MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

The Cowboy and the New Year's Baby

SHERRYL WOODS

Sherryl Woods

The Cowboy and the New Year's Baby

«HarperCollins»

Woods S.

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When single, independent-minded mother-to-be Trish Delacourt went into labor on the side of a snowy road, she swallowed her pride and flagged down the nearest passing motorist. What she hoped for: a Good Samaritan.What she got: rancher Hardy Jones, handsome as sin and sworn to be single. He knew nothing about birthin' babies, but he was going to have to take a crash course–pronto!Inveterate ladies' man Hardy never could turn down a beautiful woman, so when the pregnant damsel in distress needed him, he delivered her beautiful baby girl. But what was to become of Hardy's policy of no-strings-attached? One look at Trish–and her adorable daughter–and he could feel a most unfamiliar pull….

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“You have a daughter,”

Hardy told her, his voice filled with awe.

“Is she okay?” Trish asked, struggling to sit up. “She’s not too little, is she? She’s early, not by much, but still, it would have been better if she’d waited.”

“You’re telling me,” Hardy said dryly.

“Let me see her.”

Hardy stripped off his flannel shirt and wrapped the baby in it. She snuggled in, looking as contented as if this weren’t her first minute in the real world. He glanced at his watch. It was midnight on the dot. This little one had been in quite a rush to greet the new millennium.

Grinning, he placed the little sweetheart gently in her mama’s arms. “Happy New Year, darlin’.”

Dear Reader,

Happy Anniversary! We’re kicking off a yearlong celebration in honor of Silhouette Books’ 20th Anniversary, with unforgettable love stories by your favorite authors, including Nora Roberts, Diana Palmer, Sherryl Woods, Joan Elliott Pickart and many more!

Sherryl Woods delivers the first baby of the new year in The Cowboy and the New Year’s Baby, which launches AND BABY MAKES THREE: THE DELACOURTS OF TEXAS. And return to Whitehorn, Montana, as Laurie Paige tells the story of an undercover agent who comes home to protect his family and finds his heart in A Family Homecoming, part of MONTANA MAVERICKS: RETURN TO WHITEHORN.

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Join the celebration; treat yourself to all six Special Edition romance novels each month!

Best,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

The Cowboy and the New Year's Baby
Sherryl Woods

www.millsandboon.co.uk

SHERRYL WOODS

Whether she's living in California, Florida or Virginia, Sherryl Woods always makes her home by the sea. A walk on the beach, the sound of waves, the smell of the salt air, all provide inspiration for this writer of more than sixty romance and mystery novels. Sherryl hopes you're enjoying these latest entries in the AND BABY MAKES THREE series for Silhouette Special Edition. You can write to Sherryl, or—from April through December—stop by and meet her at her bookstore, Potomac Sunrise, 308 Washington Avenue, Colonial Beach, VA 22443.

Harlan Adams welcomes the Delacourts!
and announces that his White Pines family is expanding

Baby Laura,
daughter of Trish Delacourt,
arrived promptly at midnight
New Year's Eve.
She was assisted
into this world
by bachelor Hardy Jones,
the man destined
to be her new daddy.

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Chapter One

Country-western singer Laurie Jensen kept her gaze fastened on her husband as she sang her latest megahit at the End of the Road Saloon in Garden City, Texas. It was New Year's Eve and she and Harlan Patrick had taken over the bar and were hosting a private bash for the ranch hands from White Pines. The bar was packed with members of the Adams family, hands and their guests, but based on the adoring look on Laurie's face and the rapt expression on his, she and Harlan Patrick might as well have been all alone. Married for over a year now, they were still besotted with each other.

Hardy Jones watched with a disgusted shake of his head. It pretty much seemed to Hardy as if every male he knew was succumbing to love. First his boss and Laurie, then his buddy, Slade Sutton, and Laurie's assistant, Val. Watching the two couples tonight was giving him a first-class case of hives.

Not that he had anything against romance. Far from it. He loved women. He loved the delicate, feminine scent of them. After a long day with a herd of cows, just the soft, floral aroma of perfume was enough to kick his hormones into overdrive. The shimmering silk of long hair glistening in the sun was enough to conjure up thoughts of a fragrant curtain of curls teasing his flesh while making love. Beyond that, he appreciated the way a woman felt in his arms, the sheer wonder of all those lush curves.

Tonight, in a roomful of available, sensuous women, it seemed to him that irresistible temptation lurked everywhere. In fact it was a little worse than usual tonight because he was all alone and determined to stay that way.

Not five minutes ago a gorgeous redhead he'd been out with a few times had sidled up to him and whispered an indecent suggestion in his ear. He'd swallowed hard, fought off a surge of testosterone and turned her down.

"Not tonight, darlin'." It had taken an act of will to get the words out.

Looking disappointed, she'd run a vivid red fingernail along his cheek. His temperature had skyrocketed, but his willpower had remained firm.

"Another time, then?" she'd suggested.

"Count on it."

There had been others. From the moment he'd walked into the bar, it had been like seeing his past flash before his eyes. Los Piños, where White Pines ranch was located, and Garden City were hardly major metropolises. He was pretty sure he'd met—if not dated—most of the single women in both cities at one time or another.

The truth was he'd made it a point to be thorough. At least half of the women here tonight were listed in his little black book, a virtual Who's Who of his bachelorhood. It seemed as if his buddies had invited every available female from a hundred-mile radius just to torment him.

As for his little black book, it was dog-eared and invaluable. He touched his pocket just to be sure it was safely tucked there. There were phone numbers in those pages for hot, sultry women who could make a man's vision blur with a kiss. There were numbers for all-American women who liked hiking and sports, for some who could cook a mouthwatering gourmet meal, and for some who could simply make him laugh. He'd slept with fewer of them than most people thought, but probably more than was wise.

Some he'd only been out with once or twice. A handful had lasted longer, until he'd started to notice the way their gazes lingered on the diamonds every time they strolled past a jewelry store. He'd crossed out any who were inclined toward jealous rages.

Yes, indeed, that little book was worth its weight in gold. The men in the bunkhouse at White Pines had offered him all sorts of incentives just to get a peek, but he kept it private. His social life was nobody's business but his own, even though an awful lot of people thought otherwise.

Of course, seeing so many of the entries gathered in one place tonight was a little disconcerting. He'd been walking a tightrope for the past couple of hours, exchanging friendly hellos and not much in the way of encouragement, trying to dodge some of the more persistent, clever females who weren't inclined to take no for an answer.

Ever since his arrival he'd been asked to dance to every song. Drinks had been sent over. A blonde named Suzy with long and very shapely legs displayed to mid-thigh had brought over an entire bottle of champagne. If he'd been in the market for a date, all of the attention would have been very flattering. As it was, it was making him jittery. His willpower was only so strong, and some of these women were doing their best to destroy it. Alcohol, cleavage, caresses—it was enough to test a saint.

But over the years Hardy had discovered that there were two days of the year on which a dedicated bachelor had to be on his guard: New Year's Eve and Valentine's Day. For 363 days a man could pretty much date whomever he pleased without worrying too much about the consequences. Pay a woman a little too much attention on either of those occasions, however, and a man could all but kiss his freedom goodbye. New Year's and Valentine's Day were meant for lovers and commitment, at least that's how the women he knew saw them.

At 29, Hardy still valued his freedom. Even surrounded by some of the most enthusiastic proponents of marriage in the universe at White Pines, he remained a staunchly determined holdout. He had his reasons. Good reasons. Reasons rooted deeply in the past, a past he never talked about and tried not to remember. He lived in the moment, not the past, and never the future.

He fended off another admirer, took a long swallow of the sole beer he'd been nursing, and tried to relax and get into the spirit of the party. It was hard to do when the only other bachelor not on the dance floor was the grizzled cook, who only had half a dozen of his own teeth left and forgot his plate with the fake ones more often than not. Sweeney was a whiz with a skillet, on the trail or off, but he wasn't much of a talker. He didn't seem to care much about women one way or the other.

