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August

JODI O'DONNELL

WHEN BABY WAS BORN

That's My Baby!

Jodi O'Donnell

When Baby Was Born

«HarperCollins»

O'Donnell J.

When Baby Was Born / J. O'Donnell — «HarperCollins»,

Her newborn son was perfect.She had rugged cattleman Cade McGivern to thank for that. He'd delivered her baby when a New Year's snowstorm stranded her at his ranch. She knew that Cade's strength and quick thinking had saved her and her baby. She just didn't know who she was.Cade believed she was Sara McGivern–his estranged brother's wife. But as his feelings for Sara grew, he didn't want it to be true. Yet without her memory, she couldn't prove him wrong. Snowbound with her newborn son, Sara and Cade had to face their fears to find the truth. Because Cade refused to be the kind of man who fell in love with his brother's wife.…

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That's My
Baby!

“I had a dream…a memory.”

Cade stopped combing her hair as she continued. “Your brother told me if I needed anything, anything at all, I could count on you. And that you were the kind of man who never quit someone you loved—even after that person quit you.”

Cade’s gaze delved into hers, as if to unearth every secret thought that she herself had no conscious knowledge of. With a shudder she glanced away. Careful to keep her thoughts close. Careful to keep her heart close.

Especially when he took up his task again, tugging the comb through her hair with a long, full stroke, tugging her back, for one moment, against him.

If ever a man had brushed her hair in that murky, unclear past of hers, Sara knew such an experience could not compare to the vivid here and now of Cade McGivern.

It was heaven. It was hell. It was oh-so-right. It was wrong.

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Special Edition, where a month of spellbinding reading awaits you with a wonderful lineup of sophisticated, compelling August romances!

In bestselling author Jodi O’Donnell’s memorable THAT’S MY BABY! story, When Baby Was Born, a pregnant woman with amnesia meets a cowboy she’ll never forget! Beloved author Ginna Gray sweeps us away with another installment of her miniseries, A FAMILY BOND. In her emotional book In Search of Dreams, a woman with a scandalous past tries to say no to the man who vows to be in her future. Do you think a reunion that takes seventeen years to happen is worth waiting for? We’re sure you’ll say yes when you read When Love Walks In, Suzanne Carey’s poignant story about a long-ago teenage passion that is rekindled—then a secret is exposed. When the hero of Carole Halston’s Because of the Twins… needs help caring for his instant brood, the last thing he expects is a woman who turns his thoughts to matrimonial matters, too! Also this month is Jean Brashear’s Texas Royalty, in which a tough, once-burned P.I. seeks revenge on the society girl who had betrayed him—until she manages to rekindle his desires again! And finally, Patricia McLinn kicks off her compelling new miniseries, A PLACE CALLED HOME, with Lost-And-Found Groom, about a treacherous hurricane that brings two people together for one passionate live-or-die night—then that remembered passion threatens to storm their emotional fortresses once and for all.…

All the best,

Karen Taylor Richman

Senior Editor

When Baby Was Born
Jodi O'Donnell

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To Pam Johnson, for being there.

Books by Jodi O’Donnell

Silhouette Special Edition
Of Texas Ladies, Cowboys…and Babies #1045
Cowboy Boots and Glass Slippers #1284
When Baby Was Born #1339
Silhouette Romance
Still Sweet on Him #969
The Farmer Takes a Wife #992
A Man To Remember #1021
Daddy Was a Cowboy #1080
Real Marriage Material #1213
Dr. Dad to the Rescue #1385

JODI O'DONNELL

grew up one of fourteen children in small-town Iowa. As a result, she loves to explore in her writing how family relationships influence who and why we love as we do.

A USA Today bestselling author, Jodi has also been a finalist for the Romance Writers of America's RITA Award, and is a past winner of RWA's Golden Heart Award. She lives in Iowa with her two dogs, Rio and Leia.

Dear Reader,

When baby was born… What memories those words evoke! In a family of fourteen children, as mine was, such a phrase is apt to produce a spate of "remember when's," like "Remember when Tom was born? Dad was on the road working, so Mom had cousin Ellen drive her to the hospital, and they barely made it!" Or "Remember when Evy was born? Dad was on the road again, and the Lutheran minister's wife drove Mom to the hospital in the Cadillac. She said that car spoiled her for any other after that!"

Yes, each and every one of us has a story that begins with "When you were born…" because the birth of each and every one of us is unique. I firmly believe there are no routine births; each is its own miracle, capable of transforming the lives around it.

That's exactly what happens to Sara and Cade in When Baby Was Born. Fate has conspired to bring them together for this most memorable of births. And indeed, this baby changes their lives, and continues to change them even as fate seems to conspire to keep them apart.

It's impossible, however, for Sara and Cade to deny the bond they forged when her baby was born. Such is the power of this kind of an event. Such is the power of love.

So for the child in all of us who loves to hear about that moment when we came into the world, forever changing it, here's When Baby Was Born. Enjoy!

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Chapter One

With only a towel about his waist and one slung around his neck, Cade McGivern gingerly sat down on the side of the bed in his darkened bedroom. Twenty minutes under a hot-as-he-could-stand-it shower, and it had only taken the edge off his aches, the merest bite out of the chill that seemed to go bone deep. He could still feel on his face the raw sting of snow driven by straight-line winds.

Yup, from the looks of it, it was shaping up to be one hell of a new year.

Hunching forward, he finished toweling his hair dry, stifling a groan at the twinge of pain through his right shoulder, the result of trying to coax a particularly ornery steer out of a drifting-over washout.

Not that there was another soul in the house to hear him if he did let go with a holler or two. As it stood, he was completely alone, with nothing for company but the wind outside. It was howling a blue streak of its own.

No doubt about it, that was one wicked storm out there. He was glad to be out of it after nearly twelve hours of working against time to ensure the safety of his herd. At a certain point, though, it all came under the category of damage control, meaning he'd learned as a matter of course not to hold out hope for a whole lot of success.

Yet both such circumstances, he realized, might be about to change, with any amount of luck. Luck, that was, and Destiny.

Cade didn't know what he'd have done today without the chestnut gelding he'd been training up. Destiny had been a trooper, never faltering throughout the hours of gathering cattle and driving them to closer pastures.

Then there was the letter that had come just yesterday. He reached out in the dark toward the bedside table to touch the still unopened envelope. What message it contained, he didn't know. Forgiveness would be nice, although he'd done nothing wrong. Cade was ages past looking for justice, however. Simply having fate give him another chance would do.

As for no longer being alone—well, that'd be nice, too.

Yup, despite this blizzard and the prospect of losing cattle to it, Cade was aware of a certain… expectancy in the air that augured better times in the new year.

In any case, he sure as hell was ready for a change.

If he had the gumption, he'd see midnight in, just for the curiosity of finding out whether this hopeful impression would bear out. But he was just too dog-tired to stay up another minute, much less three hours.

Casting the towel in his hand toward the doorway and giving the one around his waist a fling in the same general direction, he eased under the thick covers.

That's when he did smell something for real: the faintest waft of wood. Sandalwood, to be specific. He knew only because his brother had favored it, even if Loren had taken any amount of grief from Cade for being so city-slickered as to choose a "scent."

Lying on his back, Cade again put out a hand, finding the letter on the bed stand and bringing it to his nose. It smelled only faintly of ink and paper, nothing more.

He shook his head at such foolishness, much unlike him. What was he waiting for, anyway? He may as well open it and get it over with.

But he was waiting for something, he realized, even as he pushed himself up onto one elbow to turn on the lamp on the opposite bed stand. He was waiting for, wanting, expecting, something more—

Cade's heart stopped cold. He stared, blinked, then stared some more.

For lying on her side in the bed, her back to him, was a woman, sound asleep.

He was too stunned at first to move. Had he got so chilled out in the storm he was imagining things? Except he felt in perfect command of his senses.

From his vantage leaning over her, he could see that she was fairly young, with skin as smooth and white and flawless as the snow-covered plain outside. Long lashes lay against her cheek like tiny feathers. A dark braid of hair curled over her shoulder. She'd evidently been pretty chilled herself, for she'd drawn the down comforter up to her chin, making her look like nothing so much as an ebony-haired Sleeping Beauty in the midst of the hundred-year sleep whose end would come only with the kiss of her princely hero.

But he was no hero, princely or otherwise.

Truth be told, though, the whole scene she presented, sleeping peacefully in his bed as if truly secure in the trust that a certain someone would soon ride in whose return would make everything right in her world, had a feeling of…of rightness about it—like the answer to a question he hadn't even known he'd asked.

She must have heard him, for the woman stirred, brow furrowing in momentary distress, making him wonder what dream he'd disturbed her from. He couldn't tell whether it had been good or bad from the little sound she made in the back of her throat, half sigh, half moan. Half pleasure, half pain.

It occurred to Cade that it was one of the most intimate things you could do, watching someone wake up. He was helpless to look away, though, even if it made him feel like a voyeur in his own bed.

Her lashes fluttered, then opened. She glanced around drowsily before settling her gaze on his hand, propped on the mattress in front of her. Her eyes followed a path up from wrist to forearm to biceps to shoulder to neck before finally meeting his own gaze.

And Cade found himself looking into a pair of the biggest, deepest, darkest blue eyes under the sun. He'd never seen anything like them, nor the expression in them, completely, utterly trusting.

"You're home," she said simply. As if she had been waiting for him. Or someone else.

Which seemed highly unlikely, given the way she closed her eyes again, as if to fully savor his chest pressed against her spine, her backside nestled against his—

He realized only then that he was naked as the day he was born. And just as vulnerable. At the mercy of the elements, so to speak.

At the mercy of this woman.

It had been a long time since he'd been surprised into such a disadvantage. Seven years, in fact.

If his face hadn't already been red from windburn, it surely was now as Cade cast around for something to make him decent. Luckily—if you could call it luck, which he was beginning to think he was on the wrong end of—there was the pair of jeans he'd thrown over the footboard earlier before heading into the shower.

