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THE BABY IN THE BACK SEAT

Mollie Molay



AMERICAN

Baby

Mills & Boon American Romance

Mollie Molay

The Baby In The Back Seat

«HarperCollins»

Molay M.

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— (Mills & Boon American Romance)

There was a baby in his back seat! And when Sam Harrison noticed that the infant stowed away in his car was his own daughter, he ran his SUV right into a water tower! Luckily, no one was hurt, but the escapade left Sam and his baby stranded on Laura Evans's land...and she wasn't too happy about her unexpected visitors. Well, baby Annie soon had Laura cooing a different tune, especially when she learned the single dad knew nothing about child rearing. She agreed to take them in—for a limited time only. But between lessons in baby care, her closely guarded heart began to melt, though she would never reveal those feelings to Sam. For Laura had her share of secrets to keep...American Baby: Unexpected arrivals lead to the sweetest of surprises as Harlequin American Romance celebrates the love only a baby can bring!

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“Celebrate?” Laura wondered what Sam meant.

He brushed her cheek with his fingertip. “Not what you think, although it’s worth consideration.”

Laura tried to be nonchalant, but her body warmed just being in Sam’s arms. “Are you saying I’m safe with you?”

“For now.” His wicked grin belied his words.

“You’ll warn me if things change?” she asked.

Sam sat down and put his arms behind him. “Look, you could do anything to me, and I won’t touch you.”

Laura’s gaze locked with his. “Anything?”

“Anything.”

Gathering her courage, Laura brushed his cheek the way he’d brushed hers. He didn’t blink. She bent to his upturned face and kissed his mouth. When she felt his lips respond to hers, she drew back. “Maybe that’s enough for now.”

“Yes,” he agreed in a throaty voice that told her he was just as affected by the kiss as she was.

She gazed at him quizzically, wondering where to go from here.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Harlequin American Romance, where you’re guaranteed upbeat and lively love stories set in the backyards, big cities and wide-open spaces of America.

Kick-starting the month is an AMERICAN BABY selection by Mollie Molay. The hero of *The Baby in the Back Seat* is one handsome single daddy who knows how to melt a woman’s guarded heart! Next, bestselling author Mindy Neff is back with more stories in her immensely popular *BACHELORS OF SHOTGUN RIDGE* series. In *Cheyenne’s Lady*, a sheriff returns home to find in his bed a pregnant woman desperate for his help. Honor demands that he offer her his name, but will he ever give his bride his heart?

In *Millionaire’s Christmas Miracle*, the latest book in Mary Anne Wilson’s *JUST FOR KIDS* miniseries, an abandoned baby brings together a sophisticated older man who’s lost his faith in love and a younger woman who challenges him to take a second chance on romance and family. Finally, don’t miss Michele Dunaway’s *Taming the Tabloid Heiress*, in which an alluring journalist finesses an interview with an elusive millionaire who rarely does publicity. Exactly how did the reporter get her story?

Enjoy all four books—and don’t forget to come back again in December when Judy Christenberry’s *Triplet Secret Babies* launches Harlequin American Romance’s continuity *MAITLAND MATERNITY: TRIPLETS, QUADS & QUINTS*, and Mindy Neff brings you another *BACHELORS OF SHOTGUN RIDGE* installment.

Wishing you happy reading,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin American Romance

The Baby in the Back Seat

Mollie Molay



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To the Baby's godmothers, Betty, Joan, Aline, Linda and Ann and RisaLee for ten long years of friendship.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After working for a number of years as a logistics contract administrator in the aircraft industry, Mollie Molay turned to a career she found far more satisfying—writing romance novels. Mollie lives in Northridge, California, surrounded by her two daughters and eight grandchildren, many of whom find their way into her books. She enjoys hearing from her readers and welcomes comments. You can write to her at Harlequin Books, 300 East 42nd St., 6th Floor, New York, NY 10017.

Books by Mollie Molay

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE

560—FROM DRIFTER TO DADDY

597—HER TWO HUSBANDS

616—MARRIAGE BY MISTAKE

638—LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

682—NANNY & THE BODYGUARD

703—OVERNIGHT WIFE

729—WANTED: DADDY

776—FATHER IN TRAINING

799—DADDY BY CHRISTMAS

815—MARRIED BY MIDNIGHT

839—THE GROOM CAME C.O.D.

879—BACHELOR-AUCTION BRIDEGROOM

897—THE BABY IN THE BACK SEAT

Dear Reader,

My father used to say children were life's dividends, and grandchildren were bonuses.

The first time I fell in love with my own little dividend was when my first daughter, Elaine, was put into my arms. When my second little dividend was born, I named her Joy. Because that's what she and her sister were and are to me.

My grandchildren, my little bonuses, have brought love, laughter and meaning into my life. Although most children learn to walk, talk and give hugs, when mine did, it seemed unique.

I've included each of them and their exploits in each of my stories in some way. There is an Annie, and I hope you enjoy her as much as I do.

Mollie Molay

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Prologue

Sam Harrison stood in front of the house and gazed stoically at the SOLD banner nailed across the FOR SALE sign on the manicured green lawn. The small three-bedroom tract home wasn't a mansion by any stretch of the imagination, but he'd been proud to present it to Paige as a wedding gift. Too bad his flight-attendant wife had been more excited about gaining a slot on a Denver-to-London flight than about having a home.

Living solo hadn't been very rewarding. Thursday he'd been in Europe, Friday in Florida, and today he was home in Colorado. Except he had no home anymore.

Fifteen months ago he'd been happily married.

Fourteen months ago he'd learned he was to be a father.

Six months ago baby Annie came into the world and crept into his heart at first glance.

He'd been hurt, even humiliated at the divorce, but it was all his fault. He should have taken the time to find out if Paige had a nesting instinct, not an unfulfilled case of wanderlust.

The unexpected arrival of an infant daughter had been another gift that hadn't pleased his ex-wife for long. The "friendly skies" still seemed to hold a greater charm than motherhood.

