Pines long-distance?

But he hadn't forgotten about her, not for a single second. Now she had a child? He didn't believe it, couldn't believe that some other man had shared her bed, not when she'd so fiercely declared that she was still in love with him. Theirs simply wasn't the kind of love that died overnight, no matter how badly they'd mistreated each other. No one had replaced her in his heart or even in his bed. He'd managed to convince himself that she'd do the same. Apparently that was just one on a whole long list of delusions he'd held about Laurie.

He yanked open the screen door, then let it slam behind him as he stared into two shocked, guilty faces. "Let me see it," he demanded, his voice deadly calm.

Sharon Lynn moved between him and the table, blocking his view of the paper. "Forget about it," she said. "Forget about her."

He watched as her sense of indignation and family loyalty kicked in and loved her for it. His big sister had a mile-wide protective streak. All of the Adamses did.

"Laurie Jensen isn't worth one more second of your time," Sharon Lynn declared. "She's never been any good for you, and this proves it."

"I know what you're trying to do, sis, but you and I both know that Laurie is the only woman for me."

Sharon Lynn blushed. "Okay, I'm sorry. It just makes me so mad the way she keeps walking out on you."

He decided not to remind her that that was only half of the story. The first time Laurie had gone, Sharon Lynn had actually

taken her side, accused him of being a short-sighted jerk for not going after her, for not trying harder to become a part of her new life, maybe using his business degree to become her manager or something. When Laurie had gone this last time, Sharon Lynn had positioned herself staunchly behind him. Rarely did a kind word about Laurie cross her lips. The rest of his family tried never to mention her at all.

He scowled at Sharon Lynn. "Just hand over the paper, okay?"

His sister wasn't quite finished. Once she got wound up, it was impossible to slow her down. She gave him defiant look. "You have to forget about her, Harlan Patrick. Move on. There are a zillion women in Texas who'd love to be with you. Pick one of them, one who'll treat you right instead of running out on everything you have to offer."

"Easier said than done," he said.

He ought to know. He'd cut a wide swath through the available women in three or four counties after Laurie had left the first time. He hadn't had more than a date or two with any of them then and he hadn't bothered to call even one of them after Laurie had left this last time. He'd accepted the possibility that no one would ever measure up.

"Sis, I appreciate your loyalty. I really do," he assured her, then glared. "Now let me see the blasted paper, unless you'd prefer to have me drive all the way into town to pick one up. Do you want me to be standing in the supermarket with half the town gawking at me when I read it? That ought to keep the gossips

busy for a while.”

His mother, who'd been letting the two of them battle it out up until now, sighed. “Let him see it, Sharon Lynn. The horse is out of the barn anyway.”

His sister handed him the paper with obvious reluctance. The front page was folded in two. He opened it slowly, regretting that he had even his mother and sister as his audience.

The sight of Laurie, all done up in her fancy, rhinestone-studded cowgirl stage costume, brought his pulse skidding to a halt. No matter how many times he saw her picture, he never got over the wonder of her beauty—the thick chestnut-colored hair, the dare-you curve of her smile, the sparkle in her eyes. Despite the fancy getup, there was no artifice about her. She didn't need a lot of makeup to enhance what nature had given her.

He'd pretty much stopped looking at these rags, because the sight of her always had the same effect and he figured sooner or later it was going to turn deadly. How many times could a man's heart grind to a halt before it stopped pumping altogether?

This time, though, the photographer hadn't done her justice. There was no glint in her eyes, no smile on her lips. He'd caught her in an instant of stunned disbelief, one hand held up, futilely trying to block the lens, while she turned to try to shield the baby in her arms.

She'd been too slow. The baby was in perfect focus, round faced, smiling, with a halo of soft brown curls and blue, blue eyes sparkling with pure devilment. Adams eyes, Harlan Patrick

thought at once, unmistakably Adams eyes. There was a whole mantle full of baby pictures just like this up at Grandpa Harlan's. He was surprised his mother and Sharon Lynn hadn't guessed the truth—but then they hadn't known about that last meeting—the one where he lost his head and made love to her one last time.

This time it wasn't love or even lust that kicked his pulse into overdrive. It was fury. The suspicion that had been nagging at him from the moment he'd heard his mother and Sharon Lynn talking was all but confirmed. Laurie Jensen had had his baby and kept it from him. Betrayal cut through him like a lance. He was surprised he wasn't bleeding from the wound.

In less than an instant, fury was replaced by icy resolve. He whirled around and without a word went out the way he'd come in, slamming the door behind him, the tabloid crushed in his hand.

"Oh, my God," Sharon Lynn murmured. "Did you see his face?"

"I saw," his mother said, racing out the door after him. "Harlan Patrick, get back here!"

He ignored the command and headed straight for his pickup. A half hour later he was at the airstrip with Uncle Jordan's corporate jet fired up and waiting for him.

He was going after Laurie Jensen and his baby and when he found them, there was going to be hell to pay.