"Hey, Hardy, what's your New Year's resolution?" Slade Sutton shouted across the bar, his arm wrapped tightly around the waist of the petite woman with him. "Aren't you creeping up on thirty? Is this the year you're finally going to let some lady catch you?"

Hardy scowled at the teasing. "Not a chance, Sutton. Just because you've got the prettiest woman in Texas by your side these days doesn't mean the rest of us intend to fall into that trap."

The very recently wed Val Sutton regarded Hardy with feigned indignation. "And just what is wrong with marriage?"

Hardy pretended to think really hard. "Let me see if I can count that high."

"One of these days," Slade taunted, "you are going to fall so hard you'll knock yourself out."

"Never happen," Hardy insisted.

"If you had a woman, you wouldn't be sitting all alone at the bar looking pathetic on New Year's Eve," Slade persisted. For a man who'd taken his own sweet time acknowledging how he felt about his new wife, Slade seemed awfully eager to see Hardy follow in his footsteps. He had all the fervor of a recent convert.

"I guess you've missed all the women who've been over here tonight. Val must have put blinders on you," Hardy retorted.

"Watch it," Val warned. "I may be little, but I pack a mean punch."

Hardy grinned at her. She was a spirited little thing. All woman, too. He fondly recalled all the times she'd sashayed around the ranch on outrageously spiked heels just to catch Slade's attention. The other hands had appreciated it, even if Slade hadn't.

"Oh, if only I'd seen you first," he said with an exaggerated sigh that was only partly in jest. Val was a keeper, all right. Even he could admit that. If he'd been a marrying man—and if it hadn't been so plain that Val fit with Slade and his daughter, Annie—Hardy might have made a pass at her when she'd first turned up at White Pines.

“One date with me and you’d never have settled for a broken-down cowboy like Slade,” he told her.

She gave him a thorough once-over, then turned to her husband and did the same. When her survey ended, she regarded him with exaggerated sorrow. “Sorry, Hardy. Slade’s the man for me, has been ever since I first laid eyes on him.”

“Yeah, we all noticed that,” Hardy conceded. “Took him a long time to catch on, though. He must be real slow.”

“Since it’s New Year’s Eve, I’m not going to take offense at that,” Slade retorted. “But I may make it my personal mission this year to see to it that you’re the next White Pines bachelor to fall. If the word just happens to get out to Harlan Adams that you’re looking to settle down, he’ll take a personal interest in seeing you married. The man’s got quite a success rate. Now that his son Cody and grandson Harlan Patrick are running the ranch, the old man’s got a lot of time on his hands to dedicate to matchmaking. He’s made it a full-time hobby.”

Hardy shuddered, a reaction he didn’t have to feign. “I take it all back,” he said quickly. “Just stay the heck away from my love life—you and Harlan.”

He’d already resolved to start the millennium by sampling as many women as he possibly could. Playing the field suited him just fine. He figured his life couldn’t get much sweeter. A new woman every night pretty much kept boredom at bay. He played fair with every one of them. Treated them like queens. Respected them. Laid his cards on the table right up front, too, so they wouldn’t go getting ideas that would result in hurt down the road.

Yet it never ceased to amaze him how many of those same women—smart as whips, most of them—could ignore what a man said when it didn’t suit them. They seemed especially deaf on a night like tonight.

Yes, indeed, New Year’s Eve was a marital minefield, and Hardy had no intention of having his firm resolution to remain a bachelor blown to bits.

He checked his watch, saw that he had an hour to spare before the clock struck midnight, then slid off the barstool. “Think I’ll be heading home,” he announced.

“Hey, it’s not even midnight,” Slade said. “You turn into a pumpkin if you stay out too late?”

“Maybe I’ve got a hot date waiting,” he retorted, wishing it were true. As it was, he intended to get the best night’s sleep he’d get until February fourteenth.

Famous last words.

Trish Delacourt was on the lam.

She had planned to be tucked away in a cozy little bed-and-breakfast with a fireplace in her room on New Year’s Eve. She had it all picked out. She’d made the reservation the minute she’d seen the brochure. Her father, who had standing accounts in every luxury hotel in the world, would never think to look for her in some stranger’s home.

And Bryce Delacourt was looking for her. She didn’t doubt it for a minute. He was too controlling, too convinced he knew what was best for everyone around him not to be. He’d probably put half a dozen of his best private investigators on her trail the instant he’d realized she was gone.

Fortunately for her she was resourceful and her father was a workaholic. She had managed to sneak out of Houston while he was away on a business trip he’d sandwiched between Christmas and New Year’s. The head start had been critical. Even a couple of days might keep her out of his reach as long as she kept moving and steered away from all the big cities where her father would be likely to concentrate his search. He was probably combing Dallas at this very minute, dead certain that she’d go somewhere where she could be pampered.

But at 25, Trish was tired of being the pampered, only daughter of an oil tycoon with four headstrong sons, who also treated her as if she were made of spun glass. She was tired of her father’s condescending attitude toward her work. He acted as if the business she loved was no more than an indulgence, a cute little hobby to keep her occupied until she married someone suitable.

Of course he knew precisely whom she should marry. He'd handpicked the man for her, then all but coached him into proposing. For a time she'd been caught up in the whirlwind courtship, blinded by Jack's good looks, dimpled smile and easy charm. She had almost fallen in with her father's plan.

Then, with all the force of a bolt of lightning, her vision had cleared and she'd seen Jack for what he truly was—a weak-willed opportunist and a ladies' man. Heaven protect her from the type. If she ever dated another man, he would be ugly as sin, acerbic and completely unfamiliar with the legendary Bryce Delacourt. For now, it was enough just to be out of Jack's clutches.

She'd plotted her escape like a prisoner scheming a breakout. Everything had been going swimmingly up until now. She'd felt the tension of the past few months sliding away. She'd felt in control of her own destiny, at least until a few minutes ago.

Unfortunately a couple of wrong turns and the weather had conspired against her. Just when she'd been counting her blessings, her car had skidded into a snowdrift and sputtered to a stop on a stretch of deserted highway in the middle of nowhere in West Texas. By her calculations, she was miles away from her destination. Images of that cozy little B&B were fading fast, and the new year was rapidly approaching. Snow was falling outside in a blinding swirl. Inside the car the temperature was dropping at a terrifying clip. Her hands and feet were already freezing.

And, unless she was very much mistaken, she was in labor. Apparently her baby was going to follow in her footsteps and not do anything right.

After another unmistakable contraction, she rubbed her stomach. "You know, kiddo, you could just settle down and go back to sleep. You don't want to come into the world in the middle of a blizzard. Besides, you're not due for two more weeks."

That news didn't seem to impress the baby. Trish's body seized with another contraction, hard on the heels of the last one. This one left her gasping for breath and near tears.

Angry now, she declared, "I am not having this baby on the side of the road all by myself." She stared hard at her stomach. "Understand?"

She was rewarded with another contraction. Obviously the kid had another of her traits: he or she wouldn't listen to reason, either.

Convinced by now that nothing she could say was going to change the course of events, she yanked her cell phone out of her purse and punched in the number for the State Highway Patrol. A blinking red light on the phone reminded her that in her haste to leave Houston and stay one step ahead of her father's detectives, she hadn't taken the time to charge the battery. The phone was dead.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," she muttered, tossing the useless phone on the floor. How could a woman who'd bought, built up and sold her own business for a tidy profit—the last without getting caught by her father—be so dumb?

"Now what?" she asked, not really expecting an answer. She was fresh out of ideas and, goodness knew, there was no one else in sight.

A quick survey out the window was not reassuring. There wasn't a house or a gas station within view. The last road marker she'd seen had been for Los Piños, fifteen miles away. Too far to walk even under the best of conditions.

The name of the town triggered a memory, though. One of her father's business associates lived in Los Piños, all but owned it from what she could recall.