He didn't mind losing the house, nor, now that he was able to think of it more dispassionately, did he mind the divorce. After Paige had announced their marriage had been a mistake, he'd taken no pleasure in staying where he wasn't wanted. It was losing out at fatherhood that hurt.

After being persuaded a newborn baby was better off with her mother, it had been leaving Annie, a small part of himself, that broke his heart.

His ex-wife appeared in the doorway. "Good. You're just in time. The movers will be here any moment."

Sam took a deep breath and strode to meet her. "Sorry. I would have shown up sooner, but I had an assignment to finish."

"You always have an assignment to finish," she answered with a shrug. "Come on in—this won't take long. I have your things here inside the door."

Sam followed her into the house and briefly thought of the broken dreams the house represented. "I'll leave as soon as I say goodbye to Annie."

Under Paige's watchful eye, he went into the bedroom where Annie was sleeping on her back with a tiny finger in her rosebud mouth. She looked so peaceful he didn't have the heart to wake her. Instead, he tucked the blanket closer around her tiny shoulders and leaned over to place a kiss on her forehead. He held his breath when Annie stirred. For a hopeful moment Sam thought she was about to open her eyes. Instead, a frown appeared on her forehead, and she fell back to sleep.

Paige lingered by the doorway. "You really go for this fatherhood bit, don't you?"

Sam swallowed the lump that threatened to undermine his reluctant acceptance of the status quo. He'd wanted to be a father from the moment he'd lost his own father as a young boy. A loving father who would be there for his child. To watch over his child in good times and in bad and to give it the security he hadn't been lucky enough to know himself.

For too short a time marriage to Paige and Annie's arrival seemed to fulfill that dream. As for leaving Annie, he understood a baby needed to be with her mother, but at least he'd gotten visiting rights. Maybe even weekend custody or holidays when she grew older.

Ignoring Paige's comment, he took in the heart-shaped baby face, the golden-brown eyelashes, the tendrils of light-brown hair and the tiny lips that had accepted him without question. What would he do without her?

He turned to look at Paige. "Can't we stay friends? For Annie's sake if not our own?"

Paige hesitated, glanced at the sleeping baby. "Sure, I guess."

With a last look at his infant daughter, Sam straightened. “Thanks. By the way, you will let me know when you get to your mother’s, won’t you? I’d like to made some arrangements to see Annie as often as I can.”

His ex-wife shrugged. “Sure.”

Sam went to the door, lifted a box that contained some of his personal belongings and headed for his rental car just as a moving van drove up. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he said over his shoulder. “I want to make sure I get the photography equipment I left in the garage.” Paige went into the house.

Fifteen minutes later Sam reappeared around the front of the house with a box in his arms. The rest of his belongings and his suitcase had been moved. Paige stood by the side of his SUV.

“I had one of the movers put your things in the car for you,” she said, and held out her hand. “I guess this is goodbye.”

“Thanks,” he answered dryly as he shook her hand. With a last regretful glance at the house, he got into the SUV, waved once and drove away.

Chapter One

A baby cried.

Clicking off the car radio, Sam peered anxiously at the map furnished by the car-rental agency in Grand Junction and frowned. He didn't know what bothered him more: finding himself on an unmarked county road or the unwelcome reminder he'd left his infant daughter behind with his ex-wife a few hours ago.

As much as he would have liked to be a real father, he'd never managed to spend more than an hour or two with Annie. First, because he'd never felt welcome in his own home, and second, because his obsession with photography kept getting in the way. Which condition had contributed to his divorce was beyond him, but this proposed shared custody when Annie was older twisted in his gut.

He consoled himself with the thought that he'd be able to see the baby between assignments. And that when she got old enough for him to care for, he'd call in his shared-custody rights. Until then, she was better off with someone who knew how to take care of her.

Suddenly aware he should have been at his destination by now, his thoughts turned to the immediate problem.

As a photojournalist, he'd flown, driven and hiked to more offbeat and secluded places than he could count. He'd won half-a-dozen awards for his photo stories and had the trophies to prove it. Heck, he was even an internationally known photojournalist.

Until today, he'd managed to find his way around without a problem. So how in hell had he managed to get himself lost on a dirt road on the western slopes of the Colorado Rockies?

He didn't really mind getting lost, he told himself as he peered out the window, trying to pinpoint his present location. The surrounding terrain was beautiful and so photogenic his fingers itched to grab his camera. He'd start shooting the miles of fresh green grass that, after last night's rain, glistened in the afternoon sun. Or he'd capture the shadows cast by the ragged mountains just beyond the horizon.

Too bad he'd packed his cameras in the back, he thought wryly. He couldn't reach one without pulling off the road and rummaging through the boxes packed on the back seat of the car. Or in the cargo space, which was full of his belongings.

With a rain-soaked dirt road under the wheels, capturing on film the majestic green peaks was tempting, but it would have to wait until he reached his destination. If ever.

Getting lost really bothered him. Losing control. He was a man who wrote his own rules, traveled when, where and how he wanted and lived the good life. In his book, that meant being in charge.

To his growing disgust, he wasn't in charge now.

In the background, he heard a baby whimper.

Sam frowned and checked the car radio. It wasn't on. With a shrug he laid the sound down to an overactive imagination triggered by a guilt trip at having driven away from the one person he loved more than life itself—Annie.

The baby whimpered again, a demand for attention if he'd ever heard one, he thought miserably as he glanced through the rearview mirror.

The sight of the back of an infant car seat buckled on the back seat sent his adrenaline into overdrive.

A baby? Annie? If this was Paige's idea of a joke, it was a damn poor one.

His attention momentarily diverted, the large white rented SUV bumped into a pothole, slid and, to his mounting horror, shot across a narrow ditch and aimed straight for an ancient weathered fence. His heart thundered as he threw all of his 180 pounds into stomping on the brakes. To his

mounting dismay, the car skidded on the muddy road and continued on its wayward course straight for the fence.

Cursing his luck, Sam broke into a cold sweat. A giant stab of pain tore at his forehead. Terror washed over him as he realized the wheels had no traction. Heaven only knew where he would wind up. Or, if he was lucky, that the SUV would end up in one piece.