With a mumbled "Pardon me," he swiftly reached for the jeans and pulled them on under the covers before swinging out of the bed, back to her, to zip them up, barely preserving his modesty in the process, and only a fraction of his composure.

For when he turned around, it was to those singularly captivating eyes staring at him as if he were the answer to a wish.

But hadn't he been the one doing the wishing?

Without a doubt, the cold had done a number on his reason, Cade decided. He noticed the letter on the coverlet, where it must have slipped out of his hand. It had gotten crumpled, probably during his exertions getting his jeans on. He snatched it up and tossed it back onto the night table, making a mental note to be sure and read it as soon as he had a private moment. Best to get back to reality with no more delay.

"If you don't mind my bein' nosy, just what're you doin' in my bed?" Cade asked, embarrassment making him short.

She pushed herself halfway up on the headboard, the thick comforter mounding around her. “There wasn’t another one made up in the house,” she said, as if that explained everything.

Once more, sarcasm got the better of him. “Not much reason for a man livin’ out in the middle of the Texas Panhandle to keep a guest room ready on the off chance some strange woman’ll want to make herself at home.”

He immediately regretted his abruptness. Even with her face half in shadow, he marked the shock in her expression, as well as another emotion he couldn’t make out.

“You are Cade McGivern, aren’t you?” she asked.

“I am,” he said, wondering how she knew his name. Of course, one had only to look on the mailbox at the end of the lane, or on any number of papers and such lying around the house.

Yet she murmured on a breath of relief, “At least I’m in the right place.”

Her words sent up a flag of warning. Who was this woman? How did she get here? More important, why was she here?

Well, he was more than ready to end the mystery.

“You mind tellin’ me what’s going on here?” he asked, gesturing toward her and the bed.

She pushed herself the rest of the way upright with some difficulty, swinging her legs over the far side of the bed and rising. “Actually, I was hoping you could tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

He took a hit of confusion when she turned and he saw what her position in the bed and the comforter had hidden from him: She was pregnant. Heavily so.

He must have stared, for her arms went protectively around the burden under her navy corduroy jumper.

“T-tell me how you know me,” she said, that unnamed emotion coloring her words and sending up another flag of warning.

“Ma’am, I’ve never seen you before in my life,” Cade said in dead earnestness.

“I…see.” She closed her eyes briefly, as if absorbing another shock. Her mouth trembled in fear.

That was the other emotion he’d spied a minute ago: fear. Again, the warning went off in his head, like an alarm, but at least now he understood what it was about.

For in the next moment an unmistakable shiver of pain crossed her delicate features.

“Oh no,” she moaned. Her hand shot out to grab the bedpost as she bent forward, clutching her belly.

Cade didn’t need a medical degree to know what was happening. In an instant he was around the foot of the bed to take her elbow. “It’s the baby, isn’t it?” he said. “That’s why you stopped here.”

“No!” She shook him off. “It’s not time yet! It’s too early!” She gasped for breath, then seemed to ask of someone besides him, “Why? I did everything I could! Everything I could think of—”

She doubled over. In one motion, he lifted her and laid her back on the bed.

To his dismay, she locked her arms around his neck to keep him from rising.

“P-please,” she panted, obviously still in pain. “Please…tell me the truth. Are you sure you don’t know me?”

Bending over her, Cade could only shake his head. “Why do you think I should?”

“Because,” she answered, her gaze searching his face desperately, “I’ve been sent to you, Cade McGivern.”

“Sent to me? But…why?”

She shifted slightly, and her belly brushed against his naked stomach. The scent of sandalwood rose up to meet his nose.

“It must be…for you to deliver my baby…and not why I’d thought.”

The warning in his ears suddenly sounded louder than ever, like the bong-bong-bonging of a thousand clocks striking midnight.

Because she was looking up at him, hitting him again with that blue gaze as deep as the ocean. And what he now saw in her eyes was aloneness—crushing and soul deep.

It reached out to him, grabbed hold of him and drew him in as nothing else on earth could.

"What did you think you'd been sent to me for?" Cade asked through a throat gone sandpaper-dry.

"To tell me who I am," she whispered. "Because I don't know."

Cade climbed the stairs with a heavy tread, dreading what he had to tell the woman in his bedroom. He couldn't imagine what it would be like for her, finding out she'd only a ham-fisted cowboy—and perfect stranger to her, to boot—to depend on as doctor, midwife and partner in the delivery of her baby.

But then, she was pretty much a perfect stranger to herself, apparently.

He sure as hell wished Virgil would get home. The old ranch hand would be useless so far as helping him with the actual delivery, but it'd be handy to have someone to sterilize whatever needed sterilizing and to keep the fresh linen coming.

But Virgil must have stopped for the night at the Old-field Ranch next over, rather than trying to ride the six miles back on horseback in a blinding blizzard. No one in the county knew West Texas terrain and weather better than Virg, but not even the most experienced cowboy looked to have any truck with Mother Nature when she got her back up.

Hopefully the hand was safe and warm at the Oldfields', but Cade had learned that, more often than not, hope bought you more trouble than it was worth.

The proof of that was upstairs in his bedroom.

Mentally bracing himself, he entered the room to find the woman walking its length, back and forth, chin against her chest and one hand on her back, the other flattened on her belly.

She glanced up when he came in the room, relief chasing the fear out of her eyes. But not the desolate aloneness that had a way of pulling him in, despite himself.

That feeling of trouble on the hoof struck him once again.

"I got through to Doc Barclay back in Sagebrush," he said a little more curtly than he meant to. He'd had a moment to put on a shirt. It made him feel a little less vulnerable, at least physically.

"Doc Barclay?"

"He's the G.P. in these parts." Cade decided he may as well give it to her straight. "He said there's no way with this storm blowin' full force that he can get here to deliver your baby. We're lucky we've still got phone service."

"And d-driving—" she pressed her fingers to her mouth for a moment, then tried again "—Driving to the doctor?"

"To be frank, you'd have to be related to yourself to be so simpleminded as to go out in this weather. It's a total whiteout out there. Even in my dually four-by-four, we'd like as not end up goin' off the road and get stuck in a ditch."

"I see." She bit her lip in a way that very nearly distracted him from the emergency at hand. "I guess I'm lucky to have found you."

It was a narrow opening, to be sure, but he jumped on it. "Yeah, let's talk about that a minute, if you don't mind."

He jammed his fingers into his front jeans pockets, knowing he was being contentious bringing the subject up when the woman was about to give birth, but he had the right to at least a couple of questions before then. "I didn't see a car outside when I rode in, but that's probably because it's half-buried under a drift of snow. You said you don't know who you are," he said leadingly, "but what do you know, like how or when or why you came here?"

Her stance turned wary, her arm around her swollen belly protective, which did nothing to improve his confidence in her truthfulness. "I must've gotten here…oh, I guess two or three hours ago—by car."

"Did you stop here at the ranch 'cause it was the first place you came to when you realized the weather was getting ugly?" he tried again.

"But I told you," she answered. "I thought I was coming to you."

Cade steeled himself against the appeal in those blue eyes. "Look, you said that before, but I'm obviously not making the connection. How on earth could you know you were comin' to me?"

"I had a…a note in my coat pocket with your name and address on it," she said, glancing around. "I must have left it downstairs."

"A note?" Was it just him or was this whole situation becoming less believable by the second?

"Yes. It said 'Sara—'"

"Wait a minute," Cade interrupted. "So now you do know your name? You said before you didn't remember."

"I don't remember." She looked at him pleadingly. "All I know is that I have a note to a Sara, sending her into your care."

Nope, it wasn't just him, Cade thought. This was definitely the strangest situation he'd ever been in, bar none. "Well, if you don't mind my askin', who sent you?"

"The note didn't say."

He had to ask. "Y'think it could've been your husband?"

At the question, they both glanced at her left hand. She wore no ring, and Cade didn't like the ensuing relief he felt. Didn't like that he was being drawn yet further into a situation that had all the earmarks of trouble.

In fact, her next words only notched up his suspicions.

"Cade, please, I know it's difficult to understand," she said rather urgently, taking a step toward him. "Heaven knows I don't. But all the way here I thought, if I could just make it to you, everything would make sense. I thought you might be…oh, I don't know—that you might be my husband, or at least someone who knew me. Cared for me…"

Her shoulders slumped in discouragement. "But you don't. You don't know me at all."

Her voice cracked, and she half turned from him, one palm still pressed to her belly, the other over her mouth, as if she sought to hold back her tears along with the birth of her child.

She was apparently successful, for she went on fiercely, her fingers closed in a fist, "I have to believe I had the right instinct in coming here."

"The right instinct," Cade doggedly pointed out, "would have been to stop fifteen miles back in Sagebrush where there's a doctor with some skill at handling these sorts of situations."

She pivoted back toward him. "I know for sure I didn't pass through any place named Sagebrush," she contradicted. "Besides, you're a cattle rancher, right?"

"What the hell does my being a cattleman have to do with your giving birth?"

"You've probably delivered hundreds of calves, that's what," she said, her voice rising with panic. "You know how labor progresses and how—"

"They're calves!" Cade broke in, his own voice sounding close to panicked, even to his own ears. "Deliverin' a baby would be completely different!"

The room echoed with his doomsday words.

"In any case, no matter how I got here or why I was sent to you," Sara said with just the whisper of a quaver in her voice that sent self-disgust slicing through him like a knife, "you're all I've got right now, Cade."

Abruptly, her face contorted with pain, and she sagged forward, hands spread on her stomach. Cade was by her side in a single stride, supporting her under her elbow as the contraction intensified, her fingers gripping his forearm, before it finally ebbed.

"How far apart are they?" he asked, still steadying her while she caught her breath.

She rubbed her forehead distractedly, as if that caused her pain, too. Had she hit her head and that was the reason for her memory loss? Cade wondered. Or had someone hit her?

