MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

Sawyer's Special Delivery

NICOLE FOSTER

Nicole Foster
Sawyer's Special Delivery

Аннотация

AN EMT IN SHINING ARMOR…Sawyer Morente's specialty was saving damsels in distress. But Maya Rainbow wasn't his typical rescue: The hippie girl he barely remembered from high school had transformed into a woman unlike any he'd ever known. And when a car accident forced Sawyer to deliver Maya's premature baby, his professional concern for the boy soon blossomed into something more…for the child's mother.Strong-willed and stubborn, Maya always stood on her own two feet. But having a shoulder to lean on felt good and having the rest of Sawyer would be even better. Still, Maya had long ago stopped dreaming of a prince on a white horse….But wait…! Was that galloping she heard in the distance…?

Содержание

“My house isn’t a disaster….”	5
Sawyer’s Special Delivery	8
NICOLE FOSTER	9
Contents	10
Chapter One	11
Chapter Two	29
Chapter Three	46
Chapter Four	63
Chapter Five	80
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	82

“My house isn’t a disaster….”

Maya saw where he was headed. “Sawyer—”

“I apparently need a babysitter—” he grimaced over the word “—to make sure my headache doesn’t get worse and that I slap ice on my shoulder periodically. You need a place to stay for a while. I’ve got a spare room I never use. You’d be doing me a favor.”

What other options did she have? She wanted to be with her son, and that would be difficult at best in a hotel room. It could take weeks to find an apartment.

“So, what do you say?” he asked. “Are we going to be roommates, you and me and Joey?”

Maya hesitated. “Okay, but this is very temporary, just until you’re back on your feet and I find a place to live.”

“Temporary, right,” he said, still smiling. “Got it.”

But seeing the satisfaction on his face, Maya wondered if he did.

Dear Reader,

Well, as promised, the dog days of summer have set in, which means one last chance at the beach reading that’s an integral part of this season (even if you do most of it on the subway, like I do!). We begin with The Beauty Queen’s Makeover by Teresa Southwick, next up in our MOST LIKELY TO… miniseries. She was the girl “most likely to” way back when, and he was

the awkward geek. Now they've all but switched places, and the fireworks are about to begin….

In From Here to Texas, Stella Bagwell's next MEN OF THE WEST book, a Navajo man and the girl who walked out on him years ago have to decide if they believe in second chances. And speaking of second chances (or first ones, anyway), picture this: a teenaged girl obsessed with a gorgeous college boy writes down some of her impure thoughts in her diary, and buries said diary in the walls of an old house in town. Flash forward ten-ish years, and the boy, now a man, is back in town—and about to dismantle the old house, brick by brick. Can she find her diary before he does? Find out in Christine Flynn's finale to her GOING HOME miniseries, Confessions of a Small-Town Girl. In Everything She's Ever Wanted by Mary J. Forbes, a traumatized woman is finally convinced to come out of hiding, thanks to the one man she can trust. In Nicole Foster's Sawyer's Special Delivery, a man who's played knight-in-shining armor gets to do it again—to a woman (cum newborn baby) desperate for his help, even if she hates to admit it. And in The Last Time I Saw Venice by Vivienne Wallington, a couple traumatized by the loss of their child hopes that the beautiful city that brought them together can work its magic—one more time.

So have your fun. And next month it's time to get serious—about reading, that is….

Enjoy!

Gail Chasan

Senior Editor

Sawyer's Special Delivery
Nicole Foster

www.millsandboon.co.uk

NICOLE FOSTER

is the pseudonym for the writing team of Danette Fertig-Thompson and Annette Chartier-Warren. Both journalists, they met while working on the same newspaper, and started writing historical romance together after discovering a shared love of the Old West and happy endings. Their seventeen-year friendship has endured writer's block, numerous caffeine-and-chocolate deadlines, and the joyous chaos of marriage and raising the five children between them. They love to hear from readers. Send a SASE for a bookmark to PMB 228, 8816 Manchester Rd., Brentwood, MO, 63144.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter One

This was not the way it was supposed to happen.

None of it—the wind and sleet, the rotten, rain-slicked mountain road, the idiot driver swerving into her lane, forcing her to yank the wheel hard to avoid a collision. The baby coming.

Definitely not the baby coming,

Not now, not here and not six weeks early. Another contraction gripped her, and Maya Rainbow clenched her fingers around the musty car blanket she'd been clutching like a life preserver, fighting the fear that was threatening to become full-blown panic.

"Are you okay? Maya, are you still with me?"

The contraction eased slightly. Taking a shaky breath, Maya managed to fumble her cell phone close enough to answer the dispatcher who'd stayed on the line after she'd called out the paramedics. "I'm still here."

She didn't have much choice. Short of crawling out the window—and right now she doubted she'd be able to do anything more gymnastic than sit up straight—she couldn't get out. Her ancient Jeep Cherokee had skidded off the road, sideswiped a pine tree and ended up almost on its side in a narrow ditch. She'd blacked out. And when she'd come to, bruised and shaken, she'd managed to untangle herself from the seat belt only to discover the driver's-side door was jammed and the passenger door was

wedged against a tree.

Before Maya could call 911, she also realized her baby was coming.

"The paramedics are on their way. They should be there in a few minutes. Try to stay calm and remember your breathing," the dispatcher's voice was saying in her ear. "Tell me when you have another contraction."

"I'm telling you now," Maya gasped.

It had to be the fifteenth time in the last ten minutes the woman had coached her to breathe, to stay calm, and if she hadn't been about to give birth sitting in the front seat of her wrecked car, Maya would have laughed. She'd spent the last seven years teaching others to cope with pain without medication, to release their stress and find an inner calm. For months she herself had been practicing all those focusing and pain-control techniques she'd touted to her clients.

But now all she wanted to do was scream, I don't want to breathe! I'm not calm! It's too early, my baby isn't supposed to be this early. And where are those paramedics? It's been hours. They should have been here by now.

What if they couldn't find her? She hadn't seen any lights from passing cars, nor did she know what had happened to the other driver other than his car had run off the opposite side of the road. She didn't know if they could even see her Jeep, wedged as it was in the ditch. In the cold darkness, with the rain battering the roof and whipping against the windows, Maya had never felt

more alone.

"Less than two minutes apart," she heard the dispatcher say. "Hang in there. The paramedics should be there anytime now."

The tears she'd been holding back slid down her face as all the worry and hurt and fear that had been building up for months now crashed her defenses. If only she hadn't stupidly decided to drive home tonight, if she'd just waited until after her baby was safely born, none of this would have happened.

At the time it seemed the perfect solution, a welcome escape from the stress of Evan's relentless campaign to force her out of the apartment they'd shared. It was less than a two-hour drive from Taos to her parents' house in Luna Hermosa. The weather had been clear when she'd left. She'd had a trouble-free pregnancy and she wasn't due for six weeks. It seemed nothing could go wrong.

And then everything had.

There was never a cat stuck in a tree when you needed one.

Sawyer Morente glared at the ringing cell phone he'd tossed on the desk beside him and, seeing his brother's number flash on the screen, wished he'd had enough sense to turn it off. Right now he'd rather talk to anyone but Cort—even elderly Mrs. Garcia, who summoned the paramedics nearly every week, always making sure she suffered her chest pains on a day when Sawyer was on duty because she said she liked the way he took her pulse. At least he'd have a reason not to talk to his brother.

Tonight, though, had been unusually quiet for a Friday,

especially after a week of what seemed like almost back-to-back calls. Apart from the small electrical fire keeping the three-man fire crew busy for the last hour, there hadn't been any alarms at the main engine house centered in Luna Hermosa. The early-spring storm rumbling down across northern New Mexico from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains seemed to have kept most people off the roads and out of the kind of trouble Sawyer got called to handle.