It wasn't himself he was thinking about—it was the baby in the back seat he'd heard crying. He gritted his teeth.

Instead of coming to a stop, the SUV tore through the fence rails, careered up a small slope and crashed into a small water tower, with predictable results. As if in slow motion, the tower swayed, toppled and showered the car with a torrent of water. With a muffled curse, he wrested the door open, bounded out and headed for the rear door to rescue the baby in the back seat.

The baby was indeed Annie, and she was demanding attention in the only way she knew how. Tears rolled down her pink cheeks. Hiccups shook her tiny frame. To his relief she opened her eyes and smiled through her tears when she saw him.

Shielding her from the water with his body, Sam hurried to unfasten the baby carrier, grabbed it in his arms and stumbled away from the soaked SUV to dry land.

Annie's brown eyes, golden-brown hair and teary smile brought a lump to his throat and questions to his mind. How had Annie gotten into the SUV?

A close look revealed a note pinned to her blanket.

"Sam," he read with dismay, "I saw the way you looked at Annie when you said goodbye. I realized then she was better off with you than with me. By the time you read this, I'll be on my way to Paris. Don't bother to call me. I'll call you. Paige."

His heart beat double-time as he realized this was the reason Paige had been so anxious to help him load his belongings and to send him on his way.

He managed to muster a smile to reassure his infant daughter. There was no use scaring her, he thought as he regarded tiny teeth between quivering lips. A little dimple on her chin, a duplicate of his own larger one, clinched the deal. Annie was his responsibility.

Annie had been the unplanned result of a brief visit home fifteen months ago. Because of his commitments, he'd only seen her twice since she'd been born six months ago. Once, when she was born and her mother had shocked him by telling him she planned a divorce. The second, a few short hours ago when he'd kissed Annie goodbye.

His heart finally slowed enough so he could take a deep breath. It wasn't only the accident that gave him pause. It was the thought of taking on the responsibility of raising a child on his own. Especially one as young as Annie.

One thing for sure, fatherhood had to be a daunting experience under any circumstances.

In his case, he honestly knew zip about babies. If Annie didn't fit into her mother's schedule, she didn't fit into his own nomadic career, either.

He gazed at his infant daughter. She might have been unplanned and her presence in the SUV unexpected, but he loved every tiny inch of her.

His lifestyle was definitely going to have to change.

His immediate problem, aside from having Annie with him, was the car's busted radiator. He wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

He took a deep breath to calm his nerves and smiled his reassurance at the baby. Good thing she couldn't know he hadn't the foggiest idea of what to do now. Not with her or the car, either.

Shouts, the excited barking of a dog and the sound of a galloping horse drew his attention. In the distance he saw a rider bearing down on him. Thank God, he thought as he jiggled the baby carrier; help was on its way.

He drew a deep breath and fought to think of a lucid answer to the question that was surely coming. What in hell had caused him to crash through the fence and take down the water tower?

A baby's cry? No one in his right mind would believe him. After all, from his limited experience he knew babies cried all the time.

He hadn't known the baby was there? How could he explain he hadn't known Annie was in the back seat until he heard her cry? True, but no one would buy that story, either.

Explain that his ex-wife must have put the baby in the SUV while he was picking up the last of his belongings and about to leave home for the last time? That was the truth but just as unbelievable.

The rider bore down on him. There was something about the guy's body language that told him not to expect a welcome. He clutched the baby carrier and took a step back.

"Just what did you think you were doing?" the irate rider shouted. He pulled the horse to a halt inches away from Sam's nose and glared down at him.

Sam swallowed hard. He didn't blame the guy for being angry, but the look on his face was more than anger. The guy was furious.

"Sorry, mister," Sam began, then stopped short when he realized the person confronting him was a woman. And not an ordinary woman. This one had a rifle resting in the crook of her elbow and looked ready to use it.

He did a double take and took another step backward. He couldn't help himself. Up close the woman looked interesting, if dangerous. She was dressed in a well-washed blue cotton shirt and tight worn jeans. Long trim legs were encased in soft leather boots that, like the ranch behind her, had seen better days. From her boots to her gold windblown hair, she was all woman. A woman with sparkling green eyes that would have reminded him of green meadows in springtime if she hadn't been so angry. Right now, her eyes looked like twin tornadoes.

Her eyes widened when she finally focused on the infant carrier in his arms. She let loose with the barrage of questions he'd known were coming. "What in heaven's name were you thinking? How could you drive so irresponsibly with a baby in the car?" Before he could answer, she went on, "Is the baby all right? You're lucky the two of you weren't killed!"

"I didn't know she was there," Sam protested when the woman stopped to catch her breath. He straightened his back and attempted a smile. What was he apologizing for? After all, he was innocent. "That is, I didn't know she was there until I heard her cry. Her crying startled me and made me lose control of the car."

Behind him, the last wooden support of the water tower fell with a thud, and the last of the water it had contained drained out like a creek that had broken through its banks.

Sam and the woman on the horse surveyed the scene in silence. He was trying to think of something to say when she spoke for him. "Great driving," she finally said with a look of disgust.

Sam had intended to try to charm his way through the confrontation, but it was obviously no use. The lady was mad as hell at the destruction of her property. He looked back over his shoulder at the muddy tire skids, the broken fence, the pile of wood and corrugated tin that had been a water tower. Considering the amount of devastation he'd caused, he couldn't blame her. He hoped she had no thoughts of using the gun she held. "Don't worry. I'll pay for the damages."

"You didn't know the baby was there?" she echoed, ignoring his offer. Her eyes narrowed, and she studied him closely. Close enough to make him shiver under his soaked clothing, even though the sun was shining. "Been drinking?"

"No way!" Sam answered, juggling the carrier so that Annie wouldn't think he'd forgotten her. "The God's honest truth is that my ex-wife put the baby in the back seat of my car without telling me."

"Try again," his inquisitor said dryly. "Sounds like a custody argument to me. Are you sure you didn't take the baby when your ex wasn't looking?"

Sam was insulted. He'd been called a lot of things, but never anything as bad as this. "Good Lord! Do I look like a kidnapper?"