Chapter Two

Laurie had been heartsick ever since her manager had shown her the tabloid a week after that fateful night outside a Kansas concert hall. From that moment on she had prayed over and over that Harlan Patrick would never see it. Whether he recognized the baby as his or not, the picture was going to break his heart. She'd vowed the last time she'd seen him not to ever do anything to hurt him again. As it was, she'd broken his heart more times than she could count.

She'd tried to prepare for the possibility that her prayers wouldn't be heard. She'd warned everyone in her agent's office that her schedule was not to be given to anyone, no matter what name they gave, no matter what ruse they used. She had described Harlan Patrick to Nick's secretary from his thick, sun-streaked hair, to his laser blue eyes and angled cheekbones.

"And you *don't* want this man to find you?" the woman had said incredulously. "Are you nuts?"

"There are those who'd say I am," she agreed. "And, Ruby, let me know the instant he shows up, okay? I need to know what kind of mood he's in."

"Fit to be tied would be my guess," Ruby said bluntly. "Can't say I blame him, either. It's a hell of a way to find out you're a daddy."

"Ruby," Laurie protested.

“Okay, okay, I’m just the hired help around here. You don’t want the man to find you, I’ll make sure the man doesn’t find you, at least not with any help from me. Just don’t forget, honey, you’re the kind of woman who tends to make news, especially in this business. *Entertainment Tonight*’s scheduled to shoot that club date in Montana. It’s way too late to back out. Nick would have a cow. He worked like crazy to get it set up.”

“It won’t matter. By the time it airs, I’ll be on the road again. With any sort of luck at all, Harlan Patrick will be one step behind me.”

“Maybe you ought to slow down and let him catch up,” Ruby suggested one more time. “Have it out and get it over with. Hiding’s no good, not in your profession. This was bound to happen sooner or later. And, forgive me for saying it, but that little girl of yours has a right to know her daddy. This plan of yours to keep ’em apart seems a tad selfish to me.”

Laurie winced. Ruby was young, but she had terrific common sense and a mile-wide streak of decency. A part of Laurie wanted to follow her advice, but another part wasn’t at all sure she could cope with one more battle with Harlan Patrick, not with the stakes as high as they were.

“I know,” Laurie conceded. “But I can’t deal with him yet. I just can’t. You’ll see what I mean if he shows up there. It’s like trying to talk sense with a bulldozer that’s rattling toward you in first gear.”

Of course, she consoled herself, there was always the outside

chance that Harlan Patrick had never even seen the tabloid. Maybe he hadn't been anywhere near a supermarket checkout stand. Maybe the entire shipment to Los Piños had been lost in transit. Maybe the delivery truck had caught fire. Maybe...

Dammit, she had to know. She had to find out if he'd seen it and what his reaction had been. She had to be prepared, in case he was coming after her. For all of her attempts to cover her tracks, she knew Ruby was right. If Harlan Patrick wanted to find her badly enough, he could. Ruby and Nick could only stall him for so long. Any private eye worth his license could pinpoint her location quicker than that photographer had snapped her picture. The only real question was whether Harlan Patrick was furious enough to come chasing after her or so hurt he'd written her off once and for all. If he'd recognized that baby as his, she was pretty sure which it would be. He'd be mowing down any obstacle in his path to get to her.

She could call her mother, but her mom almost never crossed paths with Harlan Patrick's family. She could call Sharon Lynn, but after this last visit, Harlan Patrick's protective older sister had all but written her off. Sharon Lynn had told her more than once that she was a selfish fool for running off and leaving the best man in the whole state of Texas pining after her. His parents had never echoed the same sentiments in so many words, but they clearly hadn't been her biggest fans. When she'd come back this last time, they'd regarded her with suspicion at worst, caution at best. The attitude had hurt, because once they'd considered her

another daughter.

That left his grandfather. Harlan Adams was a wise man, a fair man. He'd protect his family with his dying breath, but he also had the ability to see that there was more than one side to most stories. He'd always treated Laurie with kindness, and there'd been no judgment in his eyes when she'd left yet again, only sorrow. He would tell her what she needed to know and he wouldn't pull any punches.

It took her most of the day to work up the courage to call White Pines. She told herself it was because she wasn't likely to find Harlan Adams at home much before nightfall. Despite his age, he still worked the ranch as best he could. And when his aches kept him off a horse, he was busy meddling in everyone's lives.

The truth, though, was that she was scared to hear whatever he had to say, even more afraid that this time he wouldn't be so kind at all if he thought she had betrayed his grandson.

She shouldn't have worried. Either he didn't know about the baby or he'd taken it in stride. At any rate, he greeted her with his usual exuberance.

"Laurie, darlin' girl, how are you? Pretty as ever, I know, because I see your picture in the paper and on TV all the time. You still singing up a storm?"

"I'm busier than ever," she told him. "I'm right in the middle of a concert tour now. I won't be back in Nashville for another month." She figured it wouldn't hurt to reiterate that, in case the

conversation was repeated to Harlan Patrick. Maybe he'd stay away from Nashville if he knew she wouldn't be there.

"And you enjoy all this wandering around, instead of taking the time to sit a spell in one place?" Harlan Adams asked.

"Most of the time," she admitted. "It's part of the job."

"Tell me about the next album. You finished it yet?"