Jordan Adams was head of a rival oil company. He and Bryce Delacourt had been friendly competitors for years. The one honorable man he knew, her father always said. They'd even been fishing buddies for a time when Jordan had lived in Houston, and they continued to trade tall tales about the one that got away. They still got together from time to time at business functions and at fishing lodges, where no wives were allowed.

Trish had no doubt that Jordan and his wife would come to her rescue, if only she could figure out some way to contact them. Unfortunately she also had a hunch that if he were even half the straight

arrow her father described, Jordan would blab her whereabouts to her father the first chance he got. With the circumstances getting more desperate by the second, she was almost willing to take that risk.

"Why here?" she asked, gazing heavenward for answers that weren't forthcoming here on earth. "Why now?"

As if in response to her murmured questions, headlights cut through the pitch-black darkness. In such wide-open spaces, there was no way to tell just how far away they might be. She had to act and act quickly. There was no time to worry about the dangers of attracting a stranger's attention when she was all alone in the middle of nowhere. She needed help. She had to take her chances. Her baby's life was at stake. She'd already made a lot of sacrifices for the child she was carrying. This could be the most important one of all.

She jabbed frantically at the button to turn on her blinking hazard lights, then awkwardly heaved herself out of the car to signal to the oncoming driver. Her feet skidded on the icy road and she clung to the car door to keep herself upright. More cautious now, she managed to slip-slide her way into the middle of the road, waving frantically, praying that the driver had at least a smidgen of the Good Samaritan in his soul.

At the last possible second what turned out to be a late-model, fancy pickup swerved, then skidded to a halt. The driver emerged cursing a blue streak. He ate up the distance between them in three long strides. Naturally he didn't slip. In fact, he didn't even seem aware that the ground was six inches deep in fresh snow on top of a sheet of slippery ice. She had to admire his agility, if not his choice of vocabulary.

When he was practically toe-to-toe with her, he scowled down, looking as if he would like very much to shake her. "Lady, are you out of your mind? I could have killed you."

Trish gazed up into eyes blazing with anger and what she hoped was at least a tiny hint of worry. Hoping to capitalize on that concern, she opened her mouth to explain her urgent predicament, but before she could, another wave of pain washed over her.

To her chagrin, she crumpled to the ground, right at the feet of the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen. If she hadn't been panting so hard, she might have sighed, maybe over him, maybe over the indignity of it all. Her only consolation was that, like Jack, this guy probably had women fainting at his feet all the time.

Chapter Two

"What the devil?"

Hardy dropped to his knees, oblivious to the biting cold wind and the six inches of wet snow that had made driving treacherous. What had happened to the woman? Had he hit her after all? Or was she some sort of insurance scam artist who was only pretending to be injured?

Or maybe just a nut case with a death wish? After all, she had planted herself directly in front on his oncoming truck on an icy road, all but asking him to run her down.

Whatever she was, at the moment she was clutching her stomach and writhing in pain. No matter which way he looked at it, that was not a good sign. If she was faking it, she was doing a really fine job of it. He was certainly buying it, and he was about as cynical as any man could be.

"Miss, are you okay?" he asked, gingerly brushing silky, blond hair back from a face streaked with tears. He couldn't quite bring himself to try to slap her back into consciousness.

"Come on now, darlin', wake up for me."

Finally, wide, blue eyes fluttered open, then promptly glazed over with unmistakable pain. Any lingering doubts he'd had about her faking it vanished.

"Are you okay?" he asked again, conducting a quick visual survey to try to determine if there were any cuts or broken bones.

"No, dammit, I am not okay," she snapped.

The words were ground out between panting breaths that might have been alarming if he hadn't just noticed the size of her swollen belly. How he could have missed it was beyond him. Maybe he'd been too entranced by that delicate, angelic face of hers, too distracted by the tears that smudged her cheeks. He cursed his ingrained tendency to get all caught up at the sight of a pretty woman and lose control of his common sense. He had a feeling the occasion called for really clear thinking. A pregnant woman in pain and flat on her back in the snow was not a good thing.

"You're having a baby," he said in a bemused tone, which was not exactly the brilliant observation of a man who'd gotten a firm grip on reality.

"Great deduction, Einstein," she said, clearly not impressed with his quick wit.

He continued to grapple with the implications. "Here?" he asked uneasily. Surely she wasn't in labor. Surely she'd just slipped and landed a little too hard. This wasn't the time or the place to be having a baby, and he definitely wasn't the right person to expect to assist in the delivery.

"Not if someone would get me to a blasted hospital." She glanced around in an obviously exaggerated search of the barren landscape. "Looks to me like you're elected, cowboy."

Sweet heaven, it was every bit as bad as he'd feared. She didn't seem any more overjoyed about the circumstances than he was. In fact, underneath that smart-mouthed sass of hers, she was probably scared to death. He couldn't say he blamed her. He was bordering on real alarm himself.

"Well, are you going to stand here all night or are you going to do something?" she demanded, rubbing her belly.

The movement of her hand all but mesmerized him. He'd never felt a baby move inside a woman before, never thought he wanted to, but for some reason he had to fight an urge to do so now. His willpower, already tested to its limits tonight, was called into play to restrain him from covering her hand with his own. As he struggled with himself, she scowled.

"Wake up," she snapped. "You aren't drunk, are you?"

"Stone-cold sober," he assured her. More was the pity. If he'd had more than one beer, he'd still be in Garden City, a long way from this woman and her problem.

"I hate to rush you, but I really think we need to get going," she said with renewed urgency. "Unless you'd like to loan me your truck and let me go on my own."

"Nobody drives my truck," he said tersely.

“Why am I not surprised?” she muttered. “Then how about we hit the road, cowboy? This situation is only going to get worse with time.”

Her cheeks were damp with tears, which she brushed at impatiently. Clearly, she wasn’t used to having to count on someone else, and even more clearly, she didn’t like it.

Although in a practical way he could see her point, Hardy was not overjoyed with the plan. Tears rattled him. He hated to see anyone or anything in pain. And the mere thought of babies gave him hives almost as severe as the thought of marriage. He sincerely regretted being so anxious to flee the End of the Road Saloon. Normally cool and calm in a crisis, for some reason he couldn’t seem to snap into action the way the situation required. No wonder she was losing patience.

“Where’s your husband?” he asked, aware that he sounded just a little desperate. It was clear enough that the man wasn’t close enough to help them out of this jam.

“No hus…band.” She bit the words out between gasps.

Before he realized what she intended, she seized his hand in a grip that an ex-rodeo star like Slade Sutton would have admired. There wasn’t a bull on the circuit that could have thrown anyone hanging on that tightly. Hardy gently tried to extricate his fingers.

It was finally beginning to sink in that he had two choices: he could turn around and drive her to the hospital in Garden City or he could deliver the baby himself right here on the side of the road.

Over the years he’d delivered his share of calves and foals. He supposed he understood the rudiments of giving birth to a baby, but it seemed like an awfully personal activity to engage in with a complete stranger, especially one who was eyeing him as balefully as if he were the one responsible for her being in this predicament.

He figured this was no time for asking all the million and one questions that occurred to him, such as what she was doing out here all alone with a baby due any second. Terrified that the decision might be taken from him, he reached down and scooped the woman into his arms.

“Don’t panic,” he soothed. He figured he was panicked enough for both of them. “I’ll have you at the hospital in no time.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far,” he reassured her. Too blasted far, he thought. Contractions as hard and fast as she was having them were not a good sign. Even he had sense enough to recognize that.

“Don’t push,” he cautioned as he settled her into the cab of his truck. “Whatever you do, don’t push.”

“Easy for you to say,” she muttered, clinging to the door with a white-knuckled, viselike grip as another contraction washed over her.

Hardy leaned down and gazed into her eyes. “Sweetheart, you are not going to have this baby in my truck.” It was part reassurance, part command. Apparently the baby didn’t get the message, because a scream ripped from the woman’s throat.