When the woman raised an eyebrow, Sam felt like a fool. She was right. He might not look like a kidnapper, but he did look foolish.

Between the damaged SUV, his own wet and muddy condition, the baby in the carrier and the woman on horseback holding a gun, things were beginning to look like a TV sitcom. Only he didn't feel like laughing.

"It's the truth. When I stopped to pick up my belongings at my ex's request, Paige must have put the baby carrier with Annie into the car. I swear, this came as a complete surprise."

The rider's raised eyebrows suggested her disbelief, but he was beyond caring. It was beginning to look as if this mishap could wind up as a case of life or death. Or jail.

He was ready to admit that in his case truth was stranger than fiction. He might be innocent of kidnapping, but he sure hoped smashing a fence and a water tower weren't shooting offenses around here.

Now that she'd cooled down, Laura had to bite her lip to smother a laugh. The man's story was too ridiculous to be a fabrication, but it didn't get him off the hook. The damage he'd caused couldn't have come at a worse time. She silently surveyed the destruction. Repairing the fence and putting up a new water tower would set her back months if he didn't have the funds to do the job. She saw hundreds of dollars, maybe thousands, in repairs facing her. Money she didn't have and wasn't likely to borrow in time to prevent the loss of her herd, small though it was.

As for the baby smiling at her from the infant seat, she definitely had her father's coloring and, in any case, was too cute to ignore. From the way things looked, she was in need of some tender loving care.

Laura studied the baby's father. She'd been around men long enough to sense he was a man's man, even if he didn't know how to drive. He was larger than life, handsome, tall and lithe. A brown-and-white shirt was stretched taut across his chest. Long legs were encased in stone-washed jeans and ended in brown leather boots. His clear chocolate-brown eyes, so like the baby's, met hers in a way that made her all too aware of him. So what if his glance and the muscular chest showing under his wet shirt warmed her middle? She had more important things to think about than a sexy man.

Keeping her mind on saving the ranch from being sold from under her was her number-one priority, and he wasn't helping.

She smothered a sigh. Whatever the outcome of his unexpected arrival, the stranger was someone she wouldn't easily forget after he was gone. As for the baby...well, she couldn't afford to dwell on her, either.

"Who are you, and where did you think you were going?"

"The name is Sam Harrison," he answered. "I'm a photojournalist. Actually I was on my way to photograph the New Horizons Spa when I managed to get lost." He gestured to the sodden road map lying in the mud at his feet. "According to the map the car-rental agency gave me, the spa should have been somewhere around here."

It wasn't the first time some tenderfoot had gotten lost on his way to the spa. She was used to strangers driving up to her door expecting a glamorous health spa instead of a run-down sheep ranch. But it was the first time anyone had managed to trash her property in the process. Frowning, she swallowed an angry retort and gazed at the unhappy culprit. "You took the wrong turn at the crossroads about two miles back."

The baby cried again. Sam unbuckled the infant carrier, took the baby in his arms and tried to soothe her. To his chagrin, her bottom was damper than the tears that lingered in the corner of her eyes. He felt like a heel. No wonder the poor kid had been crying her heart out for attention. What kind of father did that make him?

"What do you intend to do now?" the rider asked.

"Beats me." He glanced at the busted SUV and ran his fingers through the shock of hair that fell over his forehead. "Outside of calling the rental agency, I haven't a clue."

"Try." She gestured to the fallen water tower, now a limp mass of corrugated tin, and the pieces of fencing scattered over the road. "And while you're thinking, don't forget to figure out how you're

going to pay for the damage you caused. Without a fence, my livestock can wander out onto the road. That is, if they don't die of thirst first."

That caught Sam's attention. "Good Lord! You can't possibly mean it's as bad as all that!"

He looked horrified, but she didn't take the time to explain. The sheep wouldn't die of thirst, not after a spring storm that had left pockets of water standing in the meadow, but they would undoubtedly head for greener pastures if the fence wasn't fixed soon. What she'd told him came too close to the truth for her own peace of mind.

She leaned on the pommel of the saddle. "Every word, Mr. Harrison. Hope you can afford it, because repairing the fence and replacing the water tower at double time are going to cost you a bundle."

"Don't worry. I told you I'll take care of it." He felt in his back pocket, then shrugged. "I'll give you a check as soon as I get someplace dry." He held the baby away from the damp spot on his shirt and mustered a weak grin. "I'll have to find a motel where I can clean us up."

Laura eyed him thoughtfully and relaxed her vigilance. The guy was a lousy driver, but she'd bet her last dollar he was honest. She would have sent him packing after he wrote her a check, but the SUV clearly wasn't going anywhere. Besides, there was a baby to consider.

First things first. She gestured to the ranch house behind her. "I'm Laura Evans, and this my ranch, the Lazy E. As for a motel, there aren't any. Not around here, anyway."

Obviously dismayed, Sam eyed her. His grin faded. "You've got to be kidding! There are motels everywhere. Except maybe when you need them," he added with a distracted look around. "I guess we can bunk in the SUV until help comes."

Laura's conscience stirred. The man needed help, and his infant daughter definitely looked as if she needed some attention. What could it hurt if she took them in for a few hours while he waited for a tow truck?

She gestured over her shoulder. "My place back there is the only building around for miles. If you like, you can follow me and get yourself and your daughter cleaned up before you move on."

"Move on? I wish." He gestured at the banged-up SUV sitting in the mud. To Laura it looked like a drowned duck with its nose stuck in the mud and its rear end in the air. "I don't think I'll be able to go anywhere for a while." He sighed and gently rocked the baby. "But if it's okay with you, I'd like to take you up on your offer. First I have to make a telephone call."

"Local?"

"Don't worry, I have a cell phone."

Satisfied, Laura nodded. "Want to hand me the baby? You can follow me to the ranch house when you're ready."

He pointedly eyed the rifle and the dog poised at attention at her feet and shook his head. "No thanks. I'll carry her." As an afterthought, he added, gesturing to the rifle, "Had some trouble around here?"