"No. I haven't even started. This one's only been out a couple of months now. I probably won't get back into the studio until a few months after I get back to Nashville. It's a good thing, too. I've been scribbling down a few things, but I still haven't settled on the last two songs."

"You still writing them all yourself?"

"Most of them."

"You always had a way with words. I still remember that song you wrote and sang for me when I turned eighty. Not a dry eye in the place when you were done singing. I knew then you were going to be a superstar."

"That's more than I knew then."

Silence fell, and it was Harlan who finally broke it when Laurie couldn't find the words she needed.

"So, darlin' girl, you just calling to say hi, or is something on your mind?" There was a sly, knowing tone to his voice.

Just say it, she instructed herself firmly, then swallowed hard. "Actually, well, I was wondering about Harlan Patrick. He's been on my mind a lot lately."

"I see."

Clearly he didn't intend to give away a thing without her asking a direct question. "How's he doing?" she asked finally.

"Still misses you, if that's what you're asking. I suspect he always will. Never seen a man as lovesick as he was from the minute you left town."

That wasn't what she'd been asking, but in some tiny corner of her heart, she was glad to hear that he hadn't forgotten her. Talk about conflicting emotions. Her life was riddled with them.

"You've seen him in the last couple of days?" she asked, broaching the subject of his whereabouts cautiously.

Harlan hesitated. "Now that you mention it, his daddy did say that the boy had taken off unexpectedly. Never did mention what it was all about, though. Business, I suppose. You want me to have him call you when he gets back?"

Laurie sighed heavily. She had a feeling there would be no need for that. The timing of his unexplained departure had to be more than coincidence. If she knew Harlan Patrick, she'd be seeing him any day now, as soon as he could get someone to give him her concert itinerary.

"That's okay," she said, then added quietly, "thank you."

"Thanks for what?"

"For not hating me."

"Oh, darlin' girl, I could never hate you," he said, his tone sympathetic. "There was a time when you were practically family. As far as I'm concerned, you're as good as that now."

"But I brought so much pain into Harlan Patrick's life."

“And so much joy, too,” he reminded her. “Don’t forget that. Sometimes the best you can hope for in life is that it all evens out in the end. You take good care of yourself and come see me next time you’re home. I’ll get the piano tuned, and we’ll have an old-fashioned sing-along. I can’t carry a tune worth a hoot, but it’ll be fun all the same.”

“I will,” she promised. “Give Janet my love, too, will you?”

“Of course I will. You take good care of yourself, Laurie. Don’t forget all the folks back here who love you.”

As if I could, she thought, but didn’t say. “Goodbye, Grandpa Harlan. I miss you.”

Only after she’d hung up did she realize there were tears streaming down her cheeks. For the first time in more than six years, she realized just how much she missed home. And when she thought of it, she didn’t remember the little house in which she’d grown up, didn’t even think of her mother, though she loved her dearly. No, she remembered White Pines and the close-knit Adamses, who back then had been more than willing to accept her as one of their own.

And she remembered Amy Lynn’s daddy and the way she’d always loved him.

* * *

He might as well have been traveling in a foreign country, Harlan Patrick thought on his first day in Nashville. He’d taken off without thinking, without the slightest clue of how to go about tracing a woman who didn’t want to be found.

On the flight, which he'd piloted himself, he'd had plenty of time to try to formulate a plan, but images of Laurie and that baby had pretty much wiped out logic. All he'd been able to feel was some sort of blind rage. Aside from a friendly tussle or two with his cousins growing up, he wasn't prone to violence, but for the first time in his life he felt himself capable of it. Not that he'd have laid a hand on Laurie, but he couldn't swear that her furniture would be safe. Smashing a few vases and chairs might improve his mood considerably.

Then again, it probably wouldn't. Satisfaction probably couldn't be had that easily.

After landing, he rented a car and drove into downtown. He found a hotel smack in the center of things and dragged out a phone book. It was then that he realized just how little he really knew about Laurie's life in the past few years. An awful lot of it had been played out in public, of course, but that wasn't the part that would help him now.

"Well, damn," he muttered staring at the Yellow Pages and trying to figure out which talent representative or which recording studio to call. He couldn't even remember which record label produced her albums, even though he had CDs of every single one of them. It was hard enough listening to her songs without learning every little detail of the life that had stolen her from him.

He plucked a scrap of paper out of his pocket and glanced at the number, then dialed her house first, though he recognized it

was a long shot. She was on the road and she'd told him that she'd never gotten around to hiring a housekeeper because she wasn't comfortable with somebody else doing cleaning and cooking she was perfectly capable of doing for herself.

When no one answered at the house, he searched his memory for some offhand reference she'd made to the new people in her life. Unfortunately, though, the few days they'd had together just over a year ago hadn't been spent doing a lot of talking, at least not about the things that hadn't mattered. That baby was living evidence that they'd spent most of the time in bed, remembering just how good it felt to be in each other's arms.

"Okay, Harlan Patrick, think," he muttered under his breath.