His partner, Rico Esteban, slouching in one of the office chairs, his feet propped on Sawyer's desk, glanced up from the Sports section. "You gonna answer that? It's getting annoying."

"Tell me about it," Sawyer muttered. It was the fourth time Cort had called this week, and Sawyer was getting tired of telling his little brother he didn't want to talk about the letter—the one that lay in a mangled ball somewhere in the vicinity of his kitchen trash can. Cort, for some reason Sawyer couldn't fathom, wanted to answer it.

The only response Sawyer wanted to communicate to the letter writer was, Go to hell. After twenty-six years without a father, I don't need one now.

On the fifth ring, Sawyer jabbed the talk button on his cell phone. "Go away, Cort."

"Nice to talk to you, too, buddy," Cort said, his voice slightly distorted by static.

Another streak of lightning slashed the sky, giving Sawyer hope that they'd suddenly be disconnected. "You know, it's no

surprise you're the sheriff's golden-boy detective. I'd take jail time over being hounded by you any day. Isn't there someone else you can irritate this week?"

"Just you. And you've been doing your best to avoid me. Why bother having a house if you're never off duty?"

"Obviously not my best or I wouldn't be talking to you—again," Sawyer said, ignoring the familiar jab about his working hours. Already restless with the conversation, he pushed away from his desk and paced to the office window. "And I wouldn't be avoiding you if you would just let this go."

"You can't ignore it forever," Cort said, repeating the same argument he'd been making since Monday, when they'd gotten the letters.

Sawyer wanted to ask him why, but the question would be wasted on Cort. Instead his brother would patiently drive him crazy until Sawyer either finally gave in or relocated and changed his identity.

"Sooner or later, we're going to have to deal with this."

"I am dealing with it," Sawyer snapped. Rico looked up from his paper, then pretended he hadn't when Sawyer scowled in his direction. Sawyer turned his back on him to stare out the window. "I'm dealing with it just like he dealt with us all those years after he finally got tired of knocking us around. I'm pretending he doesn't exist."

Despite the static, Cort's frustration came through loud and clear. "The man only lives a few miles out of town. He does

business here. Hell, we went to school with his son. Although if things had been right, Rafe wouldn't have grown up a Garrett—"

"Don't go there," Sawyer interrupted. "We had nothing to do with that."

"My point is, Garrett's not going away."

"Maybe that's where you inherited it from." Sawyer gave up trying to argue his point with Cort. Their father had never wanted them from the beginning. Big and rough, with a nasty temper made nastier by his love affair with Jim Beam, he'd made Sawyer the target of his rages early on. Then when Sawyer was seven and Cort barely five, he'd kicked them off his ranch and out of his life completely without a word of regret or explanation.

When Sawyer had asked about his father, his mother refused to talk about him, except to say that Jed Garrett loved his ranch above anything and anyone else and that Sawyer and Cort didn't need a father who didn't want them. And she'd made the break complete by legally dropping Garrett's name and giving her sons her proud family name, Morente.

Sawyer might have believed what she'd told him if he'd never known that his father had adopted Rafe, remarried and had another son with his second wife. But he did know. And because he knew, he'd wasted years wondering what made he and Cort so unlovable that their own father despised them and completely denied their existence.

Now their mother was dead and suddenly Garrett wanted a reunion with his two oldest sons.

Sawyer didn't know what had prompted Jed Garrett's questionable display of fatherly interest and he didn't want to know. He didn't want anything from Garrett, now or ever.

"If it's that important to you, then you answer him," Sawyer said at last. "But you're on your own, brother. I don't want anything to do with him."

The strident tones of the station alarm followed by the dispatcher's voice drowned out whatever reply Cort started to make.

Two-vehicle accident with injuries. Woman in labor. Mile marker 223, Highway 137 at Coyote Pass.

"Gotta run," Sawyer said, hanging up and cutting off Cort's exasperated curse.

The wail of sirens jolted Maya and she whispered a prayer of thanks as the flash of red and yellow lights broke into the darkness around her. She had been trying in the last few minutes to convince herself everything was going to be fine, but her attempts had been a miserable failure, underscored by visions of herself delivering a premature baby alone in her Jeep and everything going more wrong than it already had.

At least now she had a hope of safely delivering her baby in a hospital bed.

A man's face suddenly appeared at the window, blurred by the rain. He took a quick glance at her and around the vehicle, tried the driver's door and then flashed her a reassuring smile.

"Be with you in a minute," he called through the window.

Maya closed her eyes against another contraction, and about the time it eased, she heard glass break and the rear door open and then the Jeep creaked and shifted. It took her a moment to realize someone was climbing over the backseat toward her.

"How are you doing?" he asked as he managed to somehow maneuver himself around jumbled boxes and suitcases and into the seat beside her. Already cold to the core, Maya clutched her blanket closer and tried to keep from shuddering as his shoulder brushed hers, sprinkling her with the droplets clinging to his hair and clothing.

It was the man she'd seen at the window, and the small space suddenly seemed filled with him. In the dimness, broken only by the strobe of the emergency lights, she could only see he was dark, with a smile as potent as any remedy for terror she could think of right now.

Before she could answer him, he flicked on a penlight and began checking her over. "Now there's a stupid question. I'm going to have to work on my opening line." He worked quickly, asking her several questions about the accident and her pregnancy.

"This is not supposed to be happening," Maya said just as another contraction started.

"I figured that. Here—" he took her hand in his "—go ahead, squeeze tight."

She hesitated, torn between hating the weakness that made her want to cling to a stranger for comfort and needing someone

to lean on, if only for a few minutes.

As if he knew everything she was feeling, he said, “You’re gonna make me look bad if you do this all by yourself. That’s it…”

Holding on to something—someone—besides a moth-eaten car blanket helped, but Maya had a crazy urge to ask him to go on talking. She wished she could bottle his voice and use it as a remedy for daily disasters. Rich and dark, with an intriguing hint of an accent, it—coupled with the reassuring warmth of his hand against hers—soothed some of the rough edges, distracting her from the bubble of panic waiting to burst inside her and making her feel a little less afraid.

She almost convinced herself she could relax a little when the growl of a motor followed by the crunch and shriek of metal being twisted apart next to her ear jolted her upward in her seat.

Gently he pushed her back. “They’re just getting the door open,” he said, gesturing at the firefighters outside. “Then we’ll get both of you out of here and to the hospital.”

Sawyer didn’t add that he doubted they’d make it to the hospital before her baby arrived. She was obviously already frightened enough. Her small, cold hand trembled in his. The tracks of tears clearly showed on her face and she had a death grip on the blanket in her lap. But Sawyer admired the way she fought her fear despite being trapped, in pain and on the verge of giving birth. He could feel her strength as she tightly grasped his hand.

He wondered why she was alone. What kind of man let his pregnant wife drive by herself on a night like this? Pale and bruised, she looked like something delicate and finely made that had been treated roughly.

"What's your name?" he asked when she drew in a deep breath.

"Maya…Maya Rainbow." She hesitated, glancing down at her hand still in his, looking as if she desperately wanted to him to tell her that it would all be fine. But she didn't ask him for the comforting lies that would make it all the worse if things went wrong.

"It's okay," Sawyer said. "Nothing is going to happen to either of you if I can help it. Boy or girl, do you know?"

"Boy—Joey. I'm afraid he's either going to be very impatient or very dramatic, being born too early, in a storm, on the side of the…oh—"

The pain came at the same time the driver's door wrenched open and a draft of cold rain rushed into the Jeep. Everything happened so quickly that Maya couldn't have said exactly how she got from the driver's seat onto a stretcher and inside the ambulance. It all seemed to pass in a blur of people and lights and voices until she heard someone saying her name and looked up into the only familiar face there. Trying to focus, she heard enough to understand he needed to check on the baby.