The thought roused a fury of protectiveness in him.

"Maybe ten minutes or so," she answered. "I haven't been keeping track."

"Well, let's make sure we do that next time." Her face sheened with perspiration. "Should you be up walking right now?"

"I don't know! I've never had a baby before…at least I d-don't think I have," she said, that quaver creeping back into her voice, making him even more ashamed.

She was right, of course. The doctor had been extremely clear about a lot of things, but mainly that if Cade was this woman's only source of support to get through this, then it was up to him to convey to her complete reassurance and trust in him. "The more fearful she is," Doc had said, "the more she'll like to have trouble. You know that, Cade. One of your mama cows goes into labor, 'specially for the first time, it's a loving hand and calming voice that's going to see her safely through."

But this is no cow! Cade had thought, as just now he'd said.

Which he shouldn't have. He hadn't mentioned the amnesia to Doc, his own instinct deeming such information best kept to himself for now. Who knew the trouble this Sara might be in, or who in actuality had "sent" her here.

He decided he'd also keep the observation to himself that whoever or whatever force had sent her was about as reliable as the Texas weather outside, and she'd be wise to hitch her hopes to a different star from now on. Because while he'd delivered hundreds of calves, it wasn't a process that came to him instinctively. That had always been Loren's particular gift.

Whatever the case, as she'd said, he was all she had to depend on right now, as much as Cade might wish differently.

He noticed her watching him, as if actually looking for that sign, just as she had when she'd gazed at him from his bed.

Cade realized he still held her arm, and he released it.

"All right, let's forget the third degree for now about why you're here," he said, pushing the hair off his forehead and back across his scalp. "The next contraction that comes, let's keep tabs on how long it goes on and how long till the next one. Do you feel more comfortable walking around?"

"For now, yes."

"Do y'know if you had a suitcase or some clothes other than what you've got on?"

"Th-there was nothing in the car. Not even a purse."

The question seemed to upset her again, so he moved on. "When was the last time you ate?"

"I seem to remember stopping for…something on the way here," she said with that certain vagueness he'd seen in her before. He chose to ignore it, since it tended to make him second-guess anything she told him.

"So that was some time ago. Doc said we need to keep your energy up but didn't think you'd be wantin' anything solid."

She confirmed that assumption with a nod.

"I'm afraid I don't have much in the way of broth or the like. I think there's some orange juice, though. Would you like some of that?" he asked gruffly.

"Oh, yes," she said with a grateful smile, the first he'd seen from her. And damn if it didn't take him by surprise, stealing his breath away.

It was just a shade crooked, with one corner denting in, creating a dimple, while the other side of her mouth curved up. Combined with those blue eyes, it was about as fascinating as finding the first wildflower in spring.

Which made it doubly hard to do what he needed to next. He may as well get it over with.

"I…uh, I also need to get an idea of how the baby's going to be presenting, so I can tell Doc." Cade extended one hand, indicating her bulging waistline, and asked, "Do you mind?"

She shook her head.

Uncomfortable as hell, he hovered tentatively over that roundness before he gritted his teeth and touched her. Even through the corduroy of her jumper, he could feel how taut and smooth her skin was. He moved his hand downward, feeling for the baby's backbone, hoping—there was that word again—to detect it pressing up against the wall of her womb. If the baby wasn't in the normal position and they'd be dealing with a complicated birth, Cade didn't know what he'd do.

"You're right, I've done this hundreds of times with a pregnant heifer," he murmured, more for himself than for her. But never a woman.

His touch, he was glad to note, seemed to calm her, for she put her hand over his and moved it over a spot on her belly. "Is that a foot there?"

The firmness of her swollen pregnancy captivated him, so much so he didn't answer her. Every bit of her was baby, and despite the fear she'd expressed that she wasn't ready to go into labor, he didn't see how she couldn't be. She was so fine-boned and slim, he wondered how she had been able to carry such weight. Wondered how she would look without it.

Who was she and why couldn't she remember that? He'd have to find that note of hers and take a good look at it, see if he could tell who'd sent her into the great wide lonesome of West Texas to hook up with a perfect stranger.

And by God, where was the man who'd given her this child? If it'd been him, Cade knew nothing between heaven and hell could have made him leave her side.

He lifted his eyes to find Sara's upon him, questioning—but hardly indignant at his familiarity. And oh, so very blue. She may doubt it, but some real instinct of his own told him: Sara was her name.

And he would have to get a handle on himself if he was going to make it through this.

Cade stepped away. "Far as I can tell, the baby is presenting properly. I'll call the doctor back and get instructions on what to do next if you'll time any contractions while I'm gone."

He grabbed up his watch from the nightstand and handed it to her without even asking if she had one. But he needed to get out of there, away from her, just for a while, like a man needing to fill his lungs before diving back into the deep blue sea.

Cade gathered an armful of clean blankets and sheets from the linen closet and swung by the downstairs bathroom for a box of sterile gauze, a bottle of antibacterial soap and some rubbing alcohol before heading upstairs to his bedroom again. Doc Barclay had given him a bunch of instructions and told him to round up the supplies he'd need, most of which he didn't have on hand and would have to improvise. He was going to have to use a couple of large plastic trash bags in lieu of a plastic sheet to protect the mattress. Luckily, he'd found a new pair of shoestrings in a drawer. Doc said that would be best for tying off the umbilical cord. The kitchen shears would have to do for cutting the cord after the baby was born. As for a syringe to suction the baby's nose and mouth, all he had was an eyedropper. That'd do the trick.

At least he assumed it would. He and Doc had been cut off in midconversation when the phone went dead. Obviously, the storm was doing its share of damage. Cade took a measure of comfort in knowing that the generator would keep the furnace running, even if the electricity went out.

He'd hate, though, to deliver a baby by the meager glow of a flashlight. He was already enough in the dark as it was.

At the thought, his hands shook so hard he dropped the rubbing alcohol. The bottle bounced off the step and all the way down to the foot of the stairs, from where he retrieved it.

He had to get a grip on himself. Maybe he'd do better to separate himself a little from the situation, as he did when delivering calves. He'd have liked a tad more experience with women in general, however. But since Marlene, he hadn't done much associating with the fairer sex.

With a start, he remembered the letter, still unread, on his bed stand. He'd forgotten it in all the commotion. Well, he'd no time to read it now. Yet he knew that particular moment of reckoning would have to come sooner or later.

Entering the room and setting the supplies on the dresser, Cade turned to Sara. “Doc said as long as you felt up to walking you should do it. It increases the effectiveness of the contractions,” he rattled off, avoiding her eyes. He refrained from calling her Sara outright. It kept the distance between them. “What are we talkin’ about so far as those?”

“The last one was about forty-five seconds long, seven minutes ago.”

“Do they feel like they’re getting stronger and closer together than they were before?”

She cradled her belly. “Y-yes,” she said softly.

“Then it looks like we should get prepared to deliver a baby,” he said, matter-of-fact. He brushed past her, going to the bed and stripping it. He wadded the used bedclothes in a ball and tossed them toward the doorway to remind him to put them in a load of wash. He didn’t have that many changes of sheets, and they were going to need at least two or three.

With silent efficiency, he made up the bed again, making sure he padded the middle with several layers of towels and arranging the pillows in a stack so when the time came for her to give birth, her back would be supported and she’d have leverage to push through the contractions.

Cade paused, not facing her. “I don’t really have anything like a nightgown for you to change into, but maybe that clean shirt of Virgil’s on the dresser will at least cover the vital areas. There’s some antibacterial soap there, and washcloths in the bathroom down the hall. You’ll want to wash up best you can. I’ll—I’ll give you a chance to change while I check on the water I’ve got boiling on the stove.”

He plain couldn’t look at her as he left the room again. She would know as well as he did that modesty would soon take a back seat to urgency.

Talk about really being exposed—and vulnerable.

Downstairs, Cade stalled for ten minutes, busying himself with sundry tasks, before venturing into the bedroom again to be greeted by the fetching sight of Sara in his ranch hand’s chambray shirt.

She swam in it, the tails hanging to her knees and the sleeves engulfing her hands as she clutched the neckline together. The color of the shirt brought out the blue in her eyes, making them shimmer as she looked askance at him.

She seemed so much an innocent girl in her daddy’s nightshirt and not a mother about to give birth that he had to remark, “Dang if Virgil’s shirt doesn’t fit you to a tee.”

Her frown was just as engaging as her smile had been.

Cade noticed that the toes of one bare foot curled over the other. “Here, let me get you some socks to keep your feet warm.”

He fetched a pair of his own from a drawer, and it seemed the considerate thing for him to put them on her himself, rather than make her struggle with bending over.

Going down on one knee, he patted his thigh for her to put her foot up, which she did while clinging to the bedpost for balance. Cade realized right away that while it was polite, it was also the wrong move so far as his composure was concerned.

Because she wasn’t a girl. She was all woman, no mistake. Holding her slender ankle, sliding one of his rough woolen stockings over her soft foot and tugging it over her delicate heel, being close to her and having the womanly scent of her overtake his senses…all of it nearly overwhelmed him, it had simply been so long since he’d been close to a woman this way. It was like that tidal tug he’d experienced earlier, making him want to slide his hand up her calf, over that fascinating indentation behind the knee, and further up—

“Oh!” she cried, and a gush of fluid poured down her legs and pooled on the floor in front of him.

In one motion, Cade came to his feet and grasped her upper arms in support as the contraction rocked through her. Eyes squeezed shut, she clutched her belly, gasping. “Oh…God.”

“Deep breaths now,” he counseled, even as he tried to count the seconds in his head. Where in hell was his watch? “Exhale. Get that air out for me. Now a deep breath in. That’s it.”

Sara was flushed and perspiring and shaking on her feet by the time the contraction passed. He eased her down on the bed then sidestepped to the dresser, grabbed a couple of towels, and dropped one to the floor to mop up the puddle. The other she used to dry herself. When she'd done with that, he got her a fresh one to hold between her legs in case of another onslaught.