For all of its skyscrapers and new construction, Nashville was still a small Southern town in some ways. Surely the music industry was tight-knit enough that everyone would know everybody else's business. He picked a talent agency at random and dialed.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said to the drawling woman who answered. There was enough sugary sweetness in her voice to make him feel right at home with a little flirting. He had her laughing in a matter of seconds.

"You are sooo bad," she said in response to his teasing. "Now, tell me what I can do for you."

"Actually I've got some business to do with Laurie Jensen. Any idea how I can get in touch with her?"

"Laurie Jensen?" she repeated, her voice a degree or two

cooler. "I'm sorry. We don't represent Miss Jensen."

"Could you tell me who does?"

"What kind of business did you say you were in?" she asked. This time her tone was downright chilly.

"I didn't, darlin', but it's an ad campaign. We were hoping to get her to do the spots for us."

"I see," she said. "Well, maybe you ought to have your ad agency contact her people. That's the way it works."

Harlan Patrick tried to hold on to his patience. "Don't you see, sugar, that's the problem. I don't know her people."

"Any reputable ad agency will," she said, and hung up in his ear.

Harlan Patrick stared at the phone, stunned. Then he sighed ruefully. Obviously he wasn't the first person to try a ruse to get to a Nashville superstar. He resigned himself to an afternoon spent working his way through the phone listings.

He didn't waste time trying to wrangle information from unwilling receptionists. The minute he discovered the agency didn't represent Laurie, he moved on to the next. It was after six when he finally struck paydirt—or thought he had.

"Nick Sanducci's office."

"Yes. I'm trying to arrange a booking for Laurie Jensen. Can you help me?"

"Who are you with, sir?"

"Does Mr. Sanducci represent Ms. Jensen?"

"He does, but—"

“Thank you.” He hung up and grabbed his hat. Clutching the page from the phone book and scribbled directions from the hotel desk clerk, he drove to a quiet street that looked more residential than commercial. A block or so from the address for Sanducci’s office, he noted the discreet signs on the lawns of modest-sized homes that appeared to have been built around the turn of the century. Law offices, talent agencies, even a recording studio had been tucked away here before skyscrapers had lured most of the business into downtown.

Harlan Patrick pulled into a circular driveway just as a fancy sports car shot out the other side. One car remained in front of the house, a minivan with a child’s seat in the back and toys scattered on the floor. He doubted it belonged to Mr. Nick Sanducci.

He strolled through the front door and wandered into a reception room that had obviously once been the house’s living room. The walls were decorated with gold records and photos of a half dozen of the hottest names in country music, including a blowup of Laurie that could make a man’s knees weak. That wall of photos and records was the only testament to the nature of Mr. Sanducci’s business, however.

Harlan Patrick had to admit the man had excellent taste. The place was crammed with exquisite, expensive antiques. There were some just as valuable up in Grandpa Harlan’s attic, where they’d been stored after Janet had gone through and turned White Pines from a hands-off showplace into a home.

The reception desk was neat as a pin and, with no one seated

at the chair behind it, more temptation than he could resist. He edged a little closer, noting that the desk belonged to one Ruby Steel, according to the nameplate that was half-buried in a stack of papers.

He surveyed the rest of the desk with interest. That big old Rolodex probably had phone numbers on it that could do him a whole lot of good. And that bulging desk calendar probably contained all sorts of concert dates, including Laurie's.

He was about to make a grab for it when a lazy, sultry voice inquired with just a touch of frost, "Can I help you?"

He turned slowly and offered the sort of grin that had gotten him out of many a scrape over the years, at least if there was a female involved. Ruby was young enough to look susceptible, but her frown never wavered. Obviously a woman who took her last name—Steel—to heart.

"Hey, darlin', I was just wondering where you'd gone off to."

"And you thought you'd find me under the desk?" She gave him a thorough once-over that could have served her well at a police lineup. "Let me guess. You're the one who called wanting to book Laurie Jensen."

He could have lied, probably should have, but something told him the truth would get him what he needed a whole lot faster.

"You've got a good ear for voices, sugar."

"And I've got the good sense not to go giving out information to strangers," she said in a tone that warned him not to waste his time trying to wheedle anything out of her.

Harlan Patrick was undaunted. He pretended he hadn't been close enough to discover the nameplate and asked, "What's your name, sugar?"

"My name's Ruby, cowboy, and there's no need telling me yours, because it doesn't matter. I can't help you."

His gaze narrowed at that. Something told him that Laurie had given this woman very clear and specific instructions where he was concerned.

"Now, why is that? Aren't you in the business of getting work for your clients?"

"Nick is. My job is protecting them."

"Then maybe I ought to talk to Nick."

"You can't. He's gone."

The fancy sports car, Harlan Patrick concluded. "When will he be back?"

"Hard to say. Nick's unpredictable."

"Tonight?"

"I doubt it."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Possibly. Then again, he could get a call from one of his clients and have to take off in the middle of the night."

Harlan Patrick hid a grin. Ruby was tough, all right. "How often does that happen?"

"You'd be surprised."

"I don't suppose you'd like to go out for a drink?"