Laura met his gaze. "You don't have to worry. I've been bothered by a couple of unsavory characters lately and had to run them off. I wasn't sure you weren't more of the same. Or if you'd been sent to deliberately wreck the fence and the water tower to harass me."

"Harass you? What for?"

"To get me to sell the ranch."

Without taking his gaze off the rifle, he nodded warily. "You're not planning on using that, are you?"

She leaned on the pommel of the saddle and looked him squarely in the eyes until he squirmed. "Should I be?"

Sam shuddered. "I told you the truth. I'm a photojournalist. I shoot with a camera, not with a gun. In fact, I'd feel a heck of a lot better about all this if you'd put that thing away."

“No problem.” She slid the rifle into the leather scabbard attached to the saddle. The dog poised at the horse’s feet relaxed, but to add to Sam’s discomfiture, continued to eye him warily. “So do I get the baby? Looks to me as if you have enough on your hands without her.”

“Her name is Annie,” he said. He tramped back to the SUV and reached inside for the diaper bag that had been sitting beside the car seat. Back on dry land, he handed the bag and the baby to Laura. “Whatever her mother had in mind when she stashed Annie in my car, I hope she remembered to provide the fixings for Annie’s care.” He managed a grin. “Too bad she didn’t take the time to explain what I need to do with them.”

Laura whistled at the watchful dog. “Don’t worry, your daughter is in good hands. I’ll take care of her for now. Make your call, and follow me when you’re ready.”

While he punched out the number of the car-rental agency in Grand Junction on his cell, Sam watched Laura Evans canter off with Annie in her arms. In spite of his dim view of women at the moment, he couldn’t help but feel attracted to the feisty rancher.

To his disgust, he was put on hold, but this time he didn’t get as steamed as he usually did. The wait gave him time to check out the way Laura Evans filled out her form-fitting jeans and cotton shirt. He actually admired the picture she made—until he thought about the reason she carried a rifle.

He glanced at the weathered buildings, the lack of any real activity that bespoke a successful ranch. If the lady’s property was a paying proposition, it would be a surprise to him.

It looked as if Laura Evans ought to make the best of the situation and sell out to the highest bidder, instead of threatening would-be buyers with a rifle.

Someone finally answered his telephone call. He swore under his breath at the reply and put the phone back in his pocket. He wasn’t going anywhere, at least no time soon.

Shivering, he reached into the SUV for his duffel bag. Considering his dripping shirt and jeans and muddy boots, Annie wasn’t the only one who needed changing.

He knew he had to find a way to move on once he and Annie were clean and dry. Maybe calling the spa and asking for transportation would work. Sure as hell, if someone was trying to harass Laura Evans or frighten her into selling her ranch, the last thing she needed was to have him and Annie around to add to her problems. And the last thing he needed was to become involved.

As far as he could tell, paying for the damage he’d caused wasn’t going to help Laura Evans, either. Considering the mess it sounded she was in, what the lady needed was a miracle.

Chapter Two

Sam locked the banged-up SUV and, with a last rueful glance at the broken fence, trudged through the mud and up the small rise to the ranch house. From what he could see, the only tall structure around had been the water tower. Just his luck.

Outside of a weathered barn and a few newly painted small cabins, the redwood-sided ranch house was the only building worth a damn, in his opinion. Judging from a recent coat of oil-based stain, someone must have paid some attention to putting the place in shape. A futile effort if ever there was one, but he had to admire the effort. A dozen sheep grazed in a distant meadow. If they were the extent of the Evans herd, no wonder she was in trouble.

He noticed newly planted rosebushes ringing the porch as he approached the house. Stones, painted white, lined the freshly raked walk. Alongside the house, two lawn swings sat under the shade of an oak tree. The only sign of life was an elderly cowhand busy assembling what appeared to be some kind of wooden jungle gym.

A jungle gym? Sam gazed around for a sign of kids. Outside of the cowboy and the dog now sprawled on the porch watching him closely, there wasn't another soul in sight. He shrugged and continued squishing his way in his muddy boots to the ranch house.

Not bad, he thought as he trudged up the wooden steps. Children or not, at least someone cared enough about the place to try to make it look decent.

The interior of the house, as he stood behind a screen door gazing in, surprised him even more. In contrast to the worn exterior, comfortable maple furniture had been burnished to a mellow yellow-brown sheen. Inviting rose-and-sea-foam-green chintz pillows had been thrown onto a large upholstered couch protected by crocheted white doilies. Hand-hooked rugs blanketed the polished oak floor in front of the couch. A huge stone fireplace covered a wall. Two comfortable-looking armchairs were drawn up in front of the fireplace. Sam sighed. The room looked mighty inviting after the accident and shower he'd just endured.

It was the kind of setting his mother and grandmother would have appreciated. In fact, he would have enjoyed a home like this if his profession hadn't kept him on the move. And if he'd had a wife to welcome him home.

He glanced up to see Laura standing at the door and watching him expectantly. "What?"

"You've forgotten something." She gestured to his mud-caked boots. "Please take off your boots and leave them by the door before you come in."

Hopping on one foot at a time, Sam managed to comply. To his disgust, even his socks were soaked. Under Laura's watchful gaze, he took them off, dropped them and his boots outside the door and gingerly entered the house barefoot. Damn, he thought, there was something about not having his boots on that put him at a clear disadvantage.

"Are you ready for Annie?"

Sam felt himself flush at the reminder of his daughter. He would have offered to clean up the baby before now, except he didn't have a clue what to do. He not only felt inadequate, but he also didn't like the reproachful look in Laura's eyes. So what if he didn't know about the care and feeding of babies? Were all fathers supposed to have learned how to diaper a baby, or did it come naturally?

"Sure, but..." He tried to look cool, but the truth was unavoidable. Maybe things would have been different if Paige had stuck around long enough to give him a chance. "I'm afraid I've never diapered a baby before."

Laura didn't look surprised. "I guess you're not part of the seventy percent of today's fathers who help raise their children."

If there was one thing sure to light Sam's fire, it was being put on the defensive. Especially when he felt that, under the circumstances, he was innocent of any blame. "Where did you get a statistic like that?"