Yup, so much for modesty.

Glancing up at him in apprehension, she asked, "H-how long was the contraction? I couldn't tell."

"So far as I could make it, it lasted about a minute." He spied his watch lying on the sheet next to her and noted the time. "Looks like we're moving right along," he said as confidently as possible. He was doing a little sweating himself.

She nodded, obviously trying to take her cue from him. He could see she was scared, though. Scared as hell. "I—I think I'd like to lie down now."

He didn't question her, had been told by Doc Barclay to let her decide how much activity and what position felt best for her. Cade helped her up onto the bed, where she curled onto her left side, one of his pillows between her knees. He pulled the worn coverlet up over her shoulders, as he'd done a thousand times over his own.

It struck him then, fully, that this woman was having a baby here, in his own bedroom. In his own bed.

And it was just the two of them. Alone.

"Sorry about the mess on your nice wood floor," she said, her voice tight with embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it." He sat on the edge of the mattress, keeping a close eye on both her and the watch. Thankfully, she seemed more comfortable in this position. She would need her strength for later on, he knew.

And that time seemed to be fast approaching.

With the only illumination coming from the bedside lamp behind her, her face was cast in shadow. Cade wondered if he should turn on the overhead light, but it seemed too glaring for this intimate a setting.

"So what would you like me to call you?" he asked abruptly.

She opened her eyes. "Call me?"

"I mean, if we're goin' through this together, I'm gonna need to call you something. Like, y'know—Sara."

"If that's my name." She didn't quite seem to have bought in to it yet, as he had. "What do you say when you're helping a cow to birth her baby?" she asked.

Cade shrugged. "Well, I'll say 'C'mon, girl.' Or else 'You're almost there, darlin'.'"

"You call your cows darling?"

He felt his jaw jut mulishly. His gaze stayed glued to the hands of his watch. "If that's what seems to help her, then yes."

She said nothing for a few moments. Finally, she spoke up, "Well. I guess, then, that you—" A gasp broke off her next words. Her hand shot out to clasp his.

He held on to it as tightly as the contraction ran its course. "Breathe as slow as you can," Cade coached her.

He noticed her biting down on her lip hindered her respiration.

"If you wanna holler, holler," he said, exaggerating his twang. "Cuss and swear as the urge takes you, too. There's no one to hear but me, and nothin' you say's going to shock this old cowboy, believe me."

Her brow furrowed with effort, and putting about as much wind behind it as she would to blow soap bubbles, she said "Damn," making Cade laugh out loud.

It seemed to ease the tension in them both. After what seemed an eternity, she gave one final, cleansing exhalation, her face now gone pale and wan.

"You made it through that one just fine," he said quietly, now finding it hard not to call her Sara. He smoothed a washcloth across her forehead, brushing curling wisps of hair away from her face. Her time was definitely drawing near. He was loath to leave her again but he needed to prepare for the birth. He'd see her through the next one, then go get things in order.

"Maybe…" Cade reflected aloud "…maybe that's how we should go at this whole delivery thing—get through one contraction at a time and try not to worry too much about what'll come after till it comes. Let go of what's past, let what's to be, be. And put all our efforts in the here and now."

"Th-that sounds good to me," she whispered, eyes closed. It was probably pretty apparent to her, however, that such a strategy was more to ease his mind than hers.

Although she was the one giving birth…she was the one who had come out of the storm, without the anchor of a past or the prospect of a future—except for the pure, blind faith that a man named Cade McGivern would be able to make things right with her world.

And truth be told, that was what scared the life out of him.

"Darlin'," she said.

Cade started. "Beg pardon?"

"You can call me…darlin'." She said it how he had, drawled and dropping the G. "If that comes more naturally to you. You know, because of your mama cows."

She swallowed, eyes still closed, and put her hand over his as it rested on her shoulder.

Outside, the storm raged on, fierce and ferocious as a bull tearing full bore through a pasture. Inside, the air in the room hung heavy with both possibilities and portent. Yet a slow warmth stole through Cade. For sure, they were both all the other had right now.

Amazing, how quickly a life could change and get caught up in another's.

"Sounds good to me," he said.

Chapter Two

"Talk to me," Sara pleaded.

She saw Cade's Adam's apple bob. He didn't answer.

The labor wasn't going well. Even knowing nothing of her past, she knew this. She'd hit a period of strong, close contractions, but now they'd been in a pushing phase for the past hour. She'd sweated through the shirt and the sheets as she shifted from one uncomfortable position to another, seeking relief and never seeming to find it.

But keeping, just barely, the fear at bay.

Finally, she'd settled for sitting propped up by a load of pillows, knees drawn up. Cade, trying to be helpful, had suggested she come forward on her knees, or maybe squat and let gravity do more of the work, and she'd nearly bit his head off.

For which she was immediately and profoundly sorry. Even now, half an hour later, remembering the moment made her throat constrict with unshed tears. For some reason, she found it vital she keep them in check. Keep her temper in check. Keep the fear in check.

The problem was, she didn't know how much longer she'd be able to do all three and give birth to this baby—this baby she had no memory of conceiving or carrying, whose father she had no memory of. No memory of her own identity as its mother.

The realization struck her anew. It seemed a failure, an abandonment of her child and where it had come from.

A failure if she was to be unable to see it safely born.

She couldn't think about that. If she did, she'd lose more than her memory. She'd lose her mind.

At least she had Cade. Through a fog of pain and confusion, he was the only sure thing in her world, even more than this unborn child was. Even more than the thin gold band on the chain around her neck.

She'd noticed it when she changed clothes. Still on its slender chain, she'd slipped it onto her left ring finger. It had fit perfectly.

The fact that it had infused her with caution, and she'd decided to keep it hidden for now. She had sensed that Cade wanted nothing less than to be trapped here in this situation she'd literally thrust upon him. The thought that he wouldn't want to be, or that the instinct that had brought her to him might have been wrong, gave rise to that clawing fear in her again. But she couldn't do this alone! She couldn't lose this baby. She'd do anything, anything not to.

"Cade," Sara said, bringing his gaze back from brooding out the darkened window. He had brown eyes, the color of whiskey, liquid and golden. Just looking into them, she found herself calmed. Reassured, as if she feared she'd forget him, too, should she lose for too long the connection between them. It was still so tenuous. "Please. Talk to me."

His features gentled and, for the hundredth time, he brushed her hair from her temple, sticky with perspiration. He'd taken the liberty of divesting himself of his flannel shirt, and still the sweat beaded on his chest, dampened his thick auburn hair. He was worried for her.

"About what?" he asked.

"I don't care." She shifted, vainly trying to relieve the pressure on her back. "The sound of your voice…helps me keep my mind off of…things. Tell me about yourself."

Obviously uncomfortable with the subject, he nevertheless cleared his throat. "Well, uh, I'm a rancher, as you've already confirmed. Been doin' it so long I don't guess I could do much else. Not that there's much else I fancy doin'," he added hastily.

Even from the edge of total fatigue, Sara caught his uneasiness. "Who's this…Virgil you mentioned?" she asked.

Relief eased across his brow at the change of subject. “Virg is my ranch hand. Been around here forever, since when my granddaddy ran the operation.”

Again, he offered no further comment. The connection between them waned.

Mustering her energy, Sara persisted. “Your grandfather—and your parents. Are they still around, too?”

“’Fraid not. Granddaddy passed on some years ago. Daddy and Mother, we lost them when I wasn’t more’n ten.”

Strangely, she found herself buoyed by his admission—as if it somehow confirmed that instinct she’d had to find him. He was alone, too.

Still, she apologized, “I didn’t mean to bring up sad memories.”

Cade only shrugged. “It was a long time ago.”

“So you must have been in charge of the ranch when you were quite young.” She had noted the rugged yet youthful lines of his face. “You don’t look much past thirty.”

He blinked in surprise. “I hit thirty-one my next birthday.”

“And you’ve no other family?” Her mouth worked around the next question, trying to suppress it and failing. “Or a special…friend?”

“Nope,” Cade replied, returning to his characteristic terseness. “Just a brother. In New Mexico.”

The words sparked recognition in the back of her mind. “New Mexico?”

“That would be the state just west of Texas.”

She couldn’t keep from treating him to a cross look. “I know what New Mexico is. I haven’t lost all sense of the world.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, but how’m I supposed to know that?” Cade said mildly.

“I remembered I hadn’t passed through a town named Sagebrush,” she reminded him.

Her comment apparently struck a chord with him, too. “That means you weren’t coming from west. What was the last big city you went through?”

It was the last subject Sara wanted to pursue right now. To do so brought all the emotions she needed to keep control of from taking over. Yet she’d hazarded into this territory of her own accord in her attempt to engage him.

She closed her eyes, trying to concentrate. Where had she come from? The awareness grew, hovering on the edges of her perception and making her anxious, but this time she tried to go toward it. “I think it was…somewhere in Oklahoma.”

“Oklahoma?” Cade frowned. “That’s in the opposite direction. Was there something about New Mexico that seemed familiar?”

What was it that had caused a ripple in the vast, undisturbed surface of her memory? Massaging her forehead, she tried to think back, push the edges of what memory she had, but the effort seemed more than she could stand right now. “I don’t know.”

“Were you heading to New Mexico?”

She shook her head, which only made it throb even more. “I don’t know! I don’t know.”

Why couldn’t she remember?

Pain bit into her, shaking her in its jaws.

“Oh!” Sara’s chin snapped forward and she pressed her palms to her belly.

The contraction was a doozy, rolling through her in shock wave after shock wave. All sense seemed to leave her when they hit, chased by that stark, utter terror that was gaining ground on her by the second.

She shamelessly clung to Cade’s hand, and he hung with her until the contraction passed, leaving her gasping and exhausted.

With infinite gentleness, he stroked the washcloth across her forehead. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t’ve pushed you for information, especially when I told you I wouldn’t.”