She waved her left hand under his nose. A wedding ring and

diamond flashed past. "I don't think so, cowboy. And you could get me drunk as a skunk and I still wouldn't tell you how to find Laurie."

"Because she told you not to," he guessed aloud.

Ruby hesitated for just an instant, then nodded. "Because she told me not to and because I protect the privacy of all our clients. I value their trust."

"What if I told you I was her old childhood sweetheart?"

"I'd ask how come she left you behind if you were all that special."

The barb hit its mark. "Now, darlin', that is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question." He regarded her thoughtfully. "You know, don't you?"

For the first time, little Miss Ruby squirmed. "Know what?"

"That I'm the daddy of that baby of hers."

"I don't know any such thing," she retorted, but there was a telltale flush in her cheeks.

He kept right on. "And you don't believe that a daddy should be separated from his child, do you, Ruby?" He recalled the baby seat in the van outside. "You're a mama yourself. You disapprove of what Laurie's done to me. I could see it in the way the corners of your mouth turned down when I mentioned that baby."

She ducked her head. "It doesn't matter what I think."

"Because your duty's to Laurie."

Her chin came up, and she shot a defiant look straight at him. "Exactly."

They stood there, facing each other, neither of them saying a word, until finally Harlan Patrick sighed.

“Would it matter if I told you I love her?”

Her expression softened. “It might to me, but I’m not the one who needs convincing, am I?”

He grinned. “No, but you are the one who stands between me and her.”

She grinned back. “You are a sneaky, persistent devil—I’ll give you that.”

Harlan Patrick felt a faint stirring of hope. “Will you help me, Ruby?”

Still smiling, she looked him straight in the eye and said, “No. Now, scoot along out of here, cowboy. I’m closing for the day.”

“I’ll be back in the morning,” he promised, taking the defeat with good grace. Ranting and raving wouldn’t work with a woman like Ruby, but he had a hunch that he could wear her down with charm and a few more reminiscences about the old days he’d shared with Laurie.

“Suit yourself, but the answer won’t be one bit different tomorrow.”

“We’ll see,” he said, and tipped his hat. “It’s been my pleasure, darlin’.”

She gave him a stern, no-nonsense look. “I can’t imagine why. You look like a man who’s all too used to getting his own way.”

He winked. “I am. That’s why it’s fascinating to run into a worthy challenge every now and again.”

He slipped out the door before she could respond to that. He drove down the block and parked around the corner. He didn't doubt for an instant that Ruby would be on the phone to Laurie the moment he was out of sight.

And the moment Ruby was gone for the night, he intended to sneak back into the office, punch Redial and discover for himself exactly where Laurie Jensen was holed up with his baby girl.

Chapter Three

Going back into Nick Sanducci's office and checking the phone had been a good idea. Maybe even a great idea, Harlan Patrick thought ruefully. Unfortunately Ruby was either on to him and hadn't used the office phone to call Laurie or had simply made another call after that. He'd managed to slip back into the building easily enough—the locks were downright pitiful—but when he'd pressed the Redial button, a very cranky man had growled hello, then slammed the phone down when Harlan Patrick had been too stunned and disappointed to speak.

His reaction proved what a lousy detective he'd make. Only afterward had he considered all the possible explanations for who that man might have been. It could have been someone answering for Laurie herself. Or it could have been her agent, Nick Sanducci, he concluded belatedly, regretting his silence. But even if it was the illustrious, high-powered agent, he was clearly in no mood to indulge Harlan Patrick's request for information about Laurie. He resigned himself to waiting for morning and another round with Ruby.

Back in his hotel room after a steak dinner that had tasted like sawdust, he was able to think rationally. He recognized that he ought to be grateful for the delay. In her own way Laurie was every bit as stubborn as he was—to say nothing of unpredictable. She had the financial wherewithal nowadays to simply disappear,

taking his daughter with her. Obviously, confronting her when he was ready to commit mayhem was no way to get what he wanted.

Whatever that was, he amended with a sigh. It occurred to him that he ought to figure that much out at least before coming face-to-face with the woman who generally rendered him tongue-tied and weak-kneed.

Did he just want to see his child? Did he want to exact revenge on Laurie for deceiving him? Or did he want what he'd always wanted, to take both of them home with him, to have a family with Laurie Jensen?

One thing for certain—he needed to figure all that out before he blasted his way back into her life. He needed to be seeing things clearly and thinking straight, or she'd waltz right out of his life one more time. Something told him this was their very last chance to get it right.

He spent two frustrating days thinking about Laurie, the baby and their future, while trying to convince Ruby to divulge Laurie's itinerary to him. Nick proved as elusive as a stray calf loose on ten thousand acres of pastureland, but Ruby was mellowing. Harlan Patrick had been plying her with chocolate-covered doughnuts and compliments and he was pretty sure she was weakening. She'd actually tossed a handful of newspaper clippings at him that morning and told him to figure out Laurie's whereabouts for himself.

"You're a clever man. See what you can make of these," she'd challenged.

There was plenty of information to be had in those clippings, bits of rave reviews, comments on her new album's fast rise in the music charts. It was plain that Laurie Jensen was hot news in Nashville. The only trouble was that that news was a day too late to help him find her. By the time Ruby handed over the clippings, even the most recent ones, Laurie was already moving on.