"I don't even know your name," Maya said irritably, then thought how idiotic she sounded. Under the circumstances, she

didn't really have the luxury of modesty. "Oh…never mind—"

"Sawyer Morente. And this will only take a minute."

The name momentarily distracted her from what he was doing. Of all people to come to her rescue, again. She hadn't thought about him in years, hadn't even known he'd come back to Luna Hermosa. And now…

From the business end of the stretcher Sawyer looked over at her. "Joey isn't going to wait until we get to the hospital, and my partner is busy with the guy who ran you off the road. So it's just you and me."

"Alone? Here? Oh, no, I—you can't. Not by yourself."

"Sure I can," he said firmly. "Don't worry, I've done this before."

When she just stared blankly at him, Sawyer reached over and touched her arm. "We'll do this together, Maya."

"I can't—" Her head twisted on the pillow, her whole body clenching. "Not, not here…"

"It'll have to be here. Has someone called your husband for you?"

For a moment Sawyer thought she couldn't or wouldn't answer. Finally, in a voice that sounded oddly strangled, she said, "There isn't one. Joey doesn't have…a father." Defiance flared with hurt in her eyes. "There's…only me."

Her words slammed Sawyer hard against the memories of the past, catching him off guard. He wanted ten minutes alone with the jerk who'd decided this baby and his mother could be

abandoned like something broken and worthless. He wanted to comfort Maya and reassure her that she and her son were better off without a man who could turn his back on his own child. He wanted to tell her that it didn't matter—except that it did, and he understood that better than anyone.

A crackle of radio static snapped Sawyer back to the present.

With a stab of guilt he saw Maya was looking at him with something close to alarm. Immediately shifting his focus back to her, Sawyer didn't waste time with apologies or self-rebukes he could make later.

"Okay, Maya," he said, catching and holding her gaze. "Get ready, and when I tell you, push. Now—"

With all his attention focused on a safe delivery, it seemed hardly seconds from when he told her to push to the moment he cradled the tiny infant in his hands. Sawyer worked gently and quickly, and after a few moments the baby made a small mewling sound and then started to cry.

"My baby…is he—?"

Sawyer looked up from the baby long enough to give her a brief reassuring smile. "He's small, but he seems to be doing okay."

Bothered by the hedging in his words, Maya anxiously watched him bend over her baby until Sawyer finally straightened and laid her son in her arms. The tears she couldn't hold back slid down her face unchecked as she touched the odd little tuft of red hair, the scrunched up little face, the tiny hands that flailed

softly against hers.

"Welcome to the world, Joey," Sawyer said softly.

Maya couldn't think of any words powerful enough to express her feelings. He seemed to understand, and for a moment, as they looked at each other, everything felt right to Maya.

"I never knew," she whispered. "I never knew it was so… amazing. How could anyone not want—" She stopped. She wouldn't think of Evan, not now, not again.

Reaching out, she put her hand on Sawyer's, linking the three of them. She tried to say something, to thank him, but she couldn't find her voice. Meeting his eyes, she knew it didn't matter.

Her touch and the love for her child he saw shining on her face stirred again all the emotions Sawyer had pushed away after he'd learned Joey's father had abandoned her and her baby. In that moment, he almost said something stupid, almost admitted that after helping her through the birth he felt a connection to her and her son.

Then common sense kicked him hard. It was bad enough he'd had that momentary lapse earlier, he certainly didn't need to convince her he'd totally lost it by telling her this had been some sort of bonding experience.

He smiled at her before gently breaking the hold she had on him and focusing on doing his job. Because that's all this was, doing his job, and whatever else he'd imagined was the result of a long week of double shifts, too little sleep and that letter he'd

wished he'd never opened.

Maya lay staring at the ceiling of the emergency-room cubicle, seriously considering getting up and going to find Joey and reassure herself he was okay. She wanted to find someone, anyone, and demand they tell her where her son was. But exhausted and aching all over, she didn't know if she could sit up, let alone do battle.

They'd whisked her baby away minutes after she'd been wheeled into the emergency room. No one since then had been able or willing to tell her anything about Joey or when she could see him again. Instead, after being questioned, prodded, probed, cleaned up and offered painkillers she refused, she'd been left alone in the curtained-off room to wait until someone could get her a bed in the maternity ward.

There was a murmur of voices just outside, and Maya pushed herself up on her elbows and then sat up, swinging her feet off the bed, determined to get someone's attention.

"Just a few minutes," she heard a woman say, and then the curtain was pushed aside and Sawyer looked in.

"Hey, I just thought I'd—" The smile she remembered vanished, and in two strides he was at her side, scowling. "What are you doing? You're not supposed to be up."

"If someone would tell me how my baby is, I wouldn't be. What are you still doing here anyway?" she asked, then immediately looked contrite for snapping at him.

"It's okay," Sawyer said, heading off the apology she started

to make. He didn't have a good answer for her question and he didn't want to look too closely for one right now. Taking her by the shoulders, he gently guided her back down on the bed. "And Joey is, too."

"You saw him?"

"Right before I came to see you. The pediatrician is with him now—Lia Kerrigan. I know her. Don't worry, he's in good hands."

Maya closed her eyes and let out a long breath. "Thank you," she said. "I've been going crazy. No one would tell me anything and—" She stopped, looking up at him. "You've done so much for us. I—"

"Need someone to keep a closer eye on you."

"I can take care of myself. And Joey," she said, giving him a look that dared him to disagree.

Sawyer stopped himself from saying she didn't look as if she could have stood up without help. Except for the purpling bruise darkening her temple and cheek and the long tangle of dark red hair, she looked completely drained of color and strength. She shouldn't be alone, not now. She needed someone to take care of her, no matter what she said. "Isn't there anyone you can call?"

She raised her brows at his abrupt question, then shook her head. "I was on my way to my parents' house, but apparently they've either gone out or forgotten I was coming, because they aren't answering the phone." Even though she'd talked to her parents two days ago, reminding them for the third time she'd

arrive today, their absence hadn't surprised her. It would be typical of her parents to have gone off to a party or some weird festival in the middle of the desert, expecting she'd fend for herself until they got back.

"Your parents…" Sawyer studied her a moment. "Of course, now I remember. You're the hippie girl."

Maya sighed. "That would be my parents. I grew up."

He grinned sheepishly at her. "Sorry, but I remember that's what all the kids used to call you. Your parents still live out at the old commune at the edge of town, don't they?"

"When they're not living in their van. They disappear every few months in search of spiritual enlightenment."

Maya didn't add she'd had no trouble remembering him once he'd told her his name, even though he was four years older and she'd never said more than two words to him the years she'd grown up in Luna Hermosa. She'd been the barefoot girl in ragged jeans whose unmarried parents lived in a run-down house with their cats and chickens and various people who'd stay for days or months, depending on their whims.

He, on the other hand, had grown up on the Morente family estate, excelled at everything, dared anything and been the object of many a young girl's fantasies. And she'd bet the fantasies had grown up with the girls. She didn't doubt his competence on the job, but the uniform looked out of place on a man who conjured images of a midnight rendezvous, and temptation whispered in that dark voice.

She realized she was staring and quickly looked away. “I’m surprised you remember me. You left town years before I graduated high school.”

“How could I forget the only time I actually got to rescue a cat from a tree? Of course—” he flashed her that smile “—I ended up rescuing the girl along with it.”

“Now there’s something I’d hoped you wouldn’t remember.” She’d been twelve years old and had followed her favorite kitten up a tree only to find herself literally out on a limb and unable to get back down. Sawyer and several friends had been driving by and he’d stopped and climbed up, bringing her and the cat down. “You seem to have a bad habit of being there to rescue me.”

Sawyer studied her with an intensity that made Maya blush. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said softly. Then he shrugged, and abruptly he was back to the competent professional again. “I was just doing my job.”

“Luckily for me. That’s twice you’ve been my hero,” she said lightly.