"I was a maternity-ward nurse before I came back home to take care of my folks. We took a poll at the hospital and that's what we found. Most men today say family comes first. In fact, some choose to stay at home with their children while their wives go out to work."

Sam tried to envision staying behind to take care of home, hearth and family while Paige flew to Paris and points unknown. Considering how little he knew about the requirements of a house husband, let alone a father, the picture that came to mind was so ludicrous he almost laughed.

He focused on one thing Laura had said that calmed him. A maternity-ward nurse? His spirits rose. This was the first bit of good news he'd had all day. "You're not putting me on, are you? A real maternity-ward nurse?"

"Until two years ago," she answered. "I came back to stay when my parents passed away. So if you have any intention of raising your daughter by yourself, maybe you ought to let me show you how to care for her, instead of doing it for you."

"Go ahead, please. Teach me."

With a wry glance at Sam, Laura took a changing pad, wipes and a fresh diaper out of the diaper bag. She knelt on the floor beside the coffee table. "Watch carefully," she said as she undid Annie's soggy diaper. Crooning to the baby, she laid her on the pad. "First off you have to remember to change her often. A baby's skin is very sensitive." Sam nodded. "Actually," she went on as she used a wipe to dry off Annie's little bottom before she set a new diaper in place, "you're lucky Annie is a girl. You have to work faster if the baby's a boy."

Sam edged closer and cautiously surveyed the process. As far as he was concerned, regardless of sex, a diaper change was a diaper change. How difficult could it be? "Yeah?"

"Little boys are like fountains," she answered. She applied talcum powder, and Annie giggled. "If you don't want an unexpected shower, you have to take precautions and move fast."

Sam flushed. The last thing he'd ever expected to do was discuss a baby's plumbing with a woman he found intriguing.

It wasn't only Laura Evans's appearance that interested him—although she certainly wasn't lacking in the looks department. It was her cool command under fire, coupled with her smile and warmth when it came to Annie that made him take a closer look at her.

He'd met, photographed and romanced a number of desirable women in his time—as a single man, of course. He'd even been fool enough to marry one of them: Paige. He'd been so taken with Paige, he hadn't stopped to consider she was a woman bent on adventure, not on being matrimonial material.

But nowhere had he met a multifaceted woman like Laura. He was willing to bet she ran her ranch with the same skill she'd demonstrated as a nurse. And from what he'd seen of the house, she was probably just as good at nesting as she was at her profession.

Things might have been different if he hadn't had his fill of beautiful women.

Mental warning bells sounded as one warm thought followed another. After his sorry marital experience, why was he even mulling over what made Laura Evans tick? Or thinking of her in a romantic way? Hadn't he already decided there was no way a man could begin to understand women, let alone try to live with one? That it was better to look and admire but not touch? Nesting women could be dangerous to a man like him. He drew a deep breath and gazed around the room. "Interesting place you have here."

Laura pulled the baby's romper over the fresh diaper and snapped the crotch. Instead of handing the baby over to its father, she buried her nose in the baby's neck and made bubbling noises. Not only because she couldn't resist hearing Annie laugh, but also because playing with the baby was the only way she could think of to keep her mind off Annie's father.

Sam Harrison, bare feet, wet clothing and all, was the masculine type of man who rang her bell. The fact that he obviously loved his infant daughter and, although he knew zip about babies, was ready to raise her by himself made him more of a man than most in her eyes. That was the trouble. The last thing she needed in her life right now was a baby she couldn't keep or a wandering man like Sam Harrison. A man who made her think of dreams best forgotten.

A baby had been her dream from the time a sympathetic foster mother had handed her her first doll. A hand-me-down doll with faded clothing and one eye missing, the doll had been her pride and joy. She'd built an imaginary family around Dolly Dimples and dreamed of a day when she would have her own children. A dream that had been shattered when, as a newly adopted thirteen-year-old, she'd been thrown from a horse and suffered internal injuries. Injuries that would prevent her from becoming a mother.

Laura closed her eyes, gave Annie one last hug and reluctantly handed the baby back to her father. "Diapering isn't the only task you'll have to master if you intend to care for Annie by yourself."

Jolted from his musings, Sam forced his thoughts from what made his reluctant hostess tick to his present problem. For sure he'd better get his act together and learn all he could about taking care of Annie while he had the chance. "Right. Maybe you can show me a few other tricks before I leave."

Her answering frown told him he was skating on thin ice. Maybe "tricks" hadn't been the best description for baby care he could have used. The way Laura was looking at him told him he was on probation as a father. He hurried to change the topic.

"By the way, the car-rental agency told me it's going to take a few days before they can get me another car. Seems there's some sort of local holiday going on."

Laura nodded. "Miners' Days celebration."

"Right. From the sound of it, I'm afraid I might have to stick around here until they can bring an SUV from Denver." Laura's frown grew deeper, but this would give Sam the time to learn how to take care of Annie. "The rental agency offered to reimburse me for my room and board until they arrive," he added hopefully. "How about it? Can we stay?"

Laura fought her pride and lost. She knew having Sam Harrison and little Annie around would be treading on dangerous territory for more than one reason. But bottom line, she needed the money.

"I'd planned on taking in campers to make the ranch pay, but not the adult kind," she replied. And certainly not a man who appealed to her senses as strongly as Sam Harrison did. Not that she didn't welcome Annie's presence, she did. But not Annie's father.

She didn't want to wind up caring about Sam Harrison. She knew all too well there was no future in it for either of them.

She finally nodded. "I'll let you know what it will cost to replace the water tower and to mend the fence. As for your staying here, pay whatever you think is fair."

Sam juggled Annie in one arm and pulled out his wallet. It was a struggle, but he managed to get it and to hand Laura two one-hundred-dollar bills. "That ought to do it for now." When she hesitated, he hurried to add, "Go ahead, take it. The car-rental agency will reimburse me." When she hesitated, he added another hundred. "That's for taking care of Annie."

"The care of Annie is on the house," she answered with a dark look. "And so are the lessons in child care."

He put the bill back into his wallet.