“Oh, my God, the baby’s coming.” Tears streamed down her cheeks, unchecked now, as she gave in to panic. “Do something. Please.”

Hardy sucked in a deep breath of the chilly night air and reached a hasty conclusion. Like it or not, he was about to be midwife to this woman’s baby. He touched her cheek with a soothing caress, trying not to notice how soft it felt to his callused fingers. She’d already proven beyond a doubt just how much trouble she could bring into a man’s life. The last thing he needed was to be attracted to her. This was about helping her out of a jam, nothing more. He’d get this over with, deliver her to the hospital and wash his hands of her. It sounded like a sensible plan to him.

She turned those huge blue eyes of hers on him, blinking back a fresh batch of tears. “Help me, please.”

The plea cut straight through him and propelled him into action.

“Shh,” he whispered. “It’s going to be just fine. I’ll just spread a couple of blankets on the seat here so you’ll be more comfortable, and we’ll get this show on the road.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” she asked hopefully, struggling to stretch out in the cramped confines of the pickup.

“Enough,” he promised. Calves, foals, babies. Nothing to it, he reassured himself. Just concentrate and help nature along.

After that, everything happened so fast he could hardly catch his breath. The next thing he knew, he was holding a tiny baby girl in his arms. She was screaming her lungs out, but she was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. Tiny fingers and toes, every one of them perfect. A swirl of soft brown fuzz on her head. Eyes as blue as her mama’s.

Amazing, powerful, unfamiliar feelings swept through him. He felt exhilarated, even more satisfied than he ever had after rambunctious sex. He had a hunch nothing he ever did would match the experience he had just shared with a woman he was never likely to see again.

He gazed into her anxious eyes. “You have a daughter,” he told her, his voice filled with awe.

“Is she okay?” the woman asked, struggling to sit up. “She’s not too little, is she? She’s early, not by much, but still it would have been better if she’d waited.”

“You’re telling me,” Hardy said dryly.

“Let me see.”

“In a second. Let me clean her up a little, get her warmed up in something comfortable. Not that I’m any expert, but she looks just about right to me,” he reassured her.

He stripped off his flannel shirt and wrapped the baby in it. She snuggled in, looking as contented as if this weren’t her first minute in the real world. He glanced at his watch. It was midnight on the dot. This little one had been in quite a rush to greet the new millennium.

Grinning, he placed the little sweetheart gently in her mama’s arms. “Happy New Year, darlin’.”

Hardy had a feeling it was going to be a long, long time before he got this New Year’s out of his head. Next year he might even break tradition and have a date. Surely a date couldn’t complicate his life any more than this stranger had.

“Oh, my God, she’s beautiful,” the woman whispered, then glanced at him. “Isn’t she the most beautiful baby you’ve ever seen?”

“A real knockout,” he concurred. “Now what say we bundle the two of you up and get you to the hospital?” He regarded her worriedly. “Sorry about the accommodations, but you’ll have to sit up and hold the baby. Think you’ll be able to?”

She nodded, her gaze never leaving her baby’s face. She had to be uncomfortable, but with his assistance she struggled into a semi-upright position, then settled the baby in her arms.

When he was satisfied that she and the baby were as comfortable as they could be, Hardy eased the truck back onto the highway, turned around and headed toward Garden City. Although the condition of the roads required his full attention, he couldn’t keep his gaze from straying to his companions. After a few, slow-going miles, both of them fell asleep, clearly exhausted by the whole ordeal.

Hardy, however, felt as wired as if he’d just downed a full pot of Sweeney’s coffee. Normally he liked to tune in a country music station while he drove, but he didn’t want to risk waking either mother or baby, so he hummed quietly. Christmas carols seemed oddly appropriate, so he went through a whole medley of them.

He calculated the time it would take him to get to the hospital, glad that his grown-up passenger wasn’t awake to notice just how far away it was and just how big his lie had been when he’d told her before the birth that he thought they could make it. It had taken him better than half an hour to get from the party to where he’d been intercepted. The roads were worse now. Aware that he was carrying precious cargo, he was creeping along even slower than he would have been normally.

It was nearly one by the time he saw the lights of Garden City, another fifteen minutes before he saw the turnoff to the hospital. All that time and there hadn’t been a peep from either of his ladies. He regarded them worriedly as he drove to the emergency entrance. What if they weren’t okay? What

if he'd done something wrong? What if the mama was bleeding to death? What was wrong with him? He should have driven faster, found a phone and called for help, something.

The roads around the hospital had been sanded. Even so, with the snow still coming down, the truck skidded when he tried to stop behind an ambulance, barely missing the back bumper of the emergency vehicle. Hardy bolted from the cab. Perfectly aware that he was acting a little like a crazy man, he raced into the emergency room shouting for help.

A nurse came flying out of a cubicle in the back, followed by a familiar face. He'd never been so glad to see anyone in his life as he was to see Lizzy Adams-Robbins, daughter of Harlan Adams and, far more important, a full-fledged doctor.

"What on earth?" she said when she saw him. "Hardy, what's wrong? Has there been an accident? You were at the White Pines party, weren't you? Did somebody get hurt?"

"Outside," he said. "My truck. A woman and a baby." For a man known for his glib tongue, he was having serious trouble forming sentences.

"Is the baby sick?" she asked, already moving toward the door at an admirably brisk pace.

"Newborn," he said, then drew in a deep breath and announced, "I delivered her."

Lizzy stopped and stared. So did the nurse who'd been running alongside.

"You delivered a baby?" Lizzy echoed. "Where? Why?"

"Just help them. Make sure they're okay," he said. "Don't you need a stretcher or a wheelchair or something?"

"Got it," the nurse said, grabbing a wheelchair.

Lizzy raced past him. Outside, they found the baby squalling and her mama just coming awake. Hardy helped Lizzy get the two of them into the wheelchair, then stood back as she whipped them inside.

Suddenly feeling useless, Hardy stayed where he was. He sucked in a deep breath of the cold air and tried to calm nerves that suddenly felt strung tight as a bow. It was over now. The woman and her baby were in the hands of professionals. He could go on home, just as he'd planned.

But for some reason he couldn't make himself leave. He moved the truck to a parking space, then went back inside. He grabbed a soda from a vending machine, then settled down to wait for news.

He watched the clock ticking slowly, then stood up and began to pace. There was no sign of Lizzy or the nurse. Seconds ticked past, then minutes, then an hour.

Hardy was just about to charge into the treatment area and demand news, when the nurse returned.

"Everybody's doing fine," she assured him. "They've checked the mother and the baby from stem to stern and there are no complications. You did a great job, Dad."

Hardy started at her assumption. "I'm not the father," he informed her quickly. "I don't even know the woman."

The nurse didn't seem to believe him. She regarded him with amused skepticism that suggested she recognized him and that she'd heard tales about Hardy Jones. Since he'd dated quite a few people on staff at the hospital, it was entirely possible she had.

"Really," he insisted. "I found her by the side of the road. Her car had skidded into a snowdrift."

"Whatever you say."

"No, really. I'd never seen her before tonight."

She grinned. "Young man, you don't have to convince me. I believe you." She winked. "Of course, I also believe in the tooth fairy and Santa Claus."

Hardy sighed. Word of this was going to spread like wildfire. He could just imagine what the rumors would be like by morning. He'd never live it down.

"I have some paperwork here," the nurse said. "If you'd just fill out these forms for me, I'd appreciate it."

His frustration mounted at her refusal to take his word for the fact that he didn't know the woman in the back room. "I can't help you. I don't know her. I don't even know her name. I don't know where she's from. I don't know what sort of insurance she has. Ask her."

"She's pretty well wiped out," the nurse said.

"Then look in her purse. She probably has ID in there, an insurance card, whatever you need."

"I can't go through her purse," the nurse retorted with a touch of indignation. "I just thought, given your relationship, that you could provide the necessary information."

"There is no relationship," Hardy said tightly. "None. What about that word don't you understand?"