But it had drawn him out of his remote, brusque manner, bringing the tenderness back to his warm brown eyes. Sara didn't want to see it leave again, didn't think she could stand it if it did. But she realized it came with a price to herself.

Because when the next contraction came, just as strong, a few minutes after that, then the next and the next after that, she knew it meant she was going into hard labor. Her baby was on its way. Yet still something held it back, something in her held back, for there was little progress.

She was reaching the edge of her endurance. The edge of her reason.

"Oh, Cade." Sara clutched his hands with both of hers as yet another contraction came and went, and still no baby. "I don't know…if I can do this."

"Sure you can, darlin'," he countered with quiet firmness as he sat beside her on the bed. "Sure you can."

No, I can't. She could barely hold her head up, much less hold at bay the doubts and fears boiling up in her. Why didn't the baby come? What was wrong with it? What was wrong with her? This was her own flesh and blood, for God's sake! If she hadn't the strength within her to bring her own child into the world, then what did she have the strength to withstand?

"No," Sara said, shaking her head. "No, you don't understand."

"You're right, I can't understand," Cade agreed placatingly. "No one can who hasn't birthed a child."

"That's just it! Who knows if I have before?"

Even she could hear the hysteria that rose in her voice. She couldn't breathe. The pain, the confusion, the lack of any mooring in this storm in her head—each was taking its toll.

"C'mon, darlin'." Cade's voice was steady, his gaze unwavering, keeping the connection. But even that was barely getting through to her. Panic prowled nearby, stalking her in her weakened state. "Remember our pact? Just focus on what's directly in front of you. Focus on that baby of yours, ready to come into the world."

"I know…I am…but oh, Cade, I don't even know where he came from, where I came from!" she cried, giving in to her fears at last. It was simply too much to contain.

Yet it only cleared the way for her next fear, which clambered up from the depths of her being, fighting her for expression. "I don't even know who we belong to…and why he's not here!"

Another contraction socked her, pitching her forward, her spine rounding and body shaking with effort. The pain seemed unbearable, the contraction intense, as if every muscle in her body was converging to push out this child.

But it wouldn't come! It wouldn't come, and she didn't know why.

Sara fell back, drained. It seemed impossible she'd find the strength and energy to endure the following wave.

"Sara." The name came to her as if across a canyon, wide and deep. "Stay with me now. Stay with me."

She found Cade's words unexpectedly humorous. He was the one she was trying to keep engaged in the moment, wasn't he? she thought as laughter bubbled up from her chest. What emerged was a sob, then another. Sara turned her head away as she worked to contain them.

"I'm sorry, Cade," she whispered.

"Sorry for what?"

"For…drawing you into this." She squeezed her eyes shut, but still the tears streamed from their corners. She couldn't hold them back, another failure. "You don't know me…and whoever sent me to you…why they sent me to you…it wasn't right. I don't belong…here."

He said nothing for a few minutes. Then his weight next to her on the bed stirred as he released her hand.

Arctic cold, as icy as the wind outside whistling under the eaves, swept through Sara.

Then she felt his palm on her cheek, urging her to turn her head. Weakly, she resisted.

"Hey. Look at me."

Reluctantly, Sara opened her eyes, afraid of what she'd find. Cade's face swam before her, and she blinked away tears to see him gazing at her—no, connecting with her, as she so needed.

"You're right," he said, "I can't begin to know what it's like havin' a baby—or what it must feel like to be without the anchor of a name I knew was mine, or a place to belong. But I do have some experience with goin' without the tie of loved ones. Without someone to belong to."

His gaze faltered briefly, but then came back home to hers. "And I won't have you feel so alone as that."

Like dawn breaking over the horizon, she saw in Cade's brown eyes so many things she'd hoped for, without even realizing it: reassurance, encouragement, confidence—and maybe a little bit of love.

Or was it her exhaustion, the pain, the utter despair she had been fighting that made her think she saw all those things?

Then Cade said, "I'm here to tell you, though, that wherever both of you came from, you and your baby, you're here now—in my house, in my bed, right where you need to be."

He wove the fingers of one of his large, capable hands in hers. "For now, you belong here, with me. And I won't let you down."

It seemed unreal, but at his words Sara felt the pain, the fatigue, her every doubt and fear for her child, dwindle and wane like an echo across both space and time. They were all still there, most certainly, but manageable now.

Some part of her, though, still doubted. She had to be sure. "Just…don't leave me, Cade."

"I won't," he vowed, low. "Not for anything."

Her eyes spilled over with new tears, for she knew then in her heart that she had had the right instinct in finding this man. Or perhaps it hadn't been her doing at all, and she'd been guided to him, not by some mysterious note writer, but by a force much larger than them all.

It was a gift, she realized, this trust in a force—call it heavenly or fateful or whatever—that she somehow had lost faith in, in that slumbering memory of hers.

Tremulously, Sara smiled at the man who had given her such a gift. Cade's gaze dropped to her mouth, then came around again to hers. What she saw there overwhelmed her anew.

It was that connection, to be sure, but stronger than ever, made so by the naked longing in his eyes. The power of it reached out to her, and she couldn't help but respond with an answering yearning that rose up from deep inside her, almost from another life, another time completely—

The next contraction hit.

Cade helped her pull herself forward, her shoulders hunched and her chin lowered as she bore down hard, a guttural moan of effort rising from her chest. His fingers laced with hers, and her nails dug into his palm. He didn't bat an eyelash.

"I can see the head crowning," he told her, not without some excitement. She slumped back as the contraction subsided. "Next one, give a big ol' push, and I bet we'll have him."

"Really?" she panted, not daring to believe it.

"You bet." He massaged her calves, seeming to know without a word from her that they were seconds from cramping. "When the baby does start to come out, though, I'm gonna have to concentrate on it, you know. So I won't be able to hold your hand. You okay with that?"

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, of course."

"Good. I already told you, I'm not goin' anywhere."

And he didn't, even as her agony increased twofold with the next contraction. Yet they were making progress.

"C'mon, darlin', you're doin' great," Cade urged, both hands now flush up against her intimately, ready and waiting to receive precious cargo. "Big push now. You can do it, darlin'. You can."

Sara pushed with all her might, putting everything into it, holding back nothing, for now she knew someone would be there to see her through to completion.

"There you go," Cade exhorted her. "I've got his head, just give me the rest of him—"

"Him?" she puffed, straining to see. "Is it a boy?"

"I don't know yet," Cade said, full upon his knees by now, every muscle in him seeming to strain with her in empathy. "Just one more push, baby. One more, just for me…"

She couldn't let him down. Where she found the strength, she didn't know, but it came to her, and one last time, Sara bore down. The last of her apprehension disappeared as she watched the miracle unfold as he received her child into his large hands.

First off, he checked its parts. "Hoo-haw! It is a boy! You got yourself a son."

"We do?" she breathed. "Oh, let me see him!"

"In a sec, darlin'." With barely a pause, he snatched up an eyedropper and suctioned the infant's mouth and nose.

From her position, the babe looked a good weight, easing some of her apprehension that he was early. But why was he so still?

"Is he…is he all right?" she asked, fear creeping into her voice despite herself. "What did the doctor say to do if the baby's not responding?"

He didn't answer. "Cade, what did he say!"

"He didn't…we didn't get that far in the conversation," he said curtly, still suctioning feebly.

"But why…?" Then it dawned on her. "The phone—it did go out, didn't it?"

Again, Cade refused to answer, his wide shoulders hunched over the tiny form, his face a study in fierce determination. His silence, however, was all the confirmation she needed.

Oh, what kind of woman was she not to protect her child better, to put him at such risk?

It was her worst fear revealed.

"Cade, please, I can't lose this baby!"

"You won't. He's just gettin' his bearings."

Frantically, Sara pushed herself upright, trying to see, trying to reach for her baby. "But he's not moving—"

"He will!" Cade hit her with his bloodshot gaze, and she saw his own fear in it. Yet she saw something else, too, enduring as the day was long. "He's going to be fine. I promise you."

Then, as if in answer to that promise, the baby sputtered briefly, filled his lungs and, with a grimace, gave a mighty cry.

Grabbing a towel, he dried the baby off, and Sara could see for herself that the infant was quickly gaining color. His tiny fists waved about as he gave another gloriously vigorous wail.

Cade placed him on her stomach. "There you go, darlin'—a healthy baby boy."

"Oh, you sweetheart!" She caressed the babe, wet and warm and still connected to her through the umbilical cord. But he was his own person now, even if they would forever be connected.

Hands on his thighs, Cade smiled across the bed at Sara. Even with his dark hair matted with perspiration and his eyes ringed with exhaustion, Sara thought she'd never seen anything so noble and true as this man. She'd hold the image in her heart forever.

Downstairs, a clock chimed, and she could tell he counted the strokes, as she did, twelve in all.

"Happy New Year, darlin'," he whispered.

She couldn't not do it. Whoever she was, wherever she'd come from, she had to reach out to him one more time with her gaze—reach out, grab hold, and connect. Because she knew. Knew there had been a moment of grave danger for her child. And Cade McGivern had seen him—seen them both—safely through the storm. She would never, ever forget that.

No, she'd not lose memory of Cade McGivern. Not for anything.

"Yes, it is, Cade," Sara murmured. "It's a very happy one—because of you."

And when she saw the look in those whiskey-brown eyes, it almost made her forget the slender band of gold she wore around her neck.

Almost.

Cade helped Sara to get cleaned up, best she could, changed the padding beneath her and kept the clean towels coming for the bleeding after she'd delivered the afterbirth, anything he could do to make her more comfortable and rest easier until she felt like getting up for a real shower.

He himself did the honors, giving the baby a sponge bath in the bathroom sink, as fascinated as she with the tyke.