"There's a lot more to taking care of a baby than you might realize, Mr. Harrison. Maybe you ought to consider taking your daughter back to her mother."

Sam froze. "No way is my daughter going to be an unwanted child! Her mother put her in my SUV without my knowledge. As far as I'm concerned, that means Annie is mine. I love her, and I'm not giving her back."

Laura's opinion of him went up another notch. A man who loved children had to be a decent man. Only, not the man for her.

She remembered all too well the early years of her own life when, as an unwanted child, she'd been shuffled from foster home to foster home. Until she was twelve, and Elsie and Jonah Evans had appeared out of nowhere to adopt her. She'd been grateful, had come to love them dearly and had cared for them until they'd passed on. Little Annie was lucky. She might have a mother who didn't want her, but she had a father who adored her.

"As for my learning how to take care of my daughter," Sam continued, "I'm game. That is, if you're still willing to teach me what I need to know."

Willing to take care of Annie when I fell in love with her the moment she smiled at me? You bet!
But how was she going to handle Annie's father?

A glance at miniscule lips sucking a tiny hand settled the problem. At least for the moment, Laura thought, grateful for the diversion. "Now that Annie's comfortable, it's time to feed her."

When Sam looked lost, she rummaged through the baby's diaper bag. "Any formula in here, or was the baby being breast-fed?"

He shook his head. "Knowing Paige, I doubt it. She wasn't around that much between flights. Actually her mother helped take care of the baby. As for any formula being in the bag, I haven't the foggiest notion. I didn't have time to look before you came to our rescue. Which reminds me," he went on, "I forgot to thank you for taking us in."

Laura sat back on her heels and regarded Sam with a raised eyebrow. "Just how old is Annie? I need to know so I can take care of her properly."

"Five, maybe six months."

"You're not sure?"

He tried to look innocent and felt defensive at the same time. "I was on assignment when she was born. Okay, okay," he added when she continued to stare at him in disbelief, "I'd say maybe six months."

Laura went back to rummaging in the diaper bag. "There has to be baby cereal around here someplace, unless Annie's not eating solids yet."

"Sorry, I'm afraid I don't know that, either."

He looked so lost Laura decided maybe she'd been too hard on him. "Not to worry. From Annie's healthy appearance, I'd say someone took good care of her."

She gathered Annie in her arms, nestled her against her chest and brushed the baby's velvet cheek with her lips. Murmuring softly, she grabbed the diaper bag and gestured to Sam's duffel. "Maybe you'd like to get cleaned up while I take Annie into the kitchen and find out just what we do have in here."

"I'd be mighty grateful to get out of these wet clothes." He gestured to his wet shirt and soaking jeans, and shrugged helplessly.

Laura's gaze focused on a shirt so wet it was transparent. Under it, wide shoulders, a muscular chest and dark-brown curls were as visible as in an artist's rendition. She didn't dare look below his waist.

"No problem," she said nonchalantly. "Go on upstairs and take the first room on the right. If you don't have everything you need in your duffel bag, check the closet."

Sam halted in midstride. "You're married?"

"No," Laura answered. "The clothing belonged to my dad. I've never gotten around to packing it up and giving it away."

Sam muttered his thanks and fled temptation as quickly as his bare feet would take him. The sight of Annie in the ranch owner's arms hit him where it hurt. Turned his thoughts to early dreams of a warmhearted wife and children of his own. Before his world caved in on him.

The look in Laura's eyes reminded him he was on probation as a father. Maybe as a man, too.

Considering the situation, he might be better off out of sight. At least until he'd cleaned up, rescued his boots and was able to take charge again.

The bedroom she'd directed him to appeared to be some kind of dormitory. A kid's dormitory, judging from the size of the trio of bunk beds and the rest of the furniture. Footlockers under the beds took the place of dressers. One small chest of drawers was in a corner with a brass lamp on it. The beds were covered with handmade quilts, freshly starched green-and-white curtains hung on the windows, and a large hooked rug covered the floor. From the look of the room, Laura must be expecting the campers she'd mentioned.

The child-size bunk beds were definitely not intended for a six-foot-two-inch man. Unless he curled into a pretzel shape and let his legs hang over the edge. A bunk might be okay for Annie, if she didn't turn over and topple off.

Between the too-short bunk bed and worrying about Annie, how in hell was he going to get any sleep tonight?

Through an open door, he caught a glimpse of a bathroom. Good, he thought as he shucked his damp clothing down to his shivering skin. A long hot shower was just the ticket. Cleaned up and with his boots on, he could face the lady rancher on equal terms.

In the bathroom an old-fashioned claw-foot tub greeted him. The sink was of the same vintage, maybe thirty years old or more. The shower was over the tub and enclosed by a plastic shower curtain. At least the tub was man-size, Sam mused gratefully as he stepped into the tub and let hot water run over him.

To his surprise, he found his boots, cleaned and shined, just inside the door when he came back into the bedroom. Room service? He let out a sigh of relief. Maybe his stay at the ranch was going to be more enjoyable than he'd thought.

He rummaged in his duffel for clean jeans and a fresh shirt. Once dressed, he took the stairs two at a time and headed for the sounds coming from the kitchen.

Annie was sitting on a stack of pillows. A large kitchen towel around her middle bound her firmly to the rungs of a kitchen chair. Her little hands were waving in the air, and milk dripped from her chin. Laura was laughing and waving a spoon to catch the baby's attention. Sure enough, an enchanted Annie's lips parted.

One swoop, another, then plop, the cereal went into Annie's open mouth. Beside them, the alert mutt stood with his tongue hanging out, his tail wagging. From the expectant look in his eyes, Sam expected kindhearted Laura to give the dog his turn.

Sam stood silently, lost in thought. He'd usually been on the outside of life, photographing heartwarming scenes for others to enjoy. This one, with his own daughter in it, warmed his heart. Too bad his ex hadn't hung around long enough to be a part of a scene like this.

Sam had thought he'd realized his dream of having a family of his own. Until Paige had told him he wasn't a good husband, let alone father. Annie had been a mistake, she'd explained when she'd called him from Paris and told him she'd filed for divorce.