The nurse withdrew the papers with a heavy sigh. "They're not going to like this in the billing office."

Hardy whipped his checkbook out of his back pocket. "How much?"

The nurse blinked. "What?"

"I asked you how much. I'll write a check for it."

"I don't know the charges, not yet. She'll be here overnight at least. There will be routine tests for the baby."

"Then give me something to sign and send me the bill."

"You said you don't know her."

"I don't, but I wouldn't want your precious paperwork messed up. Just send me the bill, okay?"

The bright patches of color on the nurse's cheeks suggested embarrassment, but she popped some papers in front of him, anyway. Hardy signed them all. He knew, even as he scrawled his signature in half a dozen places, that he was dooming himself. After all, what kind of fool would pay for the hospitalization of a woman he didn't even know? Obviously everyone was going to jump to a far different conclusion.

Well, so be it, he thought as he jammed his checkbook back in his pocket and headed for the exit. What was it they said? No good deed goes unpunished. Between his reputation and his bank account, it looked as if he were going to take a real hit.

Then he thought of the baby and the sassy woman who'd been forced to trust him with their lives. What if they did cost him a few bucks? What if he took a little ribbing for a few weeks? It would pass soon enough.

And in the meantime he could remember forever that he'd been part of a miracle, the kind of unexpected miracle that a bachelor was unlikely to experience, the kind of miracle that assured a man of God's presence. What price could he put on that?

Chapter Three

The last thing Trish remembered was falling asleep, her baby in her arms, as the stranger rushed her to the hospital. She'd been exhausted, but she had never before felt such contentment, such an incredible sense of accomplishment.

She woke up to bright lights and chaos as three people swept her from the truck, wheeled her into the emergency room, then took her baby from her arms and clucked over her bravery. Once she was inside, there was no further sign of her reluctant hero. He vanished just as quickly as he'd appeared earlier. She hadn't even had time to thank him properly, to apologize for the grief she'd given him.

No one seemed to stay still long enough for her to ask a single question. Finally she latched on to the sleeve of a pretty, dark-haired woman whose bedside manner had been gentle, cheerful and briskly efficient. She read the name printed on her tag: Lizzy Adams-Robbins, M.D.

"Doctor, is my baby all right?" she asked. "She was a couple of weeks early, and I was in the middle of nowhere when she decided to come. The man who helped was wonderful, but he wasn't a doctor…" She realized she was babbling but she couldn't seem to stop.

"Your baby is perfectly healthy," the woman assured her. "She weighed in at a respectable seven pounds, three ounces. Terrific lung power. Despite the circumstances of her untimely arrival, I'd say everything turned out just fine."

Trish remembered the baby's wails and couldn't help smiling. "She already has a lot to say for herself, doesn't she? No wonder she was so anxious to get here."

The doctor grinned, then patted her hand sympathetically. "Right this second you may find that charming, but take it from me, you won't feel that way a week from now when she's been waking you out of a sound sleep a couple of times a night. By the way, have you decided on a name for her?"

Trish hadn't given the matter of naming the baby a lot of thought. Despite the increasing size of her belly, the routine of prenatal visits and regular kicks from an active baby, she had somehow gotten the idea that she had forever before she had to decide on anything as important as a name. She'd been too busy trying to plan her escape and steer clear of her father, who was dead set on having her marry the baby's father.

Even now with the baby a reality and the future uncertain, she still knew with absolute certainty that she wouldn't marry Jack Grainger if he were the last man on earth. On the same day she'd found out she was pregnant, she had also discovered that he'd been seeing at least two other women—intimately—while he was supposedly engaged to her.

Even if those two pieces of news hadn't collided headfirst, she would have wriggled out of the engagement. She'd discovered that Jack bored her to tears, maybe because he was so busy with his other women that he hadn't had time for her. She suspected he hadn't been any more overjoyed by the prospect of marriage than she had been. He'd just been too much in awe of her father—or her father's fortune, more likely—not to go along with Bryce's plans for the two of them.

Very methodically she had gone about quietly selling her business to a friend who'd expressed interest in it. She'd put her furniture in storage and slipped out of Houston. She'd been heading west to start the new year and a new life…someplace, when she'd gone into labor. The fact that her daughter had arrived early did not alter her determination to move ahead with her plans, and they definitely did not include Jack or any of the Delacourts.

The baby was her responsibility, and she was going to do right by her. That started with giving her a name she could be proud of, honoring someone who deserved it. Certainly not Jack. Certainly not anyone in her own family, since they'd all been far more concerned about convention than about her well-being or the baby's. Assuming that the marriage was a foregone conclusion, her mother had pleaded with her more than once to rush the wedding so that her pregnancy wouldn't show. When

Trish had made it plain that there was to be no wedding despite her father's wishes, her mother had been appalled.

"What will we tell people?" she had demanded.

"That your daughter had better sense than to marry a man she didn't love."

"What does love have to do with it?" her mother had asked, genuinely perplexed. "I thought the two of you got along well enough. Jack is suitable. You've known him for years now. He has a place in your father's company, the promise of a vice presidency after the wedding."

That, of course, had been Jack's incentive. She'd had none, not any longer. "I've only known the side of him he wanted me—wanted us—to see. I certainly didn't know about the other women."

Ironically, her mother hadn't seemed nearly as surprised or dismayed about that as Trish had been. "You knew, didn't you?" Trish had charged, stunned that her mother would keep something like that from her.

"There were rumors," her mother admitted, then waved them off as unimportant. "You know how it is. A handsome man will always have women chasing after him. It's something you get used to, something you just accept."

"True," Trish agreed. "The difference is an honorable man, a man who actually cares about his fiancée, doesn't let them catch him."

"You're being too hard on him, don't you think? He was just having a little premarital fling."

"Or two," Trish said, wondering for the first time whether her father's behavior was responsible for her mother's jaded view of marriage. As far as she'd known, her father had never strayed, but maybe she'd been blind to it.

"Never mind," Trish had said finally. "It's clear we don't see eye-to-eye on this. Bottom line, hell will freeze over before I marry Jack. I'm sorry, but you'll just have to get used to the disgrace of it, Mother."

Of course she hadn't. Straight through until Christmas Day, with Trish's due date just around the corner, Helen Delacourt had remained fiercely dedicated to seeing Trish and Jack married. Without informing Trish, she had even included him on the guest list for the family's holiday dinner. When he'd arrived, Trish had promptly developed a throbbing headache and excused herself. Even as she went to her room, she could hear her mother apologizing for her. If she hadn't already been planning to leave town, overhearing her mother's pitiful attempts to placate the louse would have spurred her to take off.

"Hey, where'd you go?" the doctor asked gently.

Back to a place she hoped never to set foot in again, Trish thought to herself. "Sorry. I guess my mind wandered for a minute. What were we talking about?"

"Naming your baby."

"Of course." She thought of the man who'd helped her. He might have been caught off guard. He might not have wanted any part of the crisis she had thrust him into, but he'd pulled through for her. She and her baby were fine, thanks to him. "Do you happen to know the man who brought me in?" she asked the doctor.

"Sure. He works at my father's ranch." She chuckled. "I've got to tell you I've never seen a man so relieved to get to a hospital in my life."

"What's his name?"

"Hardy Jones. I'm not sure where the nickname comes from. I've heard Daddy say it has to be short for hardheaded because he's resisted every single attempt that's been made to get him married off. You'd have to know my father to understand how annoying he finds that. He's not happy unless he's matchmaking and he's not ecstatic unless it's paying off."

"Well, I certainly can't name the baby that," Trish said, disappointed. "Do I have to decide right now?"

"No, indeed. We'll need it before you leave the hospital, but it can wait. You take your time and think it over. Get some rest now. I'll be back to check on you later, and the nurses will bring the baby in soon so you can feed her."

Trish lay back against the pillows and let her eyes drift shut. The image that came to mind wasn't of her baby, but of the cowboy who'd delivered her.