What a perfect package he made! Cade couldn't help thinking as he finished up. Newborn calves were precious in their own way, but gangly. Swaddled in a blanket, this babe fit in his hands like he was made to, dinky butt situated in one palm, tiny head cradling just right in the other. The shock of dark hair that stood up on his head like a bristle brush had been impossible to slick down, and in fact Cade's efforts to do so had only made matters worse. He hoped Sara wouldn't mind having a newborn who looked like a startled rooster.

"I don't have a proper diaper for him," he said, coming back into the bedroom. "I imagine I can rig him up somethin' that'll keep him dry—or actually, keep you dry."

Sara let go of Virg's shirt, which she'd been clasping shut at the neckline, as he handed her child back to her. She'd declined a change into another of the hand's shirts.

"I'm more concerned about him soaking your bed," she said.

"Don't worry, I did a load of wash." Still lacking his own shirt, Cade leaned a shoulder against the bedpost, openly enthralled with the picture the two made. "And soon's I have a minute to get up to the attic, I'll bring down the cradle that's been in my family for years. I should get you somethin' to eat first, though. You gotta be hungry after all that work you did."

"You must be exhausted yourself, Cade," she protested, but he wouldn't hear a word of it.

"It won't take me more'n a minute to fix you an egg or somethin'."

"Th-that sounds wonderful." Sara ducked her chin, avoiding his eyes. "I want to thank you, Cade, for all the work you've done. And for, well, for everything. I've completely commandeered your bedroom, and now I'm going to inconvenience you further by your having to wait on me and my baby till I can get up and around."

"I don't mind," he told her truthfully. "Honest."

But he guessed what was going on—and what he was trying mightily to ignore. They'd just shared an intimate act in delivering her son, almost as intimate as the one that had made him. It hadn't escaped Cade how at the moment of birth she'd called him their baby. It wasn't theirs, though.

It was hers—and some other man's, wherever he was.

Cade didn't like that he felt disappointed at this reality, but what, really, did he expect?

He expected…something more, for in that moment when he'd set that child into his mother's arms, and she'd looked at him as if he'd performed a miracle, he'd felt anything was possible, anything on earth. And maybe even anything in heaven above, although he couldn't have said what he'd have wanted that to be.

The baby, who'd been fussing, finally cut loose with a full-fledged howl that echoed in the room and brought his attention back to front and center.

"That's some set of lungs," he remarked.

Sara jostled the infant slightly, worry etched between her eyes. "I wish I knew more about babies."

"Hell, what's there to know? He's probably just hungry," Cade suggested. "At least, that's what a newborn calf bawls about."

"That's a thought." Her hands were at the buttons of her shirt before she seemed to remember herself. In flushed confusion, she murmured, "If you wouldn't mind, Cade…"

He got her meaning. "Of course," he said, cutting for the door, feeling a little flushed and confused himself. And unjustifiably rankled.

In the hallway, he leaned back against the wall. So he'd just taken her baby from her body! And sure, it made him feel like he'd performed a miracle. Never in his life had he felt such power

of emotion before. And like a miracle, it had been transforming. But she wasn't his wife with whom he'd have shared the real miracle in creating this baby.

Was there a chance, though, that she might not be anyone else's?

With that thought, Cade realized he'd do almost anything to recover the feeling he'd shared with Sara—and that he definitely didn't like, not at all.

Because heaven and earth couldn't have stopped him in the next instant from turning back into the bedroom with the words of his own hopes for the two of them on his lips.

He stopped dead in his tracks. She'd already opened her shirt, revealing a creamy breast, and was in the process of guiding the newborn's mouth to one rose-colored nipple.

Sara looked up in startlement, trying to pull the edges of her shirt together, but the baby's mouth had already found its target and latched on.

Cade couldn't have looked away even if his immortal soul depended upon it.

For in that instant before Sara's gaze dropped, he caught the flutter of her lashes as she took in his own exposed chest. And instead of hope, raging desire surged through him in a torrent that stunned him, for it seemed an even greater force to be reckoned with—and even more one not to be denied.

Until he caught the glisten of a chain around her neck. On it, nestled in the hollow between her breasts and just above her child's downy head, was a simple gold wedding band.

It glittered in the light, and in just such a flash, Cade saw himself in his own desperate, vulnerable aloneness as he never had in his life.

From the direction of the stairs there came a clatter like a herd of elephants stampeded up them. In the next instant a man appeared in the doorway, steam rising from his clothing, hoarfrost covering his bushy mustache and eyebrows, his face white as the driving snow outside.

His eyeball-popping gaze went from Cade to the woman in his bed to the baby cradled in her arms, then back to Cade. His shaggy head wagged back and forth slowly.

"Lordy, Cade!" Virgil exclaimed. "I knew I was late and prob'ly worryin' ya to death, but I didn't know you'd take to such extremes to distract yourself!"

She could not take her eyes off him.

Alone for the moment, Sara took the opportunity to explore every inch of her sleeping child.

Utterly exhausted but still too wound up to sleep, she made a thorough inventory, counting each finely formed finger, each tiny toe, each delicate dimple. She caressed each satiny surface, reveling in a softness that felt like none she could have ever imagined.

Whatever pain she'd endured, whatever heartache she'd lived through or would live through, it was worth it for this child.

It didn't seem possible that just a few hours ago he had been inside her, a part of her, and now was a separate person—but oh! still so much a part of her, as he always would be.

To her surprise, features that had earlier been unrecognizable to her in the bathroom mirror she now glimpsed in her son: her own nose in the button on his face, a certain familiar look about his cupid's bow of a mouth.

Tears misted her sight as she clung to that recognition like a lifeline. Who knew why she'd forgotten who she was, but perhaps her baby would help her to remember.

Who else was he a part of, though? The question haunted her. What man had she so loved—and had so loved her—they had created a child together?

And where was he now?

Turning, she stared blindly out the window where the blizzard continued to blow, as all the questions she'd managed to keep at bay since her delivery rose up inside her again. Questions she'd seen reflected in Cade's eyes as they focused on the ring she wore around her neck.

The resulting desolation of spirit she'd glimpsed in him had been heartbreaking, for it was her own.

The tears standing in her eyes spilled over. What kind of woman was she? Had she only used that fine man, taken advantage of his good heart and tender feelings to keep him invested in her and her baby through the delivery?

But she'd had to! She herself had had to reach out to him with everything in her. He was real; he was there. The knowns in her life had had to take precedence over the unknowns.

And what had she known? That she was going into labor. That she was alone. That she'd been sent to Cade.

But now…now she had to ask about…him. The father of her child. What kind of man was he not to have been here with her now? Had she been trying to find him, and somehow gotten it in her mind she would discover him here?

Was that in fact her real transgression, not taking from Cade what she needed, but seeking from him what she'd been missing from the man who'd placed this ring on her finger?

"Hey, there," came a soft call from the doorway. She turned.

Cade stood at the threshold to his bedroom as if needing an invitation inside.

"Hello." A warmth having nothing to do with her erratic hormonal state swept over her. Suddenly, it didn't seem real—that only a few hours ago he'd been with her on this very bed, the two of them partners in a battle for her baby's life. It simply didn't seem possible that such broad shoulders, such sturdy arms and large hands, could have yielded over their might to the kind of gentleness it took to hold a newborn babe. Seemed impossible that, with his reserved, remote bearing, she could have felt completely cared for and safe. Because right now, the sheer height and breadth and strength of presence of him took her breath away.

She could not take her eyes off him.

And what kind of woman did that make her?

"How's the little mite doin'?" he asked in that provocative, gravelly drawl of his, coming into the room to drop a dark piece of clothing over the arm of a chair.

"He's eaten his fill and is sleeping like a lamb," she reported, covertly sweeping away the traces of moisture on her cheeks.

"Now that I most definitely can't tolerate."

The wind left her lungs with completeness. "But…why?"

"Sleepin' like a lamb?" He shook his head gravely. "This territory's strictly cattle ranching, and I'm afraid if word got out that Cade McGivern was tendin' sheep on his place, I'd get tarred and feathered within an inch of my life."

Sara was struck dumb—until she caught the amusement in his eyes. Relieved laughter shook loose any lingering anxiety. "Oh…you!" was the best she could come up with, flustered as she'd become.

For a second there, she'd experienced a riot of sheer panic that he meant to turn them back out into the storm.

Which was ludicrous. Yes, she'd done what she'd needed to, to secure the safe delivery of her baby. And yes, he'd seen the ring. Yet neither what happened before or afterward could diminish the moment when he had made her and her child his own.

But it had only been for that moment, he said. And now?

Sara only realized her mind had drifted when she heard Cade clear his throat, obviously not for the first time.

"So," he said tersely, "how's that makeshift diaper Virg made holding up?"

"Just fine. Want to see?"

She obligingly drew back the blanket as he bent close, leaning on one hand on the bed next to her hip. He'd showered, she noticed; his chestnut-brown hair shone slickly, the forelock hanging in spikes over his forehead. It reminded her of how his hair had been when she'd awakened and looked up into his eyes for the first time.

She pushed her own hair, limp and lank, back from her face. She must look a mess. As soon as she could, she was taking a shower.

The diaper was basically a clean washcloth with some extra gauze padding the front and pinned at the sides. The key component was the waterproof pants Virgil had fabricated out of a plastic freezer bag by cutting a couple of leg holes and rimming them with duct tape to prevent tearing and leakage. Two more pieces of tape secured the pants at the sides.

Cade eyed the whole contraption speculatively. “It sure enough makes him look like some home plumbing work, but I guess it does the job.”

“Baby Cade doesn’t mind,” she said before thinking.

His head shot up. “You named him after me?”

“Why, yes,” Sara said, commanding her gaze not to falter. It was difficult to do, with his face so close to hers. “I can think of no one finer.”

Shock rimmed his eyes. “That’s because you don’t know anyone else at this point!”

“I know you,” she averred stubbornly. “I know what you did for me and my baby.”

“But you’ve got to see, darl—”

Rather than she, it was he who dropped his gaze. He’d yet to call her Sara—except once, when he’d summoned her back from the depths of her despair.