He was back at the agent's office for the third straight day, when a teenager who was working part-time finally took pity on him and slipped him a copy of the concert schedule. He had a feeling Ruby had looked the other way—or maybe even instigated it, but he was careful not to let on what he thought. Ruby plainly felt her integrity was on the line, but just as plainly she felt that Laurie's baby deserved to have a daddy in her life. She'd all but admitted that to him on several occasions.

Clutching the itinerary in his hand, he grabbed his bag from the hotel and headed for the airport, where once again Jordan's jet was fueled up and waiting. Laurie was scheduled for a stop in Montana, then a hop over to Wyoming, a jog back to Montana, then after a two-day break, the Ohio State Fairgrounds. Columbus was closest, but he didn't want to wait another minute, much less several days. Too much time had been wasted already. He calculated the flying time and figured he could make that first Montana stop in time for her closing set.

An icy calm settled over him as he flew, but as he drove to the country-western bar where she was singing, an old, familiar sense of anticipation began to build. It was doggone irritating

that she could still have that effect on him, especially under these circumstances when he very much wanted to wring her neck. His pulse was zipping with lust, not adrenaline.

He found the bar after a few wrong turns. It was bigger than some he'd seen, but smaller than he'd expected a star on the rise to be playing. In fact, the End of the Road back in Garden City had been a step above this place. He found that irksome, too. She could have stayed in Texas and done this well for herself.

Then he recalled what he'd read in one of the clippings, that part of this tour had been arranged to settle old debts to club owners who'd given her a break. Typical of Laurie. She was loyal and generous. If it hadn't been for him, she'd probably have played the End of the Road on this tour as well. If he'd had a lick of sense or any foresight, he'd have had the owner ask and then Laurie could have come to him, instead of the other way around. Of course, because of the baby, she probably wouldn't have set foot near the place. But that was water under the bridge anyway. He was here now, and Laurie was only a hundred yards away or less.

With the bar's front door ajar on the warm night, the sound of her voice washed over him as he walked from the parking lot toward the neon-lit building. She had the kind of voice that made a man think of sin, no matter how innocent the words. It was low and sultry and filled with magic.

How many nights had he lain awake remembering the whisper of that voice in his ear? How many days had he played her albums

as he worked around the ranch? Enough that he and most of the hands knew the lyrics of her songs by heart. One daring newcomer, who didn't know their history, had made a suggestive remark about Laurie, only to have Harlan Patrick yank him out of his saddle and scare him half to death before reason kicked in.

Heaven knew, the woman could sing. He grabbed hold of the door and braced himself to enter, reminding himself to stay calm no matter what. Only after he walked inside the bar did he realize that what he'd heard had come from a jukebox, while the impatient audience waited for the second set to begin. Harlan Patrick slipped into the shadows in the back, ordered a beer and waited.

A few minutes later Laurie emerged amid a flash of red, white and blue strobe lights, the beat of the song fast and hard and upbeat. The wall-to-wall crowd was on its feet at once, and the whole place began to rock with the sound of her music and wild applause. She kept up the fever pitch through one song, then two, then a third. Just when Harlan Patrick was sure half the room was going to pass out from the frenzy, she turned the tempo down and had them swaying quietly to a tune so sad and soul weary, he almost shed a tear or two himself.

A cynic might have said she was manipulative. A critic would have said she had the crowd in the palm of her hand. Harlan Patrick simply wondered at the mixed emotions he felt listening to the woman he loved captivate a whole roomful of strangers. He'd had her to himself for so many years. Was that the real

problem, that he didn't want to share her with the world? Was it selfishness, as much as cussedness, that had made him refuse to search harder for a compromise?

The thought that possessiveness might be the root of their troubles made him too uncomfortable to stay in the room a moment longer. While the show went on, he slipped out the door and made his way to the club's back entrance, which was also standing open to permit the night's breeze to drift inside the overheated club.

Harlan Patrick had no trouble slipping past the bulky, fiftyish guard. The man was too busy gazing at the woman on stage, his foot tapping to the beat of her song, a smile on his lips and a yearning in his eyes. That was when Harlan Patrick realized that part of Laurie's success was her ability to touch hearts and inspire dreams, even the impossible ones.

The backstage area was cramped, with barely enough room for an office, a storeroom and one remaining room that had to be Laurie's dressing room. He opened the door, saw the tumble of clothes and cosmetics and smiled for the first time in ages. Laurie never had been much for picking up after herself.

It was a no-frills dressing room, with a metal rod for a clothes rack and bare bulbs around a square mirror. The chair in front of the dressing table was molded plastic, but the bouquet of flowers beside the scattered makeup was lavish enough for the biggest superstar.

While he waited, he tidied up, folding this, hanging that on

the bare metal rod stuck in an alcove. He lingered over a scrap of lace and prayed to heaven no man had ever seen her wearing it. He'd have to rip his eyes out. Finally he tucked the panties into the suitcase sitting on the floor in the corner and pulled out the room's only other chair—a straight-backed monstrosity with a seat covered in tattered red plastic. He turned it around until he could straddle it and face the door.