The smile went out of his eyes so suddenly, Maya blinked.

“So,” he said in a very obvious change of subject, “are you planning on staying in that house alone?”

“I’m sure my parents are around somewhere. I just talked to them the other day. And if not, they won’t mind if I crash there a while.” She knew that wasn’t what he’d meant, but right now she didn’t want to think past making sure Joey was healthy. Her head was starting to pound, and all she wanted to do now was see

her baby and then get some sleep.

Sawyer easily read the exhaustion in her eyes and the droop of her body. He didn't want to press her, but he knew the Rainbow house and he was surprised it was still standing. The idea of her there alone with a new baby, with no one to look after her, bothered him more than he wanted to admit.

It wasn't even remotely his problem. He didn't even know her, except as a memory of a scrawny girl with red braids and wide green eyes, a girl that everyone called weird. He'd done his job, gotten her and her baby to the hospital safely. There was no reason why he should care what she did or where she went.

Except that he did.

Before he could come up with a good reason why, Rico stuck his head into the cubicle. "We're up. Another accident on 137."

Sawyer looked at Maya. "I'll see you later."

She made herself smile. "Sure, and thanks again."

Then he was gone. A sense of loss stabbed her and Maya felt silly for it. He'd only been doing his job. And now that it was over, she doubted, despite his parting words, that she'd ever see him again unless it was an accidental meeting in town.

She and Joey were a family now. There wasn't going to be anyone else. And the sooner she accepted that, the better off they'd both be.

Chapter Two

A small noise woke Maya from a light doze and she stopped herself from groaning, wondering what the nurses wanted this time. In the past three days, she'd gotten used to being roused at odd hours to feed Joey, to answer more questions or to be poked, prodded, or tsked over because of her refusal to take any pain medication. Three hours of uninterrupted sleep had become a luxury. And she'd been tempted more than once to take the painkillers, especially the morning after the accident, when she'd awakened stiff as a hundred-year-old and with a thousand pains.

But no one should be here now. She'd been to the nursery less than an hour ago to feed Joey, and the doctor had already been by this morning to tell her she could go home tomorrow.

Forcing open her eyes, Maya found herself looking into a smiling face she'd hadn't seen in years. Though the woman's curves were more lush now and her dark hair shorter, her generous mouth and smiling eyes and a passion for brilliant orange and red hadn't changed. "Valerie? Valerie Valdez? Is that really you?"

Valerie laughed and bent to give her a hug. "In the flesh, honey, although there's more of it than you probably remember. And it's Valerie Ortiz now," she added, settling herself in a chair beside Maya's bed.

"But how did you know I was here?" Maya asked as she

struggled to sit up. Running a hand over her tangled hair, she tried to force her brain to start functioning. “I haven’t been able to reach my parents and I haven’t talked to anyone I know since I got back.” Except Sawyer. But she couldn’t imagine him looking up her old friends and asking them to visit her.

“You can’t have been gone so long that you don’t remember how fast news gets around here. Your baby’s day nurse is my sister-in-law. Rainbow isn’t exactly a common last name. Cat told me about your accident and your baby and asked if I knew you and so here I am. Oh, and I have this,” Valerie said and held out a crumpled and water-stained piece of bright yellow paper.

“I stopped by your parents’ house first to see if I could find them for you but instead of them I found this stuck to the door,” Valerie said with a look that said she was sorry to be the messenger. “It’s a little worse for the wear, but the gist of it is they’ve gone off to some rock in Sedona to commune with like souls. Sorry, I tried.”

“I know, and thanks. I’m not surprised. It’s just—” Maya stopped, then made herself smile. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just really glad you came. You don’t know how wonderful it is to see you.” After three days without seeing a familiar face or being able to share her joys and fears about Joey with anyone she knew, Maya felt close to tears seeing Valerie. She brushed quickly at her eyes, pretending to rub the sleep out of them.

“It’s okay, babies do that to you,” Valerie said, taking her hand and squeezing. “It’s good to see you, too, honey. You look a little

banged up, but from what I hear, you're lucky to be alive. You and your little boy."

"Have you seen him?"

Valerie nodded. "He's tiny and precious. But I hear he's doing just fine. He'll just need a little extra TLC for a while."

"So the doctor keeps telling me." Maya turned to look out the window into the bright sunlight, tears welling in her eyes. "He—he just looks so little and helpless right now. And they're not going to let me take him home with me when I leave here. They still won't tell me how long he's got to stay, and I'm just so worried about him."

"I know. But Lia Kerrigan is a good doctor," Valerie said, echoing what Sawyer had told her. "Before you know it, your baby will be a boisterous, rowdy little boy and you'll wonder how he ever could have been so small and quiet. Believe me, I know, between the twins and now the baby."

"You have a baby?" Maya remembered Valerie had married her high school boyfriend shortly after graduation. The marriage had gone wrong almost from the start, and less than two years later Valerie had taken her twin daughters and left. "New husband, new baby—wow, has it been that long?"

Valerie laughed. "It's been a few years since we were sixteen, dreaming up ways to cut algebra. I think my favorite was the time we took your dad's motorcycle and skipped school for two days so we could go to that music festival in Taos."

A flash of memories made Maya smile. "We were trouble,

weren't we?"

"And proud of it," Valerie said. "Now I'm working to keep my kids in line. And not succeeding most days. If it weren't for Paul, I'd be a crazy person by now. This time I got it right." She hesitated, looking uncertainly at Maya before asking, "What about you?"

It was the closest Valerie would come to outright asking her what had brought her back to Luna Hermosa, unmarried, with a baby. And what could she say? She'd left shortly after high school graduation to find something her parents had never been able to give her—stability, commitment, someone willing to share responsibility. She thought she'd found those things in Evan, but she couldn't have been more wrong.

"I decided to come home to have my baby," she said at last, not ready to rehash the last miserable year with her ex-fiancé. "Unfortunately that turned out to be a really bad idea."

"Don't beat yourself up over it. You're here and you're both okay. And I hear it was our finest resident knight in shining armor, Sawyer Morente, who came to your rescue. You remember Sawyer, don't you?" Valerie prodded. "You know, Mr. Captain of Everything in high school, Air Force hero, the guy with the killer smile?"

"I remember him." Maya suddenly felt warm and restless. The memories of the accident, of giving birth, of the moment she first held her son, were as clear as if they'd happened minutes, not days ago. And they evoked the same uncomfortable mix

of emotions, somewhere between embarrassment at having to be rescued and to give birth in the back of an ambulance and an odd lingering sense of intimacy with the man who'd safely delivered Joey. Avoiding Valerie's eyes, she fidgeted with the blanket, reached back to adjust her pillow. "I suppose everyone in town knows what happened by now."

"Well, it hasn't been in the newspaper yet," Valerie said, then laughed when Maya shot her a wide-eyed look somewhere between horror and disbelief. "Paul is a firefighter. He and Sawyer work the same shift most of the time. So—"

"So everyone knows I'm not married and that Sawyer delivered my baby on the side of the road. And next week it probably will be in the paper," Maya muttered.

"It's not that bad. I'm sure there are at least a few people who don't know what happened," Valerie said with a wink. "Oh, I almost forgot. These are for you." She reached over to the bedside table and tugged forward a plastic pitcher filled with an eclectic mix of brightly colored wildflowers. "I caught Sawyer bringing these to you when I was on my way up to see you. He didn't want to wake you, so I offered to deliver them for him. Sorry about using your water pitcher but it was all I could find."

"Sawyer? Brought these?" Maya almost couldn't believe her ears. Sawyer Morente had brought her flowers? The most drop-dead gorgeous guy in town, every girl's idea of the perfect romance hero, had picked wildflowers for the hippie girl no one ever wanted to be seen with? Don't make more of it than it is.