"Hardy," she murmured on a sigh. A strong man with a gentle touch. She could still feel the caress of his work-roughened hands as he'd helped her in one of the most terrifying, extraordinary, wondrous moments of her life. No matter what happened in all the years that stretched ahead, she would never forget him, never forget the miracle they'd shared.

"Hey, Hardy, I hear you're a gen-u-ine hero," one of the men taunted at the bunkhouse the next morning. Hardy grimaced and concentrated on spooning his oatmeal into his mouth.

"Yes, indeed, our boy has delivered himself a baby girl by the side of the road," another man said. "Is that some new technique of courting that I missed? No wonder I'm still crawling into a cold bed all alone at night."

"Oh, go to blazes," Hardy snapped, sensing that there was no let-up to the teasing in sight. He grabbed his coat off the back of the chair and stormed out of the bunkhouse.

It had been like this ever since the word of his good deed had spread at dawn. He'd barely crawled into his bed, when it had been time to crawl out again. Lack of sleep had left him testy. By the time everyone had come back in from their chores for breakfast, he'd been the nonstop subject of their good-natured taunts. Even the untalkative Sweeney had thrown out a sly comment while he'd dished up the oatmeal.

Outside, Hardy drew in a deep breath and tried to clear his lungs of the smoke that permeated the dining room.

"Hardy, could I have a word with you?" Cody Adams called out, poking his head out the door of his office and beckoning for Hardy to come inside.

Hardy walked over and followed his boss into the cluttered office, wondering what his boss wanted to discuss. For the last year or so Cody had let his son, Harlan Patrick, deal with the hands more often than not. Cody ran the business side of things, analyzing the market for beef on his computer, determining the best time to take the cattle to market, tracking down the best new bulls for breeding. Harlan Patrick knew the land and the herd. He knew which men he could rely on and which were capable, but lacked initiative. He and his father had arrived at a division of labor that suited them.

"Congratulations! I hear you delivered a baby girl last night," Cody said, proving right off that the conversation had nothing to do with ranch business. "Did a right fine job of it from what Lizzy tells us."

"Lizzy had no business blabbing," he grumbled. "I just did what had to be done. Dropped mother and child off at the hospital, and that was the end of it."

"I'm sure that's how you see it, but the new mama's mighty grateful. Lizzy phoned a little while ago and said she'd like you to come see her. If you'd like, take the morning off and drive on over to the hospital."

The very idea of seeing the woman again panicked him. He'd felt too much while he was delivering that baby—powerful, unfamiliar emotions that his bachelor's instincts for self-preservation recognized as way too risky. "I can't ask the men to take on my chores," he hedged, grasping at straws. "We're short, anyway, because a couple of the men aren't back from their holiday break."

"I'll pitch in," Cody said. "I still have a rough idea of how things work around here. Go on. Let the lady deliver her thanks in person. Get another look at that baby. Wouldn't mind getting a peek at her myself. Did you ever hear how my brother Luke delivered Jessie's baby, when she turned up on his doorstep in the middle of a blizzard?"

Oh, he'd heard it, all right. It was the stuff of Adams legends. Every man on the ranch had heard that story. He also knew how it had ended, with Luke and Jessie married. That ending was warning enough to him. He wasn't about to risk such an outcome by spending a minute more than necessary with the woman whose baby he'd delivered. He ran a finger around his collar, as if he could already feel the marital noose tightening around his neck.

"I've heard," he said tightly.

Cody chuckled at his reaction. "I suppose a bachelor like you would find that scary, seeing how they ended up married. Well, you go on over to the hospital just the same. Take your time. With so little sleep, you won't be much use around here, anyway. Besides, you deserve a break after what you went through last night."

No, what he deserved was to have his head examined, he thought as he reluctantly climbed into his truck and headed toward Garden City. He was asking for trouble. He could feel it in his bones.

As if the reaction at the ranch wasn't bad enough, he was greeted like a hero by the staff in the emergency room, too. The response made him queasy, especially since he'd dated quite a few of the admiring women in there at one time or another. Thanks to that paperwork he'd filled out, he figured half of them were speculating on just how close he was to the new mother. The other half were probably hoping this would make him more susceptible to the idea of marriage. He couldn't get out of the reception area fast enough.

Rather than going to the mother's room, though, he detoured to the nursery. An infant—female or not—was a whole lot less risk than a beautiful mama.

That's where Lizzy Adams found him, peering in at that tiny, incredible little human he'd brought into the world the night before.

"Amazing, isn't it?" she said, standing beside him to look through the glass. "I never get over it. One minute there's this anonymous little being inside the mother's body, and the next he or she is out here in the real world with a whole lifetime spread out before them. It surely is a miracle."

Hardy nodded, wishing he'd managed an escape before getting caught. "Yes, ma'am, it surely is."

"Are you here to see Trish? She's been asking for you. To tell you the truth, grateful as she is about your help last night, she's mad as spit that you agreed to pay her hospital bill. I thought I ought to warn you."

"I only agreed because that barracuda of a nurse panicked over the paperwork," he said defensively.

"Whatever. I'm sure the two of you will work it out."

"Maybe I'll wait to go see her, though," he said, seizing the excuse. "She's got a right sharp tongue when she's riled up. I wouldn't want to upset her."

Lizzy grinned at him. "Want to hold the baby first?"

Hardy was tempted, more tempted than he'd ever been by anything other than a grown-up and willing female. That was warning enough to have him shaking his head.

"I don't think so."

She regarded him knowingly. "You're not scared of a little tiny baby, are you?"

He scowled. "Of course not."

"Come on, then," she said, grabbing his hand and propelling him into the nursery. "You can rock her. Look at that face. You can tell she's getting ready to wail again. She's been keeping the other babies up."

Before he could stop her, Lizzy had him gowned and seated in a rocker with the baby in his arms. He stared down into those wide blue eyes and felt something deep inside him twist. Oh, this was dangerous, all right. If he'd been able to thrust her back into Lizzy's arms without looking like an idiot, he would have.

"She's beautiful, don't you think?" Lizzy asked, gently smoothing the baby's wisps of hair.

A lump formed in Hardy's throat. He was pretty sure he couldn't possibly squeeze a word past it without making a total fool of himself. He nodded instead, rubbing the back of his finger along the baby's soft cheek. She was…amazing. It was the only fitting word he could think of. Since he'd never considered marriage, he'd figured fatherhood was a moot point. Holding this precious little girl in his arms, he was beginning to realize that he was actually sacrificing something incredible.

"Here comes her mama now," Lizzy said brightly. "Don't you two be fighting over her."

She beckoned to the woman who was gazing through the window. Hardy took one look at the baby's mama and wanted to flee. She was every bit as beautiful as he'd remembered, every bit as much of a shock to his system. If he hadn't been holding her baby, if Lizzy hadn't kept a hand clasped on his shoulder in a less-than-subtle attempt to keep him in place, if it wouldn't have been the most cowardly thing he'd ever done, he would have leaped up and run like crazy.

Lizzy made the formal introductions that had been skipped the night before, gave them both beaming smiles, then took off and left them alone, clearly satisfied by a sneaky job well done. Hardy awkwardly got to his feet, then gestured toward the rocker.

"After what you went through a few hours ago, you should be sitting down," he scolded.

Trish gave him an amused look, but she dutifully sat. He all but shoved the baby into her arms. For a moment, with her attention riveted on her daughter, neither of them spoke. Eventually she sighed.

"I still can't quite believe it." She looked up at him. "Thank you."

"No thanks necessary."

"You handled it like a real pro. Are you in the habit of delivering babies by the side of the road?"

"No way. This was a first for me. Can't tell you how glad I am that I didn't foul it up. What were you doing out on a lonely stretch of highway in a snowstorm, anyway?"

"Running away from home," she said wryly. "It's a long story."

And one she clearly didn't want to share. Hardy pondered why a woman in her twenties would need to run away from home. Was it that husband she'd said didn't exist that she was leaving? If so, getting to know her any better would just be begging for trouble. He twisted his hat in his hands, then asked, "Does that mean you're not from around here?"