He heard the last refrain of the encore die down, then the thunder of applause, then the sound of laughter in the corridor and boots on the hardwood floor outside the door. His pulse thundered as loudly as a summer storm.

The door swung open and there she was, pretty as ever, with her color high and her long, chestnut brown hair mussed and glistening with glints of gold and damp with perspiration. He'd seen her looking just like that after sex, only without so many clothes on.

Her mouth formed a soft “oh” of stunned dismay. The color washed out of her cheeks, and for just an instant he thought she might faint, but Laurie was made of tougher stuff than that. She squared her shoulders and met his gaze evenly.

“Hey, darlin’!” Harlan Patrick said in his friendliest tone. “Surprised to see me?”

* * *

Laurie's pulse was racing so fast, she was certain she was only a beat or two shy of a medical emergency. She'd guessed Harlan Patrick would hunt her down—*known* he was coming, thanks

to Ruby's warning call—but seeing him here, so at home in her dressing room, had caught her off guard.

How many times had she found him waiting for her just like this in the old days? How many times had she come offstage, giddy with excitement, and rushed into his waiting arms to be twirled around until her head spun? Of course, there was no crooked grin tonight and his arms were crossed along the back of that pitiful chair, not waiting to catch her up in an exuberant hug.

Lordy, he was gorgeous. Under other circumstances her pulse would have been scrambling from pure desire, rather than panic. The Adams genes were the best in Texas, maybe the best on earth. Even travel weary, Harlan Patrick was pure male, from that angled jaw to his broad shoulders and right on down to the tips of his dusty boots. The sensual curve of his mouth was a reminder of deep, hot kisses that could rock her to her soul.

But the look on his face, so cool and neutral and composed, was worrisome. Harlan Patrick's emotions were usually right out there for anyone to see. Only when she looked into his eyes did she detect the fire of complete and total fury. That's when she knew that not only had he seen the tabloid, but he'd also realized that Amy Lynn was his.

That left her with a quandary. She could fold right now and throw herself on his mercy or she could stand up to him the way she'd been doing since their first playground scuffle so many years ago. Her first rule in dealing with him had always been to get the upper hand and hang on for dear life. It was the only way

she knew to deal with a steamroller.

“How did you get in here?” she demanded, every bit the haughty superstar.

“Unfortunately for you, the security guard’s a fan. He never even noticed me. Be glad I wasn’t a stalker, sugar, or you’d be in a heap of trouble.”

She had a feeling in his own way, Harlan Patrick was every bit as dangerous as any stranger about now. “I could have the guard in here in a flash if you start stirring up trouble,” she threatened. “Nobody gets backstage without a pass, and Chester has a very jittery trigger finger.”

“Now, darlin’, why would I want to stir up trouble for you?” he asked in a patient tone belied by that hard glint in his eyes.

She refused to be taken in by the deceptively mild question. Skepticism lacing her voice, she asked, “Then this is purely a social call? You just happened to be in Montana and thought you’d drop by to catch the show? We’re just a couple of old friends getting together to catch up?”

“Could be.”

“Why don’t I believe that for a minute?”

“Guilt, maybe?”

He looked her over so thoroughly, so knowingly, that it took everything in her not to bolt or spill her guts, pouring out the whole story behind her decision to keep Amy Lynn a secret from him. She forced herself to wait him out.

“So, tell me, Laurie,” he began eventually, “anything new in

your life?"

Oh, he knew, all right, she thought, listening to this cat-and-mouse game of his. She could have strung him along for another minute or two, maybe more, but why bother? Now that he'd found her, they were going to hash this out sooner or later. Hopefully they could get it over with right here in her dressing room. It was a hell of a lot better than having it out at the hotel, where Amy Lynn was already fast asleep with Val watching over her.

She looked him straight in the eye and forced his hand. "Come on, Harlan Patrick, spit it out. You saw the tabloid, didn't you?"

His gaze locked with hers. "I did."

There was that neutral tone again. It was maddening. "And?" she prodded.

"And I want to know why the hell you kept my daughter a secret from me?"

There was the blast of temper she'd been expecting, the confirmation that he'd guessed it all. Laurie didn't bother trying to deny the truth. In fact, she was glad it was finally out in the open. The secret had been weighing her down for months now, ever since the home pregnancy test she'd taken had turned out positive. She hadn't been able to go near Los Piños so her mama could see the baby for fear of Harlan Patrick finding out that she'd deceived him. At last she could put all of that behind her. She told herself she should be grateful, but all she felt was a gut-wrenching sense of fear.

"I made a choice," she told him quietly. "You and I had said our goodbyes. We had finally admitted once and for all that it wouldn't work with me being on the road all the time and you chained to that ranch you love so much. How could I tell you that there was a baby on the way?"

"How could you not tell me?" he countered in that same patient, lethal tone. "Did you think for one second I wouldn't want to know, that I didn't deserve to know?"

"No, of course not, but—"

He was on his feet now, pacing, agitation replacing patience and calm.

"But nothing," he said, whirling on her.