“I suppose it isn’t every day he delivers a baby by himself in a thunderstorm,” she murmured as much to herself as Val.

“No, but it figures it was Sawyer. Paul calls him Zorro because he always seems to be the one riding to the rescue whenever someone’s in trouble around here. Although…” Val turned thoughtful. “Paul said delivering Joey seemed to really affect Sawyer. Maybe it’s because he understands what it’s like.”

“You lost me,” Maya said.

Shrugging, Val didn’t quite meet Maya’s eyes. “I guess you don’t remember hearing the gossip, but Sawyer’s father abandoned him and his brother when Sawyer was about seven. He completely cut those two boys out of his life. He never acknowledged they existed ever again, even though he still lives less than fifteen miles from them.”

An odd ache touched Maya, hurting her heart and burning her eyes with unshed tears. Whether for Sawyer’s loss or her and Joey’s, she didn’t know, but she felt like crying, giving in to the sadness that had shadowed her since Joey’s birth.

To distract herself Maya brushed a finger over a daisy, breathed in the fresh scents of lavender and sage. “I guess he thought wildflowers would suit me better than roses,” she mused, still wondering at his gesture. “They do remind me of home.”

“You are home now,” Valerie said firmly. “And you’re not alone, no matter how much it might feel that way sometimes.”

Tears rushed to Maya’s eyes. “Thanks Val,” she said, reaching for her friend’s hand. “I know we’re going to be fine. I just need

to get out of here and get settled at Mom and Dad's for a while."

"If you can call staying at your parents' place 'settled.' They haven't changed much."

"Changed from tie-dye to spandex and back again, but finding the next Grateful Dead concert is still their top priority." Maya sighed. "Maybe it's better they've taken off again. If they were here, I'd have three kids to keep up with."

"Well, don't you worry, Paul and I are here to help. And then there's Sawyer…"

"Oh, no—" Maya held up her hands "—don't even go there. He was only concerned about Joey. Like you said, he can sympathize. End of story."

"Oh, right, that's why he brought Joey flowers. I'm sure at three days old he'll really appreciate them. Yikes, look at the time. I hate to run mi amiga, but Paul's shift starts soon and I need to get home to the kids before he goes."

"Thanks so much for coming," Maya said, returning Valerie's quick hug. "I can't tell you what it means to me."

"Then don't, just invite me over when you break out of this place."

"You're on."

"Catch you soon." With a wave Val left.

The room felt cold and empty without her friend. Despite Val's comforting words, Maya had trouble shaking a sense of utter loneliness, although she guessed that would pass once she and Joey were out of the hospital and the drama of the last few days

was a distant memory.

She reached out and touched the soft petals of a daisy once more and suddenly her whole being ached to be with her new baby. Moving carefully, she swung her legs out of her bed, grabbed a robe and headed down the hallway to the nursery.

Sawyer slammed the door of his truck and strode across the parking lot of Firehouse No. 1. The bee sting on his hand was annoying him. He turned his wrist over to look at the red swell. “Morente, you’re a freakin’ fool,” he muttered under his breath.

What had he been thinking? Picking wildflowers for that girl—woman and mother now, he reminded himself. Maya Rainbow wasn’t a scrawny kid anymore. Even bruised and disheveled and swollen with child, Sawyer had thought she was beautiful, so different from the pale girl with eyes too big for her face he remembered.

After three days he hadn’t been able to shake the image of her struggling to hide her pain and fear, determined to bring her son safely into the world and to care for him alone. Those big green eyes seemed to hide lifetimes in them.

It was those eyes and the way she’d looked at him the other night when she’d told him Joey had no father, coupled with the miracle of her little boy, that had messed with his mind so much, he’d wound up in the middle of some field on the side of the road, picking wildflowers and getting stung by that damned bee.

As he yanked open the door to the station, he thanked the guardian angel of masculine pride that one of his buddies inside

hadn't driven by and seen him with a handful of daisies.

Sawyer strode straight to the coffeepot and poured himself a mug, wishing it were a double espresso instead of Paul Ortiz's "lite" coffee. He needed to clear his head and he needed a jolt of caffeine to wake him up. He'd hardly slept since Maya's accident; the whole night kept turning over and over in his mind like a movie stuck on replay. Why that night, that accident, that birth should be any different from any of the others he'd dealt with over the years, he couldn't figure.

Lost in thought, he didn't hear Paul come into the kitchen until a slap on his shoulder nearly caused him to drop his coffee mug.

"Wildflowers, Sawyer? Wildflowers?"

Cursing under his breath, Sawyer refilled his mug to avoid Paul's smirk. "If Valerie wasn't your wife, I'd put a muzzle on that woman."

"Don't worry, your little secret is safe with me," Paul said, laughing. A few inches shorter and broader than Sawyer, his dark eyes seemed always to reflect a smile. "A little above and beyond the call of duty, though, wouldn't you say?"

"The kid could have died," Sawyer said, wondering why he bothered trying to explain himself. "They both could have. I— I just thought she needed a boost, you know, something to remind her it'll get better."

"Aw, that's so sweet of you. I never figured you for the sensitive type."

"Go jump," Sawyer muttered. Taking his coffee, he headed

for his office with the idea of locking himself in. Unfortunately Paul followed. Paul was a great guy, the kind of guy you'd want watching your back when it counted. But he was also the type of guy who didn't know when a joke was old.

"I'll bet the next time you visit her, she'll have the flowers in her hair," Paul teased.

"I'm not going back. I saw the kid and he's doing fine. That's all I needed to know."

"Sure, that's what you say now." Paul said, leaning against the door to Sawyer's office. "But Val and I already have money on it. Once you see that dump of a house Maya's moving into, you'll be over there with a hammer and a paintbrush all ready to remodel the Rainbow love shack. We all know you can't resist riding to the rescue. Besides, from what Val says, your damsel in distress has grown up rather nicely."

"She's not mine," he said, then, unable to stop himself, he added, "So she really is going to move back to that rattrap of her parents'?" She'd told him so the night of her accident, but he'd put it out of his mind, half hoping she'd change her mind before the hospital discharged her and her baby.

"Val says so. Man, I remember that party we went to at the love shack right before graduation. The incense was so thick, my throat hurt for days."

Sawyer remembered he'd been glad to get out of the Rainbow residence before he caught something. He also remembered Maya, a thin girl with tousled hair, sitting against the railings of

the upstairs loft, gazing down at the strange mix of revelers with a solemn look as her parents called and waved up to her, trying to get her to join the party.

"Her parents were something. They still are, from what I've seen," Paul mused. "I guess it shouldn't surprise anyone, Maya coming home the way she did."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Sawyer said more sharply than he intended.

Paul held up his hands in mock surrender. "Hey, you're pretty quick to defend someone you plan on never seeing again." He grinned at Sawyer's glare. "I didn't mean to insult your flower child. It's just her parents were never married and everyone knows they basically raised Maya in a commune. Val says half the time they'd take off on that banged up Harley of theirs and leave her with whomever happened to be staying at their house at the time."

"She told me they're gone again," Sawyer said.

"Yeah, and Cat said Maya's doctor plans to release her tomorrow. So, just in case you want to drop by the old love shack…"

"Why, so you'll win the bet with Val? Wait a minute. If you two are so sure what my next move is, what's there to bet on?"

"That's for us to know and you to figure out."

Sawyer began sorting through the pile of paperwork on his desk, ignoring Paul's attempt to bait him. "Don't count on my losing any sleep trying."

“What, you sleep?” Cort, in his usual jeans and battered leather jacket, was standing in the doorway. He walked around Paul, greeting the other man before dropping down into the chair beside Sawyer’s desk. “That’s not what I hear.”

“Superheroes don’t need the rest we mere mortals do,” Paul said, laughing. “I’ll let you annoy him for a while. I’ve done my duty for the day. Oh—” he leaned back around the door before leaving “—don’t forget to ask him about his flower girl.”