"Yes. I'm just passing through."

To his surprise, her reply actually disappointed him. Because he wasn't wild about the reaction, he backed up a step. Entranced by the daughter, intrigued by the mother, he was likely to do something he'd regret. In fact, if he wasn't very careful, he might be crazy enough to suggest that she stay on just so he could sneak an occasional peek at that little girl growing up. The words might pop out despite his best intentions to steer as far away from them as possible from this moment on.

"Ought to be going now," he said in a rush.

She reached out a hand, but he was too far away for her to make contact. The gesture was enough to bring him to a halt, though.

"Oh, no you don't," she said firmly. "You and I need to talk."

"About the bill," he guessed, based on Lizzy's warning. "Don't get all worked up over it. I was just trying to keep the nurse from having apoplexy. You know how hospitals are about their forms these days."

"Oh, I'll admit that threw me, but I figured out what had probably happened. It's settled now. I've already explained to the billing office that the bill is my responsibility," she said. "No, what I wanted to talk to you about is more important."

Hardy regarded her warily. He didn't like the sound of that. "What's that?"

"The baby needs a name. I was hoping you could help me choose one. Something that would be special to you." Her gaze met his. "Your mother's name maybe."

Hardy froze at the mention of his mother, a woman who'd run out on him so long ago he could barely recall what she looked like. It wasn't a betrayal he was ever likely to forget, much less honor.

"Never," he said fiercely.

The fervent response clearly startled Trish, but unlike a lot of women who'd have taken that as a sign to start poking and prodding, she didn't pursue it.

"Another name, then. Maybe a sister or a girl you've never forgotten."

Hardy thought of the older sister who'd left home with his mother. Neither of them had ever looked back. He'd go to his grave resenting the fact that his mother had loved his sister enough to take her but had left him behind.

Then he considered the long string of woman whose memories lingered. None were important enough that he wanted to offer their names.

Finally he shook his head. "Sorry."

"Surely there's a girl's name you like," she persisted. "Or even a boy's name that we could change a little to make it sound more feminine."

He squirmed under the intensity of her gaze and her determination to pull him into a process that was by no means his to share. Naming a baby should be between a mother and a father. A stranger should have no part in it. But he recalled that she'd told him the night before that there was no father. Well, obviously, there was one, but he wasn't in the picture. That still didn't mean that Hardy had any business involved in this.

"Can't think of a single name," he insisted, hoping that would be the end of it.

"Well, then, I guess it will just have to be Hardy, after all."

He thought at first she was teasing, but he could see from her expression that she was flat-out serious.

"Oh, no," he said adamantly. "That's no name for a pretty little girl. Not much of one for a man, if you think about it. Comes from Hardwick, an old family name on my daddy's side. At least one boy in every generation had to be a Hardwick. Just my luck that I came along first in my generation. You would think after all those years of saddling poor little kids with that name, some mother would put her foot down and insist on something ordinary like Jake or Josh or John."

"What were the girls in your family named?"

He chuckled as he thought of his cousins, every one of whom had been named after flowers. They'd viewed that as being every bit as humiliating as Hardwick. "Rose, Lily, Iris," he recited, ticking them off on his fingers. He watched her increasingly horrified expression and kept going for the sheer fun of watching the sparks in her eyes, "I believe there might even have been a Periwinkle a few generations back."

Testing her, he said, "How about that for your baby? I really loved hearing about old Peri. To hear my father tell it, she was ahead of her time, quite the feminist."

Trish laughed. "You're kidding."

"About Peri?"

"About all of it."

He held up a hand. "God's truth. I swear it. Somebody, way back when, had a garden thing. Nobody who came after had the imagination to stray from the theme." He finally dared to look straight into Trish's eyes, which were sparkling with little glints of silver that made the blue shine like sapphires. "Okay, forget Peri. What's wrong with naming her after yourself? Trish is a pretty name."

"Short for Patricia," she explained derisively. "It's a fine name, I suppose, but too ordinary. I want something that will make her stand out."

"Take it from someone whose name was a constant source of teasing, ordinary has its merits."

He paused for a minute, suddenly struck by a memory of the one woman in his life who'd been steadfast and gentle, his grandmother Laura. She'd died when he was only ten, but he'd never forgotten the warmth she had brought into his lonely life on her infrequent visits. She'd smelled like lily of the valley and she'd always had little bags of candy tucked inside her purse. She was the one person on his mother's side of the family who'd ever bothered to stay in touch.

“There is one name that comes to mind,” he said, still hesitant to become involved in this at all. His gut told him even such a tenuous tie to this woman and her baby was dangerous.

“Tell me,” she commanded eagerly.

“Laura. It’s a little old-fashioned, I suppose. It was my grandmother’s name.”

“And she meant a lot to you?” she asked, searching his face.

“A long time ago, yes, she did.”

Trish’s expression brightened then. “Laura,” she said softly. “I like it.”

Hardy liked the way it sounded when she said it. He liked the way her voice rose and fell in gentle waves. Even when she’d been snapping his head off during the baby’s birth, there had been a hint of sunshine lurking in that voice.

He liked everything about this woman a little too much. She and her baby were the type who could sneak into a man’s heart—even his—before he knew what hit him. Just thinking that was enough to have him heading for the exit from the nursery.

“You’re leaving?” Trish called after him, clearly surprised by the abrupt departure.

“Work to do,” he said tersely, not turning around. “I meant to go a while back.”

“Maybe I’ll see you again.”

“Since you’re not from around these parts, I doubt it.”

He hesitated, then turned and took one last look at the two of them, sitting in that rocker with the sunlight streaming in and spilling over them. He had a feeling that image would linger with him long after he wanted to banish it.

“I’m glad everything turned out okay,” he said. “You all have a good life wherever you go.”

Not until he was out in the hallway with the door firmly closed behind him did he begin to feel safe again.

Chapter Four

Trish had no idea what to make of Hardy Jones. He wasn't like any other man she'd ever known. He was brusque and tough one second, a little shy the next. As gorgeous and enigmatic as he was, she could imagine women falling at his feet, wanting to unravel the mystery of him. She had no intention of being one of them.

He'd done her a huge favor. She'd thanked him. There was no reason for their paths to cross again. In fact, he'd made it plain that he'd prefer that they didn't. Given some of the gossip she'd heard in the hallways about his active social life, she'd concluded he was a little too much like Jack. She certainly didn't need another man like that in her life.

After Hardy had gone, her doctor magically appeared in the nursery as if she'd been waiting just outside the door.

"So, what did you think of Hardy?" she asked.

It seemed to Trish that she posed the question a little too casually. Her watchful gaze suggested she was very interested in the answer. Alarm bells went off. Between her father and her big brothers, Trish had spent her entire life with overactive meddlers. She knew one when she saw one. She phrased her reply very carefully.

"He's very sweet, but he seemed nervous. He must be awfully shy around women, or is it just me?" she said, testing what she'd overheard about Hardy's womanizing.

The doctor's mouth gaped predictably. "Hardy, shy? That has to be a first. If you asked a hundred women around this part of Texas to describe him, I doubt there's one who would come up with that."

The doctor's description confirmed her worst fears. "You said you've known him for a while, Doctor. How would you describe him?" Trish asked curiously.

"Forget the 'Doctor,' okay? Call me Lizzy. I think we're going to be friends. As for Hardy, well, I'd have to say he's a hunk. The general consensus rates him as sexy, handsome and charming," she replied without missing a beat. "A real ladies' man. The word around here is that he can accelerate a pulse rate faster than a treadmill."

All the traits Trish had vowed to avoid in a man, she thought. It was strange, though. Obviously she had noticed that the man was gorgeous, that he exuded masculinity, but she'd been more struck by his gentleness, by his uneasiness around her. Not once had he tried to charm her. Of course, she doubted any man on earth would be inclined to flirt while delivering a baby, but what about today? Was she that much of a wreck that he hadn't even been inclined to try? And why did she find that so annoying? It was probably just some weird hormonal shift.