He grabbed her arms, clearly fighting the urge to shake her. With any other man she might have been afraid of the look in his eyes, but she knew Harlan Patrick as well as she knew any human on earth. There wasn't a violent bone in his body. Even now, he had a tight rein on his temper.

Then again, as far as she knew, he'd never been tested like this before.

She looked into his eyes and saw beyond the outrage, saw the genuine hurt and anguish, and that was her undoing. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do."

He regarded her incredulously. "Couldn't you have called me, talked to me? There was a time when we brought all our problems

to each other. We could have worked something out.”

“We’d said our goodbyes,” she repeated. “I couldn’t go stirring things up again, not when there were no easy answers. It wouldn’t have been fair.”

“Fair?” he all but shouted. “What was fair about not telling me I had a baby on the way? What was fair about you going through a pregnancy all alone? What was fair about letting our little girl start her life without a daddy?”

“I did what I thought was best for all of us,” she insisted.

“What *you* thought was best,” he mocked. “You didn’t even give me a chance to come up with a solution.”

“Why should it have been your problem, your solution? I was the one who was pregnant.”

“With my baby, dammit!” He closed his eyes, drew in a deep breath, then said more calmly, “We could have figured it out together.”

“And done what? You’d be miserable away from White Pines. And I can’t live there. It was as simple as that.”

“We could have worked it out,” he insisted with the stubborn conviction that was pure Adams. It didn’t matter that they’d run into the same brick wall a thousand times before.

“And they’re always telling me I’m the romantic,” she said with a rueful sigh. “This time there wasn’t a happy ending, Harlan Patrick. Trust me.”

“Trust you,” he hooted. “That’s a laugh.”

He regarded her evenly and took a step closer. He was near

enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell the pure masculine scent of him. He reached out and ran his knuckle along the curve of her cheek, setting off goose bumps. She hated that he could make her react like that with just the skim of his fingers.

“Darlin’, we’ve got a whole passel of passion, no question about that,” he said. “We might even have a little love left. But I’m afraid trust is the one thing we’ll never have between us again. You’ve pretty much seen to that, haven’t you?”

Something died inside her at the cold, hard flatness of his words, but she knew it was the truth, had known it way back when she’d made the decision to keep the secret. Staying silent was going to cost her eventually. Now it had and it hurt more than she’d ever imagined.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“*Sorry* won’t cut it this time. Now how about getting this stuff together and taking me to see my daughter?”

It was a command, not a request, and it sent a jolt of pure fear shooting through her. “Tonight?”

“I think it’s time, don’t you? Way past time, in fact.”

“She’ll be asleep,” she protested, trying to buy time. An hour from now she could bundle Amy Lynn up, wake the band and be on the bus heading for the next stop. No one would question the abrupt, middle-of-the-night departure, not aloud at any rate, and definitely not once they’d heard about Harlan Patrick’s untimely arrival.

He gave her a look that suggested he saw straight through her. "I'll be quiet as a church mouse," he countered. "And if she happens to wake up, well, I'd say a momentous occasion like this is worth losing a little sleep over, wouldn't you?"

Laurie couldn't think of a single argument that could possibly counter the bitter logic of that. "Give me five minutes," she said tightly, then waited for him to leave the room.

He didn't budge. Regarding her evenly, he said with wry humor, "You surely weren't thinking I'd wait outside, were you? With that big old window right over your dressing table? I don't think so. As I recall, climbing out windows in the middle of the night used to be one of your specialties. That's how we got around your curfew way back when we couldn't keep our hands off each other."

"I was a kid back then," she protested, then gave up. He was sticking to her like glue, and that was that. "Okay, then, at least turn your back."

"Laurie, there's not an inch of bare skin on your body I haven't seen with my own eyes. It's a little late to turn all prim and proper on me."

She thought she detected a faint hint of laughter in his voice, and that alone was enough to give her hope that they could get through this mess tonight and go on with their lives. This was Harlan Patrick, after all. He'd always been quick to anger, but just as quick to forgive. He'd see Amy Lynn, satisfy himself that she was okay and go back to Texas. That would be that, she thought

optimistically.

One glance at his expression told her she was delusional. Harlan Patrick wasn't going anywhere. And once he'd seen Amy Lynn, what then? Would he really be able to walk away, or would that just be the beginning of her worst nightmare? Mad as he was, she couldn't envision him demanding marriage at the moment. Would he try to take her baby? It was a distinct possibility.

Already gearing up for the fight, she scowled at him. "Oh, for heaven's sakes," she said, "if you're so hard up you have to sneak a peek at my bare breasts, then have yourself a ball."

She stripped out of her damp stage clothes and reached for fresh underwear. Only then did she notice that it wasn't strewn all over the room the way she'd left it.

Without bothering to cover herself, she turned to him, laughter bubbling up. "You straightened up in here, didn't you?"

He shot her a defiant look. "So what if I did?"

"Harlan Patrick Adams, I'm surprised at you. I thought you were long past tidying up my messes."

"Old habits die hard, darlin'," he said in a tone rich with hidden meanings. "Maybe you should remember that."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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