“Now my morning’s complete,” Sawyer said. He rubbed at his temple, really wishing he had that espresso.

“Girl?” Cort looked expectantly at Sawyer. “Don’t tell me you’re actually seeing someone. Although I’ve probably already missed it, since your idea of a long-term relationship is two weeks. So who is she?”

“There is no she. We delivered a baby the other night and I went back to check on the boy and his mother. Now Paul and Val have decided I’m ready to propose. So what are you doing here?” Sawyer asked, wanting to shift the conversation away from Maya before Cort got wind of his temporary insanity with the wildflowers. “As if I didn’t know.”

“You won’t return my calls or come see me, so I came to you.”

“This isn’t the time or the place.”

“C’mon, Sawyer, it never is with you,” Cort said. “But we have business, like it or not.”

“Not,” Sawyer said flatly. “I need more coffee.” Pushing back from his desk, he strode out of the office, hoping this would

be the morning Mrs. Garcia would decide she needed her pulse taken.

The next morning, fed and content, Joey lay nestled in Maya's arms, sleeping peacefully. She rubbed her fingertip over his cheek, marveling at the softness of his skin, wondering how he could be so perfect.

"Looks like he's finished." Cat Ortiz walked over to where Maya sat in a padded rocking chair next to Joey's incubator. Maya liked the petite nurse, with her ready smile and gentle touch, but she dreaded her arrival in the nursery—especially today, because it meant leaving Joey in the hospital while she went home to her parents' house.

"I don't want to leave him," Maya said, holding her son a little closer.

"I know, but he needs to go back to the incubator now. It won't be long," Cat said as she rearranged the blankets in Joey's incubator. "Then he'll be able to go home with you."

Maya bent and kissed her precious little boy before grudgingly transferring him to Cat's arms. Joey sighed, wriggled a little, then let out a satisfied gurgle.

"'Bye for now, sweetie," Maya said softly. "I'll see you at feeding time."

"You'll probably want to give him a bottle for the next several feedings since you're going home today," Cat reminded her.

Maya bit her lip, watching as Cat settled Joey in the incubator. The last thing she wanted to do was leave her baby to the care

of the nurses, no matter how competent and caring they were. But she didn't have much choice. Her insurance wasn't going to pay for her to stay any longer since her doctor had said she was fit to leave.

Cat had said she could visit Joey anytime, but it was a poor substitute for having her little boy with her.

"I know how you feel," Cat said sympathetically. "But Dr. Kerrigan says he's doing so well, he'll be out of here real soon. You'll see, the time will fly by."

Maya doubted it but she forced herself to smile at Cat before carefully levering herself out of the rocker. Her insides still felt weak and tender and her back and neck tended to stiffen up when she sat for too long. "I guess I'd better find something to wear besides this hospital gown," she said. Pausing by the incubator, she touched the glass, tears welling in her eyes as she watched her baby sleeping.

"Is someone picking you up?" Cat asked.

"No. Actually I hadn't thought about it." Val had come back yesterday afternoon and brought her some clothes from the suitcases packed in her Jeep, but the Jeep itself was still sitting in a local tow yard, useless. She doubted the doctor would release her knowing she was going to drive herself, anyway. That meant she'd have to impose on Val and Paul and hope they wouldn't mind giving her a ride to her parents' house. And first thing there, she'd have to arrange for a rental if she was going to spend as much time as possible at the hospital with Joey.

“Go ahead and call Val,” Cat suggested. “Paul’s off shift, he won’t mind—oh, there’s Sawyer.” She waved, drawing Maya’s eyes to the nursery window.

Sawyer stood on the other side of the glass, hands in the pockets of his faded jeans, watching her. In a leather jacket and boots and his hair wind-ruffled, he looked nothing like her rescuer of four days past and everything like those dangerous fantasies his voice suggested.

Maya’s knees suddenly felt weak and she nearly sat back down in the rocker again. What was he doing here?

“You back again?” Cat asked him, going to the nursery door. She turned to Maya. “He’s been here every day since the accident, checking on Joey.” Grinning at Sawyer, she gestured to Joey. “He’s fine, but his mom’s not too happy about going home without him. Since you’re here, maybe you could walk Maya back to her room.”

“Oh, that’s all right, I can…” Feeling her face grow hot, Maya wondered if Sawyer felt as awkward as she did about Cat’s suggestion. She couldn’t read his expression, but she guessed the last thing he wanted right now was to play nursemaid to her. Then she realized she’d been staring at him again and quickly averted her gaze, deciding she couldn’t do much more to embarrass herself at this particular moment.

“Actually I came to see you,” Sawyer said easily. “Paul told me you were going home today, and since you don’t have a car, I thought you could use a ride.”

"Uh, well, I—" Maya began, but Cat interrupted.

"That's great," she said. "We were just talking about how she was going to get home. Now, problem solved."

Far from it, Maya thought, but not wanting to argue in front of Cat, she turned to caress the glass of Joey's incubator one last time before gathering her hospital-issue robe more firmly around her and walking out of the nursery to face Sawyer. "You don't need to rescue me this time. I'm sure I can find a way home," she said as they started walking back toward her room.

"Save yourself the trouble," he said shortly. "I just got off shift and I'm on my way home. I can easily drop you at your parents' house."

Sawyer told himself this was the last thing he'd do for her. He'd see her safely to her parents' home and that would be it. He was saving Val and Paul a trip to the hospital to get her, so his offer to drive Maya was really nothing more than a favor to friends. Besides, he'd been coming to the hospital anyway to check on Joey. It wasn't as if he was going out of his way.

He caught Maya looking sideways at him as they waited for an elevator and figured he probably looked more than a little tired and out of sorts. It was no wonder she was reluctant to go anywhere with him.

"Look, I'm sorry if I snapped. It's been a long week already and I haven't had my transfusion of caffeine yet this morning." He tried a smile. "Why don't we start over? I'll be glad to give you a ride home as long as we can stop for coffee and bacon and eggs

on the way. What?" he said when she grimaced. "Please don't tell me you're one of those health-food freaks who only drinks weed tea and refuses to eat anything that used to breathe."

"Okay, I won't tell you," Maya said, flashing him a smile in return that lit up her eyes and temporarily banished the shadows from her face. The elevator opened and he followed her inside. "But I won't deny you your drug of choice."

"So does that mean we're outta here?"

"Just as soon as I lose this lovely hospital gown and sign whatever stacks of papers they have waiting," Maya said. The elevator shuddered to a stop and he walked her to her door, where she stopped him by touching her fingers to his arm. "One thing, though."

Sawyer looked down at her and decided at this point it didn't much matter what she asked. He'd committed himself to helping her, at least for today. "One thing?"

She nodded. "I'll accept your offer of a ride. But you have to let me do something for you in return."

And before he could ask what that might be, she smiled and ducked inside her room and closed the door.

Chapter Three

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind," Sawyer said nearly two hours later as he followed her, pushing a cart, through the organic-foods market. Instead of the café, she'd managed to talk him into stopping at this new-age excuse for a grocery market, offering him breakfast at her parents' house in exchange for helping her stock the shelves.

He'd agreed only because he figured she needed the supplies and, without a car, she'd have a hard time getting them. And she'd also reluctantly agreed to let him pick up breakfast at the café after shopping.

But watching her, Sawyer was beginning to regret giving in to her. She hadn't bothered with makeup, and in loose-fitting jeans and an oversize gray sweater, her hair loosely pulled back, she looked small and pale and unequal to a half an hour of grocery shopping, let alone the demands of time and strength raising a baby alone would take.

"You shouldn't be on your feet this much," he said. "You just got out of the hospital."