"I hadn't noticed," she said, aware that she sounded ever so slightly testy about it.

The doctor pulled up another rocker and sat down, clearly ready for a friendly chat. "I'm amazed," she said. "Flirting's as ingrained in Hardy as breathing. Are you telling me he never so much as winked at you?"

"Nope."

"Hmm. Isn't that fascinating?" Lizzy said. "No little innuendoes, no flattery, no sweet talk?"

"Afraid not." She grinned. "Of course, I have just had a baby. Not many men would flirt with a brand-new mother. What's he going to say? You look pretty good for someone who's just had a baby in my truck?"

"You don't know Hardy. The guys say…" She hesitated. "Well, never mind what the guys say. Let's just leave it that Hardy likes women. Correct that. Hardy loves women. Big, small, old, young."

Trish studied her intently. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Just sharing information," Lizzy insisted. "In case you're interested."

"I just had a baby," Trish reminded her. "I'm passing through town. Why would I be interested?"

Lizzy shrugged, unperturbed by her response. “I just thought you might be.”

Trish recalled what Lizzy had said about her father’s matchmaking on Hardy’s behalf. Obviously she shared the trait. It just seemed a trifle misplaced under the circumstances. “It hasn’t occurred to you that I could have a husband somewhere?”

“No mention of one on your hospital forms,” Lizzy said. “I checked.”

Trish stared. “You didn’t.”

“Of course I did,” Lizzy replied unrepentantly. “You have to admit that having a baby together —”

“He delivered the baby,” Trish corrected impatiently. “We didn’t have one together.”

“Still, it had to be an incredibly intense moment. That’s the kind of moment that creates an enduring bond, don’t you think?”

Friendly chitchat was rapidly turning into advice for the lovelorn. Trish figured it was time to put a very firm stop to it. “Oh, no, you don’t,” she warned. “Stop it right there. Obviously you have your father’s matchmaking tendencies. I am not in the market for a man. Hardy clearly wasn’t the slightest bit interested in me. Even you have to realize that, since he didn’t even bother to try to charm my socks off.”

“But that’s what makes it so interesting,” Lizzy insisted. “For a man like Hardy not to flirt, for him to actually act all shy and tongue-tied around you, I think that’s very telling.”

“And I think you’ve been at the hospital too long without sleep,” Trish said. “You’re hallucinating.”

“We’ll see,” Lizzy said, undeterred.

“Afraid not. As soon as I’m back on my feet, the baby and I will be moving on. I’ll probably never see Hardy Jones again.”

Famous last words.

Not an hour after she’d made her very firm declaration to Lizzy, Jordan and Kelly Adams appeared. Trish wasn’t dumb enough not to realize that there was a connection, especially when they suggested she come and stay with them.

“We have lots of room, and you need to get some rest. Having a brand-new baby is exhausting. You’ll need help, at least for a while,” Kelly said. “Don’t even bother making excuses. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“It’s the least we can do for Bryce’s daughter,” Jordan added. “Your father…”

Before he could get the rest of the words out, Trish cut him off. “My father is not to know I’m here,” she said firmly. “I can’t come with you, unless you agree to that. If you feel you have to tell him, then I’ll just take the baby and move on.”

Kelly squeezed her hand and shot a warning look at her husband. “I’m sure you have your reasons, though I hope you’ll reconsider. I’m sure he must be worried sick about you. In the meantime, we want you here with us. Isn’t that right, Jordan?”

He looked uncomfortable with the promise, but he finally nodded. “It’s your decision.”

“By the way, how did you even know I was here?”

“Word travels fast in a small town,” Kelly Adams said. “It’s hard to get used to, if you’ve lived in the city most of your life.”

“And in this family, word spreads like wildfire,” Jordan added. “Never known a worse bunch of gossips. My father’s the worst.”

“Then you and Lizzy are related?” she asked, trying to reconcile the age difference.

“She’s my half sister,” he said. “We share the same impossibly nosy father. No doubt you’ll meet him. He’s chomping at the bit to get over here and get a look at you and the baby. With luck we’ll be able to keep him away until you move into the house, but don’t count on it. He’s not a patient man.”

“He’s also looking for a new project,” Kelly warned her.

Trish managed a wan smile. “I’ve heard about the matchmaking. Lizzy seems to have inherited the trait.”

“Yes, well, I don’t know about Lizzy, but he certainly does seem to have a flair for it,” she said. “He did well enough by us.”

Jordan frowned at her. “I’m the one who courted you, remember? My father had nothing to do with it.”

Kelly patted his hand. “You go right on thinking that, sweetheart.”

Trish was fascinated by the byplay between them. There was so much obvious affection, so much love. Her own parents were not especially demonstrative. She’d assumed it was that way between all couples after many years of marriage. Obviously, that was not the case with Jordan and Kelly Adams.

He was a handsome man, a polished businessman with his well-trimmed hair and his fancy suit. He carried off the look of success with flair. Kelly, however, looked as if she’d just hopped off a horse and grabbed a ride into town with him. They both had to be in their forties, but while Jordan had a touch of gray in his hair and a few lines on his tanned face, Kelly was as vibrant and lovely as a girl. No one would have taken a quick look at them and guessed them to be a match. But judging from the way Jordan gazed at her, he adored her. And Kelly couldn’t seem to keep her own gaze from straying to her husband every few seconds.

If only she could have fallen in love like that, Trish thought with a sigh. Instead, she’d fallen for a playboy with about as much substance as whipped cream.

Well, never again. Even if she stayed in the area for a few days or even a couple of weeks, she would do her best to avoid Hardy Jones. Rather than intriguing her, Lizzy’s recitation of Hardy’s attributes had solidified her determination to stay the heck away from him. And all of the hints that Harlan Adams might try to throw the two of them together were enough to make her skin crawl.

Realistically she couldn’t take off in the next day or two, but she wouldn’t hang around much longer than that. These people could plot and scheme and matchmake to their heart’s content, but she was immune.

More important, in no time at all she and Laura would be far away. Hardy Jones wouldn’t even be an issue once she’d found a new place to settle down. She’d been thinking New Mexico or Arizona, but Alaska was beginning to seem attractive. Or Maine. Any place that would put a few thousand miles between her and the growing number of people who seemed to think they knew just what she needed to make her life complete.

Hardy was constantly amazed at just how hot and sweaty a man could get when the temperature was barely above freezing. He and Harlan Patrick had been riding hard for most of the day, checking on the cattle to see how they’d done during the storm, making sure there was feed available, since most of the grazing land was still covered with a blanket of snow. All he wanted was a hot shower, a decent meal and sleep.

Instead, as he walked through the bunkhouse door, he was greeted by Harlan Adams.

“Hey, there, son, you’re just the man I’ve been looking for.”

In all the years he’d worked at White Pines, the owner had never sought him out before. Hardy regarded him warily. “Oh? Why is that?”

“Just wanted to add my congratulations to everybody else’s. You did a fine thing the other night, helping out a stranger. Couldn’t have been easy circumstances, but you kept your head and pulled through for her.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate it, but the truth is, I just did what anyone would have done. I’m hardly anybody’s idea of a hero.”

“I doubt you’d get the new mama to agree to that.”

“Oh, she’s just grateful, that’s all.” He noticed that the old man showed no inclination to be on his way. “Is there something else?”

“Well, you could do me a favor, if you have the time.”

“Now?” Hardy asked, trying not to let his dismay show.

“Not right this second, but tonight. Like I said, only if you have the time. I know what a busy social life you have.”

Hardy searched for a hint of censure in his tone, but couldn’t find any. “The truth is I thought I’d skip going into town tonight. It’s been a long day.”

Harlan Adams beamed, clearly ignoring Hardy’s hint that he was exhausted. “Terrific. Then you have some time on your hands.”

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