“I’m just askin’,” he said, his voice muted, “what about the baby’s father?”

“What about him?” Sara said boldly. She realized what he was staring at, and her fingers went to the chain lying on her chambray shirtfront. “Yes—this ring. Obviously, it’s mine. But no, I don’t remember who gave it to me or what happened t-to him.”

To her dismay, her voice shook and her mouth trembled with more tears. Sara sniffed them back. “But whoever he is, Cade, he owes you a debt of gratitude, and I can’t imagine he would begrudge this expression of my—of our appreciation. I—I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me,” she vowed in an echo of her thoughts at that moment when he’d given her this child.

“You won’t?” Cade asked skeptically.

Sara didn’t even realize the contradiction in her phrasing until the words were out—for obviously she had forgotten, so very much.

Her head had begun to ache again, and she rubbed the knot of tension at her temple. She couldn’t let what she didn’t know keep her from believing in what she did!

She noticed Cade had gone very still, his expression watchful.

“Does your head hurt because you were injured?” he asked. “Did you hit it somehow…or did someone hit you?”

She wondered what he’d do if she said yes, because from the looks of it, Cade McGivern had it in him to focus a ferocious amount of energy toward protecting someone he cared for.

The thought calmed her, gave her courage. Lifting her chin high, she answered, “I don’t know, Cade. I don’t know what happened. But there is no way on earth I will ever forget the experience with you of bringing this child into the world. I may not know who I am, but I know that with every bit of my heart.”

For a moment Cade didn’t speak, his whiskey-brown gaze keen upon her face as if himself searching for recognition in her features, as she had in her son’s. Or was he looking for something else, something beyond acknowledgement? For lurking in the back of his eyes, she detected the same yearning she’d seen before, a desperate wanting to believe.

And she wanted to give him the assurance he could, as he’d given her, because what had happened between them was worth believing in, was worth remembering. But before she could speak, Cade pushed off from the bed, pivoting away, and her chance was gone.

“Speakin’ of identities,” he said, “I found your coat downstairs where you left it.”

He fetched it from where he’d laid it on the chair and thrust the coat out to her with a brief nod. “I didn’t want to go through the pockets myself, but I’m thinkin’ you might find that note in them.”

She again caught the skepticism in his voice. Cradling her baby in the crook of her arm, Sara took the coat from him and drew it across her lap. She didn't know why, but her hand shook as she dipped it into one pocket. Out came a pack of chewing gum and a set of car keys.

"No note?" Cade asked.

"Not here." Turning the coat over, she felt inside the other pocket. Her fingers closed over something. She pulled out a folded scrap of paper.

Opening it, she read aloud, "'Sara—if there's anything you should need—anything at all—contact Cade. He'll take care of you.'"

Relief came in a wave, washing over her. She didn't realize until now how much she had doubted of what she knew.

Handing the note to him, she said triumphantly, "Your name, address and phone number are listed, along with some directions from the interstate, but as I said, there's no signature—"

He made a strangled sound.

"Cade?" Sara asked.

All of her apprehension came back as she watched him study the note as if he were memorizing every pen stroke. It was the same way he'd looked at her—except she could see in that note he was finding recognition.

"What is it, Cade?" Still he didn't answer her, his whole stance seeming carved in stone, and Sara instinctively clutched her baby to her breast.

When he finally moved, he did so with a speed that seemed fantastic, and at once had rounded the bed to the opposite bed stand. He picked up an envelope lying there. He tore into it, read its contents like one possessed.

Before her eyes, he turned pale as a ghost, and rather than shocked, as earlier, he looked utterly horrified.

"Cade, tell me, please!" Sara cried.

In two strides he was at her side. He practically shoved the envelope into her hand. His own closed around the sheets of writing it had contained, crushing them.

The envelope looked as if it had been handled tens of times, even though the postmark was only half a week old.

Then she saw what Cade obviously had: the envelope was addressed to him in the exact same handwriting as her note. The return address said "McGivern, Albuquerque, New Mexico."

Meeting his gaze, Sara shook her head. "This is from…your brother?"

"Yes. My brother—Loren." He watched her closely, obviously looking for some sign from her, but the name meant nothing to her.

"So I must know your brother, well enough that he'd give me your name in case of an emergency. He never mentioned that to you?"

"Funny, but it never seemed to've come up. Of course, this letter is the first contact I've had from him in seven years," Cade answered.

He seemed to have distanced himself from her, was more like the cynical man she'd first encountered. Except now she knew what lay behind that hard exterior of his, and she couldn't go back.

"Is that what's wrong, Cade? You and your brother are estranged?" she pressed. "Was there some sort of falling out?"

He gave a mirthless laugh that she didn't care for, not at all. "Oh, definitely. But now Loren writes to tell me he remarried some months ago, that his new wife is pregnant with his first child. And once that child is born, he doesn't want him not to know his only uncle."

Foreboding crept over Sara. Strange she should have any kind of presentiment when she remembered nothing of the past. Wouldn't it have to be rooted in some event she remembered as already happening in her life?

But something had happened. As short as it was, she did have a past she remembered: she and Cade had shared the experience of her son's birth. And she couldn't go back to before.

She wanted to remind him of their pact to focus on this moment and not let either the past or the future stop them from living this moment to the fullest. She wanted to remind him of how he himself had allayed her fears with his own vow that still rang in her ears: Wherever both of you came from, you and your baby, you're here now—in my house, in my bed, right where you need to be. For now, you belong here, with me. And I won't let you down.

It had meant so much to her, kept her hanging on through the worst of the pain and fear. Oh, was she about to lose that, too?

She couldn't!

Sara put a hand to her head, it was spinning so. She felt as if she were trapped and struggling in a quagmire of all the unknowns in her life, both past and to come. Maybe that was why she clung so desperately to the certainty of the here and now. Clung so desperately to Cade.

She didn't want to ask her next question, but she knew she had to. Knew—because Cade knew the answer, and it would kill him not to say so. She owed him more than that.

"Your brother, Loren." The name felt heavy on her tongue. But definitely not unfamiliar. "His wife…?"

Sara made herself lift her eyes to meet his, and wished she hadn't. Memory or no, she had never seen a man look so bleak.

"My brother's wife's name," he said, "is Sara."

Chapter Three

Cade plunged out into the storm, head and hands bare and exposed to the freezing cold. At least he'd stopped to pull his wool-lined jacket from its peg and thrust it on, or he'd be completely at the mercy of the elements.

The icy bitterness felt good, though. It was like a great big hit of reality smack in the face, right where he obviously needed it.

Because the woman in his bed—the one in a moment of insanity he'd vowed was his and no other man's—was his brother's wife.

The very brother Cade had spent the past seven years wondering whether he would ever be forgiven by and, since receiving Loren's letter, had begun to hope he had.

And it got worse from there. Stumbling through a snowdrift, Cade brutally forced himself to admit that yes, even after seeing Sara's wedding band, he'd hoped her wearing it on a chain around her neck and not her finger had meant she might be free.

Free—to do what? He barely knew her!

So why didn't it feel that way?

Yet there had to be a reason for her keeping the ring on a chain. Was it something Loren had done? When? From the way his brother wrote in his letter, it seemed as though the pregnancy was recent. Obviously, that wasn't the case.

So what had happened? What could have happened, in just a few days? Of course, there was Sara's amnesia, her claim she had no purse. Had they been held up on the highway, and his brother had tried to hold off their attackers so Sara could speed to safety?

Cade endured a moment of mortal fear for his brother's safety, until he recalled the note in Loren's handwriting. His brother had obviously anticipated sending his new wife to Cade, for whatever reason.

So what had happened with Marlene? Or maybe the question was, what happened to her, since Loren had loved her to such distraction Cade couldn't imagine they'd split up voluntarily.

It was damned hard to get his head around all the changed perceptions that up until ten minutes ago had been well settled in his mind.

Then another possibility occurred to him? Was this a…a test of some sort? Cade couldn't get behind that, not by a long shot! Loren would never do that to him, no matter how hurt and angry he'd been.

Cade had gone seven years, though, without one single, solitary word from the older brother he'd worshiped since he was old enough to walk.

Which brought him around to the real questions he wanted to ask Loren, the ones buffeting him like the pounding wind: Why aren't you with Sara? How could you bear not to be with her so close to her hour of need?

Damn it, Loren had even been careless about her name! He'd written it as "Sarah," over and over again, throughout the letter. But on the note to Cade, it was "Sara." How could a man not know how to spell his wife's name?

Somehow, Cade felt glad. Sarah—she was the one Loren had gone on about for pages, his words steeped in love and devotion.

But Sara—she'd been sent to him out of the storm, knowing nothing but the one certainty: once she found him, all would be well.

And she'd said it herself: he'd delivered her baby, and she would never forget it. The act forever linked together their lives.

Cade swore soundly. He had to get rid of that thinking pronto. Sara, with or without the H, was Loren's.

Only she didn't remember Loren. She only knew him, Cade.

Loren's scent surrounded her.

The questions flew at him like the millions of snow-flakes, confounding him. Then one in particular loomed in his mind: what had Loren told her about him, the kid brother he'd given up on seven years ago—and why?

He practically smashed his forehead into the side of the stable, Cade was so wrapped up in his thoughts. He definitely needed to get a handle on himself. Men had gotten lost and frozen to death mere yards from shelter in such weather.

Feeling his way, he located the stable door, pulled it open with difficulty, and slipped inside.

All three horses stirred, but only Destiny lifted his massive head and gave a snort of greeting into the dimness. Lord, he was one smart horse! Cade had only had him a few months and already the chestnut welcomed his particular presence.

"Damn if you're not about the only one around here who does," Cade said without rancor, making his way to the stall.