"That's the fifth time you've mentioned that," Maya told him as she reached for a container of yogurt. "Like I said, I'm fine. It's good for me to get up. If I sit too long, I get so stiff I can't move at all. Besides, it won't be too much longer and I'll be getting up all the time with Joey." She added a carton of soy milk, smiling

as he winced.

"You weren't kidding about the weeds and sticks. It's a wonder you haven't starved to death."

"It's a wonder you haven't poisoned yourself."

"As far as I'm concerned, that stuff is poison," Sawyer told her. "Give me caffeine and cholesterol any day."

"Mmm…guess that's why you're so cranky."

"Who's cranky?" he grumbled. "I just don't like mornings without espresso." Catching the laughter in her eyes and the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, he shrugged off her teasing. "Hey, I let you drag me here, didn't I? And this place is enough to make anyone with a healthy caffeine addiction cranky."

Maya laughed outright, remembering the look on his face when one of the clerks had offered him a sample of herbal tea. "Healthy and caffeine aren't two words you should use in the same sentence."

"If you're trying to convert me, you're wasting your time."

"Sorry," she said. "It's a bad habit I have, always working."

"What? Your job is helping hopeless caffeine addicts?"

"Some days," she said, laughing as she added bananas to the cart. "I practice alternative medicine." When he looked blank, she added, "You know, massage, aromatherapy, herbal remedies, meditation—that sort of thing."

She could see the effort he made to keep from rolling his eyes. "I guess that explains the weeds and sticks."

"That was pretty good," she told him. "Most people at least

make a joke."

Maya remembered how embarrassed her ex-fiancé had been whenever one of his friends or business associates asked what she did for a living. Evan had cringed every time the subject came up and had done his best to change it before she could answer. And when she'd gotten pregnant, he'd blamed her, saying it would never have happened if she'd gotten over her "fetish" about medication and taken the pill.

Her shoulders slumped and Sawyer noticed how she suddenly looked drained. Despite her continually telling him how fine she was, he'd been right and she'd tried to do too much too soon. But it wouldn't do him any good to tell her that again. The woman had a stubborn streak a mile wide.

"Let's get out of here," he said, touching a hand to the small of her back and urging her toward the checkout. "I think I'm crashing after going without coffee this long."

While she waited for the clerk to tally and bag her groceries, he used his cell to call ahead to the café and order breakfast, so it was ready by the time they'd stowed the bags in his truck. Making a quick stop to pick up the food, he easily found the road to her parents' house, and less than fifteen minutes later they were pulling up in the drive.

It was as bad as Sawyer remembered.

The story-and-a-half adobe house looked as if no one had bothered to do anything but live in it for the last fifty years. The peeling paint on the window frames revealed chips of about a

half-dozen different colors, several tiles were missing from the roof and a crack in the front window had been mended with duct tape.

He switched off the engine but didn't make any move to get out of the truck. "Are you sure about this?" he asked Maya. "I mean—" He gestured to the house.

"It could be worse," Maya said with a shrug.

"How?" Sawyer wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

She grinned at him. "We haven't been inside yet."

"Can't wait," he muttered as he pushed open his door and went around to offer her a hand out.

She looked up at him as she started to step down, and her foot slipped against the running board. Sawyer instinctively reached out and grasped her shoulders as she stumbled a little. Another step and she would have landed squarely in his arms. A jolt of awareness hit him of how close she was, the warmth of her against his hands, of how she looked at him, as if caught off guard by the same feeling.

In the next moment cold reality doused him. What the hell was he thinking? She'd just gotten out of the hospital after having a baby. He dropped his hands. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, fine—thanks." She didn't look at him as she stepped away from the truck. "Sorry, I'm not usually such a klutz. I guess I haven't gotten used to the sleep deprivation yet."

Sawyer tried to match her casual tone. "Take it from me, you never get used to it. At least I have caffeine to lean on." He

glanced at the house. “You still have a key?”

That brought her eyes back to him and she laughed. “What key? Azure and Shem’s doors have always been open to anyone the universe brings to their doorstep. Well, ready or not, I guess I’d better go in.”

The bricked path leading up to the front door was overgrown with a tangle of wildflowers and vines. Blue paint peeled from the decades-old Spanish-style door that someone had embellished with a large yellow plastic peace sign.

“I don’t think I’m ready,” Sawyer said under his breath as Maya shoved open the door to a whirl of dust and a foul smell, some evil combination of sandalwood incense and neglect.

“I think they had a party in here before they left,” Maya said, wrinkling her nose.

“For all we know, someone did, considering the way they let anyone walk in the place,” Sawyer grumbled, fumbling for a light switch in the dim room. Finding one on the wall, he flicked it. Nothing.

“Don’t waste your time. They have this habit of forgetting to pay utility bills.”

Sawyer banked his growing irritation. He scanned the room for windows. Spying drawn curtains, he stopped Maya from going any farther into the room with a hand on her arm. “Wait here a minute while I let some light in this dungeon.”

Maya groaned as morning sun streamed into the room. “Oh, you’re going to wish you hadn’t done that,” she said, stepping

carefully inside. “I think I was right about the party.”

Empty beer and wine bottles, ashtrays, plastic cups and paper plates were strewn all over the house. All sizes, shapes and colors of pillows lay haphazardly flung about the small living room. Strings of brightly colored beads hung from the blades of the ceiling fan, and the air hung heavy and cold, as if no one had bothered to bring any warmth or light into the house for months.

“You’re right, it’s worse,” Sawyer said flatly. “This place ought to be condemned. How could anyone live here?”

Maya shrugged as she bent to pick up a pink-and-green-striped pillow she almost tripped over. “Well, what do you know? My happy pillow. Azure made this for me when I turned seven,” she said, absently hugging the worn pillow. “And she made that blue-and-yellow one over there, stuck between those two candles, when I was nine. Every year she made me a new happy pillow out of fabrics with the lucky colors for the number of my age.”

“Nice,” was all the response Sawyer could muster.

“Actually this isn’t as bad as it’s looked after some of their parties. A little elbow grease and a few dozen gallons of disinfectant and the place will sparkle.”

Sawyer lifted a doubtful brow. “Sparkle?”

“Okay, so at least it won’t stink.”

Biting back a curse, Sawyer wondered how she could so casually accept her parents’ complete lack of responsibility. He’d had an idea of what it was like for her growing up with parents like the Rainbows, but it hadn’t come close to this.

"Maya—"

She turned from frowning over the mess as he strode over to her. He took her shoulders between his hands. "You can't stay here. And you sure as hell can't bring a baby home to this. Besides the fact it's a man-made disaster area, you don't have electricity and probably no gas or water either."

"There's a well out back," she said steadily, although there were shadows of worry and doubt in her eyes. "And there's a butane tank for cooking. I'll get the electricity turned back on and things cleaned up. We'll be fine."

"Are you telling me you honestly want to bring Joey home to this?"

"Honestly?" Maya lifted her chin. "Of course not. But right now I don't have a choice. We'll make do."

Maya waited for his next argument, but instead he stood for a moment, still holding her, his expression clearly saying he wanted to scoop her up and carry her out of this place, compelled to rescue her once again. And it was tempting right at this minute to throw herself into his arms and let him do it. Since she'd been a kid, she'd been the one taking care of others, fixing their problems. It would be a new experience to let someone take care of her.

Someone with great hands and a killer smile, who could make her warm inside with just a look and who attacked her defenses with his determination to help her.

Tension breathed in the silence between them. From their

argument. Had to be. From words, not feelings. Yet she was so close now that one step, the smallest move and she would be touching him and…

And don't even go there. How crazy was she for even thinking like that? New single mothers with four-day-old babies and a life to reorganize had fantasies about undisturbed sleep and winning the lottery, definitely not about men who inspired wicked cravings.

Besides, there was no way she could believe that Sawyer Morente, who surely could have his pick of any woman in New Mexico, would ever see her as anything more than just a needy single mother. Even ignoring the fact he'd delivered her son a few days ago, in her baggy clothes, with her hair a mess, with her face colored with bruises and still moving stiffly, she hardly qualified as a temptation.