He gazed at little Annie. With her golden-brown hair, chocolate-brown eyes and a dimple in her chin, she was almost a mirror image of himself.

Annie, a mistake? No way. Annie was the best thing that had ever happened to him. She might have a mother who'd opted out of motherhood, but she sure had a father who wanted her.

The domestic scene in front of him was unsettling. He told himself he still had mountains to climb, roads to travel, photographs to take. That it was the wrong time and place to become maudlin over broken dreams.

He'd have to forget the attraction he was beginning to feel for Laura, both for her sake and for his. His first priority was to prove he could make it as a father—or bust a gut trying.

Laura Evans apparently had problems of her own, anyway. She didn't need him to complicate her life.

There was only one thing left to do, he thought as he cleared his throat and made his presence known. As soon as the car-rental agency turned up with another vehicle, he'd take Annie, do Laura a favor and get out of her life.

Arm in midair, Laura looked up at Sam. In a clean, although wrinkled, white shirt and fresh khakis, he looked taller, more sure of himself. Maybe not as sexy as he'd looked when he was dripping wet, but definitely interesting.

"Hungry?" she asked. Annie banged her spoon on the table and babbled a welcome. The dog growled at the interruption.

"Sure," Sam answered with a grin. "That is, if you have something more filling than baby cereal around."

"Of course," Laura answered. "Just give me a minute to finish feeding Annie."

"How about letting me take over?" Sam suggested. "I may as well learn the drill."

Laura regarded him thoughtfully before she stood and handed him the spoon. "Of course. Just don't put too much on the spoon at one time or she'll choke."

Sam sensed her reluctance. He understood her dilemma all too well. He might be Annie's father, but Laura was concerned he might not be able to do the right thing for the baby. "With you here to supervise, I'll do fine," he said bravely. "Just wait and see."

"I wasn't expecting company," Laura answered. "Ham and eggs and hash browns for supper okay with you?"

Sam sat down and gingerly dipped the spoon into the cereal and aimed for Annie's mouth. "Sure," he answered. Happily Annie was hungry enough to cooperate. "By the way, thanks for cleaning my boots."

"It wasn't me," Laura answered as she rummaged in an old refrigerator. "Hank took care of it. Said a man without his boots is like a fish out of water."

"My thoughts exactly," Sam answered, wiping excess cereal off Annie's chin. "Who's Hank? I'd like to thank him."

"The ranch handyman," Laura answered. "He's been around here for more years than he can remember. Not that there's a lot for him to do anymore," she added as she sliced a shank of ham, "but he said that since the old sheep herder's life has passed him by, he might as well hang around here."

Sam nodded. From their surroundings, he sensed Hank remained at the ranch because he cared for the place and its present owner. It wasn't difficult to understand, Sam thought as he watched Laura break eggs into a buttered frying pan. Judging from the way she took to caring for Annie, she was the nurturing type. And the nurturing didn't stop with babies.

Laura slid a plate with scrambled eggs, ham and hash browns toward Sam. "Toast and coffee will be ready in a minute."

Sam studied his daughter. She'd spit out the last two spoonfuls of cereal and was hanging over the towel babbling at the mutt. Sam heaved a sigh of relief. Annie was obviously full.

Laura joined him at the table with a plate of her own. "Room okay?"

"Sort of," he answered, debating the wisdom of complaining about the size of the bunk beds. "But to tell you the truth, I'm a little worried about where Annie is going to sleep."

Laura jumped up to turn off the coffeepot before it boiled over. "Not to worry," she answered as she buttered wheat toast and placed it on a plate. "There's always the dresser drawer."

Sam felt himself blanch. "The dresser? How is she going to breathe in there?"

Laura smiled reassuringly and poured coffee. "You don't have to worry. We'll improvise. If you're going to be traveling around with Annie, you're going to have to find ways to make do, starting now. Although," she added with a frown, "I don't think traveling with an infant as young as Annie is a good idea."

Sam shrugged. "Don't have a choice. At least, not for now. I'll try to find a more permanent place to stay later. Somewhere I can bring in a nanny while I work."

Laura leaned over to make sure Annie was still securely fastened to the chair. “Sounds to me it’s not going to be easy.” She bit her lip, reached for her cup of coffee and met Sam’s gaze. “It’s okay to leave her here while you do your thing at the spa. That is, if you feel okay leaving her here with me.”

Sam was agreeable to leaving Annie here all right, but only as long as the photography assignment would take. “I’m game if you don’t mind,” he finally answered. “It’ll only take me a couple of days of shooting at the spa, and I’ll be back here at night.”

Laura was torn between offering him her ancient truck to get to the spa or withholding the offer to keep him from leaving. Until she noticed Annie’s drooping eyelids.

“Let’s go upstairs, and I’ll show you where Annie can spend the night.”

“Maybe I can help you clean up in here?”

“Later,” Laura answered. She untied the sleepy baby and cuddled her in her arms. “Let’s get Annie to bed first. The dishes can wait.”

Sam carried the diaper bag and trailed Laura up the stairs. Something told him the next lesson was going to be a zinger.

It was. After Laura cleaned up the sleepy baby, she rummaged in the diaper bag for nightclothes and came up with a yellow fleece sleepsuit. “Looks as if her mother thought of everything Annie would need for today at least,” she murmured. “Any more of the baby’s things in the SUV?”

“Don’t know. Frankly I didn’t take time to look around. All I could think of was getting Annie out of there before the deluge hit her.”

Laura nodded. “Good thinking. Now, why don’t you pull out the bottom drawer of that chest over there and I’ll make Annie’s bed.”

Puzzled, Sam pulled out the empty drawer, brought it over to the bunk bed and watched Laura stuff the drawer with linens. In minutes she had a sleeping Annie tucked into the drawer on her back. “Annie will be safe in here.”

Sam was lost in admiration at the makeshift crib.

He spent the rest of the evening and the night waiting for Annie to cry. And hoping that Laura wouldn’t come barreling in to rescue her. The last thing he wanted was to see Laura in a nightgown. He might have sworn off women for now, but he wasn’t a saint.

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