The gelding had been an indulgence, no doubt about it, costing upward of twice as much as Cade had planned to spend on a new cow pony. There'd been many a fine piece of horseflesh he'd looked at that could have done the job he needed just fine. Yet as soon as he'd seen the quarter horse in that pasture, head held high and the sun glinting off his chestnut coat the color and shine of a new penny, Cade had had to have him.

Up to then, he'd pretty much abandoned the dream of training horses for a living. But with one look, Destiny had sparked the hope to life again. He didn't know how or when he might build such a business, given he was running a three-man spread with just him and Virgil, but for Destiny, he'd find a way.

Of course, if he wanted to free up some of his time, all Cade had to do was hire a second hand; it wasn't as if the ranch's income couldn't bear another wage earner. The truth, however, was that he'd never hired anyone else because he'd always held a picture in his mind of how his older brother would look when he came back and discovered Cade had never given up on the ranch—or him.

And when he'd gotten Loren's letter, it had taken somewhere in the vicinity of sixty seconds for him to play out the rest of that scene to where Loren asked if he could come back to the ranch to live—for good this time.

Now, though, the prospect of living here with Sara seemed more of a nightmare than a dream come true.

His ears were thawing out, and they itched like blue blazes. Rubbing one, Cade rested his forearm on the stall railing, hand dangling. The gelding snuffled his palm hopefully.

"Sorry, pardner," he murmured. "No treats tonight."

He gave the chestnut a scratch on the bridge of his nose instead, and the caress seemed to satisfy. Cade couldn't help regretting all his shortcomings weren't so easily compensated for.

Seven years. Seven years of living here with no family but Virgil, trying to run the ranch using his spotty know-how where in the past he'd always had Loren to know what to do. Loren had been the one who'd been born to ranch, the one who because of age and skill Granddad had groomed for the job from the first. And Cade had always been the younger brother meant to take the reins in a different arena.

Except their fate hadn't played out that way. And both he and Loren knew the reason why.

Cade swung around, his gaze making a circle of the stable's interior. It had happened here, actually. He could still hear his brother's words ringing in the dusty air.

"You bastard! I can't believe my own brother would do such a thing! You bastard."

"But I didn't do anything! Loren, you've got to believe me," Cade pleaded. "What you saw, it's not what you think!"

“The hell it’s not! Then why’m I standin’ here looking at you with guilt written all over your face?”

“I don’t know!” He shook his head, wondering himself at the guilt that pecked and gnawed at his insides like buzzards on roadkill.

Cade held out a hand in appeal. “Honest, Loren, I was just bein’ friendly. I mean, Marlene is your fiance´e! When she followed me out here to the stable, I thought she was just wantin’ us to get to know each other better, you know?”

Loren’s head had just about come clean off his shoulders at that. “And your idea of gettin’ to know her better was kissin’ her with your hands all over her like stink on a skunk?”

“It didn’t happen like that! I was tryin’ to push her

away. Good Lord, Loren, you’re my brother! I wouldn’t do you that way. Marlene’s the one that—”

That’s when Cade had seen the look in his brother’s eyes, begging him not to go there. Loren had been stone gone in love with Marlene Lane, in over his head and not even sane about it.

So Cade had shut up, because there was nothing on earth that could have made him do his brother that way.

Yet it meant Loren had gone away believing his only brother had betrayed him. He’d been wrong, though. Cade hadn’t betrayed Loren with the woman he loved. He hadn’t had the least interest in Marlene, had never felt for her anything more than brotherly affection.

That had been Marlene, however. Not Sara.

This time, his brother would have a justifiable bone to pick with him. And Cade couldn’t help feeling that this time, unlike the last, he’d of his own will brought such wrath upon himself.

He’d heard the warning about not tempting fate, but what were the consequences when fate tempted him?

Cade dropped his forehead to rest on the wood rail. A day ago, all he would have asked those fates for was one minute. One minute on either side of Loren’s appearance that day seven years ago —before Marlene had stepped forward and wrapped herself around Cade, or after he’d freed himself from her clutches.

And now? he wondered. What would he ask for now—with Sara?

Straightening, Cade made himself take a fortifying breath. He had to remember, nothing had happened—yet. And nothing would, he silently vowed. He knew better now, knew that he’d been a fool to hope he could have—even for one minute—the kind of love with a woman he’d pretty much resigned himself to not being in the cards for him this go-round on earth.

So. He would care for Sara, as Loren would want, until he came for her himself. Cade had to trust that the reasons his brother couldn’t be here were sound, and that Loren had known Cade would look after Sara and the baby’s every need.

The thought brought him up short. He was doing anything but looking after them out here.

Cade ran from the stable, lunging through the knee-deep snow, arms flailing in front of him. He was blind as a bat out here, couldn’t even see the lights from the ranch house. He might wander right past it and never find it.

He had to! He had to get back—back to Sara. He had promised to stay with her as long as she needed him, and he always kept his word.

When Cade came up against a car, he wasn’t exactly happy. It was just one more obstacle between himself and Sara. Muttering a curse, he started to feel his way around it when it occurred to him he might find more clues as to his brother’s whereabouts.

Or maybe he’d find more clues as to Sara’s identity, Cade thought. Maybe…maybe the woman who just gave birth in his bedroom wasn’t his sister-in-law. Because really, what was he going on so far but a four-inch-square piece of paper in his brother’s handwriting? She could have found it on the side of the road or left behind at the grocery checkout—neither of which she remembered, of

course. And why didn't she? What sort of blow had she suffered to make her lose her memory? Or was her amnesia all an act?

Barely considering that he was near to hoping he'd been duped by the woman in his house than the alternative, Cade brushed away snow until he found a door handle. He tried it. The car was unlocked.

Its interior was like a tomb, buried as the car was in snow. He couldn't tell the make or model right off, but could see it was a sedan of some kind. Loren was strictly a pickup man.

The dome light was about as illuminating as striking a match. Cade peered about for clues. On the passenger seat lay a road atlas with a route from Albuquerque to Oklahoma City highlighted in yellow. Except no—Sara said she'd come from the east.

What was in Oklahoma City that she'd have been returning from—alone?

He opened the compartment between the bucket seats. Some change, a paper clip, that was about it. There wasn't much else in the car—no clothes, an old receipt, not even a CD or cassette tape which might have given him an idea what kind of person owned the vehicle.

Then he opened the glove box. There, he found an operator's manual—and the registration.

With fingers deadened by the cold, Cade tried to remove it from its plastic sleeve and failed. He held it up to the light and caught only glare off the plastic. Damn it! He turned it, and the names became readable.

Loren and Sarah McGivern.

Cade sat for some time slumped in the driver's seat of the car. His feet were frozen, his hands were frozen. He was numb clear through to his bones, and still he continued to sit staring at the paper in his hands.

He couldn't stay there forever, though. He needed to get back and take care of his brother's wife and son.

The dream was all flashes of impressions and vague images.

She was back in labor, although there was no pain. Just the fear. Instead of wanting the baby to come, she resisted. It was too early, much too early. She couldn't lose him!

It made her cry, great keening wails that seemed to come up from the depths of her being. The sound of her cries stopped dead in the air, though; no echo came back to her, answered her.

Alone. That's how alone I am. The realization was like an arrow through her heart, making her cry harder. She didn't think she could endure it. She had to, though. She had to—for this child she wanted and yet didn't want.

What kind of woman did that make her?

Then she felt Cade's presence there beside her, enveloping her, connecting with her and pulling her back from the depths of hopelessness with his touch and solemn vow: Wherever both of you came from, darlin', you're here now—in my house, in my bed, right where you need to be. For now, you're mine. You belong to me. And I won't let you down.

Peace settled in her like a dove alighting on a branch. Yes, Cade was there. He wouldn't leave her, no matter what.

She glanced up, needing to see that confirmation in his face, and found instead some other man, not Cade, stood beside her. He looked like Cade, though, even if his nearness produced hardly a fraction of the same powerful reaction Cade's did. He had Cade's dark brown hair and whiskey eyes—eyes that were clouded with concern as he looked down at her.

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, the sense that she'd had this conversation before immediately striking her. "I'll be fine."

"I'm afraid it'll be difficult to get in touch should you need something on the road," he said doubtfully. "Maybe we shouldn't go—"

"Go! Go and don't worry a minute about me. You won't get this chance again for a long time once the baby comes," she said with affection, touched by his concern.

The man smiled at her with the same fondness—but no more than that. "Well, at least you've got Cade's contact

info if somethin' happens," he said. "Just explain what you need, and I know he'll see to it."

Regret filled his eyes, even as he said with quiet humbleness, "He's one of the best, my brother. It isn't in him to quit a person he loves—even when that person quits him. No, I never saw him give up on anything or anyone, no matter if sure defeat stared him in the eye."

The tears dried on her cheeks as she stared at him in hushed silence, each word striking like the chime of a clock, deep and resonant, until all that remained was their memory in her heart.

The crying, though, went on…and on…and on—

"Sara. Sara, wake up."

Sara came out of her dream like one drugged. With effort, she lifted her head and tried to orient herself in the darkened room. She still heard crying, and with a start, she realized it was her baby, lying next to her in the bed.

"Oh! Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry!" She'd pushed herself up on one elbow, blindly reaching for the babe, when a large hand on her shoulder urged her back down.

"Relax," Cade murmured. "I'll try to quiet the little mite while you get your bearings."

She heard him pick up the infant, who continued to wail at an ear-piercing volume. Now fully awake, Sara tried to sit up, stifling a groan. Where right after the labor she'd been tired, now she ached all over, as if she'd climbed Mount Everest.

A lock of her hair got caught between her back and the headboard, and she tugged it free, gathering the whole damp mass of it in her hands and twisting it over one shoulder.

"All right, I can take him now," she said, holding her arms out toward Cade's shadowed form, dimly backlit by the pale light filtering in from the hallway. "And you may as well turn on a light. It doesn't sound like he's going to settle back down right away."

"You sure?" Cade asked, holding the still-fussing infant, insignificant as a peanut against his broad shoulder, and patting his back.

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