"Care to share the joke?"

Maya blinked, startled out of her musings. "Joke?"

"You were smiling," Sawyer said. He let his hands slide away from her shoulders. "I figured I was missing something, because there isn't anything remotely funny about this place."

"Give it up. I'm staying. Which means I need my groceries." She made to turn toward the door.

"Hold on a minute." Sawyer raked a hand through his dark hair, trying to quickly come up with a compelling reason for her to get as far away from this dump as possible. "You don't have to stay here. You have a choice. You and Joey can stay with me."

Maya stared at him. A faint pink flushed her pale skin. “You… I don’t quite know how to answer that,” she said finally.

Sawyer was beginning to feel he really had lost his mind where she was concerned. But it was too late to retrieve it now. “It wasn’t a proposition. You’d be on your own most of the time. I’m hardly ever there, ask anyone. Besides, I’ve got the room and electricity and running water. It’s a much better place for Joey than this.”

“No retro decor, though, I’ll bet.” A smile tugged the corner of her mouth. She touched his arm. “Thanks for the offer, but I can’t. Joey is my responsibility, not yours. Besides—” her smile broadened into a grin “—what would people think if they found out you were living with the hippie girl?”

“That she had more sense than to raise her son in a place like this,” Sawyer snapped back, earning a frown from Maya. He took a breath. “I’m sorry. I know it’s not my business and Joey is not my responsibility. I just wanted—” What? He couldn’t find any words for what he wanted, because at this moment nothing made any sense anyhow.

“You’ve already rescued us once,” Maya said, her eyes and mouth soft again, as if she knew what he didn’t. “Listen, this is only temporary. As soon as I’m working again, I’ll find us our own place. Trust me, I had enough of the love shack growing up. I mean, my parents were really good to me in their own way, but I don’t want that kind of life for Joey.”

Sawyer didn’t understand her parents. But he kept quiet, not wanting to bring her frown back.

She seemed to read his thoughts all the same. “They weren’t abusive. They’re…who they are. They’re good people. I have some really happy memories of this place. You just can’t count on them for anything. But I always know they love me even if sometimes it seems they forget they have a daughter.” She glanced around the room with a rueful smile. “I guess that’s hard to understand, looking at this and comparing it to your family.”

“There’s no comparison,” Sawyer said shortly. Avoiding her eyes, he started toward the door. “I’ll go and get your groceries. I’m sure you’re starving by now.”

How could he compare living on his grandfather’s estate with Maya’s chaotic commune life? he thought as he hefted the bags out of the back and retrieved his own breakfast from the front seat of his truck. Somehow Maya had felt wanted and loved even though her parents had never bothered to marry or give her any stability.

His mother, on the other hand, had been the complete opposite of the Rainbows. She’d been a woman driven by her determination to provide her sons with everything their father would never give them. Teresa Morente could never have been accused of neglecting her sons, at least when it came to material things. But neither she nor his grandparents had ever been warm and nurturing, had ever looked at him or his brother with the soul-deep tenderness and love that he saw in Maya’s eyes every time she looked at her son.

Joey would always have that even if he never knew his father.

And that would be enough. Because it was obvious, as far as Maya was concerned, it would have to be.

Shouldering his way into the house, he found the living room empty. Sawyer followed the sound of banging and scraping to the kitchen, where he found Maya pushing the litter of cans, bottles and candle stubs off a battered oak table into a garbage bag.

"I think we might be better off eating in the living room," she said, indicating with a helpless wave of her hand the dirty dishes heaped up on every available counter space, along with what looked like dead weeds optimistically planted in clay pots.

Sawyer set the bags down on a square of table she'd managed to uncover. "I think you're right."

They carried breakfast into the living room, shoving pillows aside to share the slightly lumpy couch. Sawyer made short work of his bacon and eggs, and while Maya picked at her yogurt and banana, he moved to take a look at the fireplace. There was a stack of wood piled next to it and matches in a jar on the mantle, but he was unsure about what might be blocking the flue.

"It should be okay," Maya said, answering his silent query. She set her yogurt carton on an end table and drew her feet up, hugging her arms around her knees. "Since we couldn't always count on having gas or electricity, my parents made sure they at least had the fireplace to fall back on."

Sawyer didn't comment but set to work building a fire, and in about fifteen minutes his efforts paid off as the first tentative flames curled up between the chunks of wood.

“Much better,” Maya said when he returned to sit next to her. Sighing, she looked at the flickering fire and wished she could be back at the hospital sleeping close by her son.

“You’re going to need an army to get this place livable,” Sawyer said, interrupting her reverie.

“Hardly. Just a lot of garbage bags.”

“Come on, Maya, I can—”

She held up her hands, fending off his next attempt to convince her she needed his help. “Stop trying to fix everything. Just because I’m on my own doesn’t mean I can’t handle a dirty house. Your mom managed to raise two kids by herself.”

“My mother lived with parents who didn’t disappear into the desert on a whim and who had a staff to take care of her kids and clean the refrigerator. It’s hardly the same.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll survive anyway,” Maya said firmly. She shifted on the couch, laying her head back. “I’ve got to do something about my car first. And then, once Joey and I are settled, I need to look for work. Maybe there’s something at the hospital.”

“Yeah, surely some department there needs an expert in weeds and sticks. Hey, just kidding,” he said, fending off the pillow she threw at him.

Maya didn’t feel like defending her work to him so she just smiled. “Don’t worry, Joey won’t starve.”

His expression turned from teasing to serious. He hesitated a moment, then said, “Joey is lucky to have you. But it’s not going

to be easy bringing him up alone."

"I can't change that." Regret, sadness, anger mixed up inside her but she pushed them away. It was too late to cry over what might have been. Any love she'd ever felt for Evan was long dead, and it was very clear he'd never cared enough about her to stick by her when she needed him most.

"Where the hell is Joey's father?" Sawyer blurted out, then immediately held out a hand in apology. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry that way."

"You have a better way?" Maya gently teased him. "It's okay," she said before he could say anything else. She looked away, plucking at a woolly strand on her sweater, not sure what, if anything, she wanted to tell him. Finally she raised her eyes back to his, deciding it would be better to say something. There would be enough rumors going around as it was.

"We were supposed to get married next month. But that was before he found out I was pregnant. Then he decided he couldn't handle being a husband and father all at once. So he walked out."

She didn't add that Evan at first had accused her of deliberately getting pregnant, then repeated his conviction she was a freak for refusing to take the pill. At one point he'd even questioned whether or not Joey was his. It was then Maya had given up on him, handed him back his ring and later gotten him to legally give up any and all parental rights, which he'd been only too happy to do after insisting he never wanted to see her or her baby again.

She would never regret that decision—Joey didn't need a father who resented him and didn't want him. But she could admit to herself, especially now when her emotions were so close to the surface following Joey's birth, that the idea of raising a child alone was more than a little daunting.

Something of her feelings must have shown in her face because Sawyer reached out and touched her hand. "You'll do fine."

She smiled a little. "I guess he'll survive me, one way or the other." Suddenly a wave of tiredness washed over her, and after a glance around the room she leaned back and closed her eyes. "I do wish, though, I could wave a wand and make this all go away. It's looking like a bigger job all the time."

"Nothing a bulldozer and a pit couldn't handle," he muttered.

"It's better than nothing. And it is home."

How anyone could call this "home" was beyond Sawyer. His irritation at the whole situation rose up again, making him angry with her parents for creating this dump, for bringing Maya up this way to begin with and then taking off when she needed them most.

He had to do something about it. He couldn't let her bring a new baby to this rattrap. Hell, anyone would feel the same way if they took one look at this place. Maybe he should talk to Val and Paul about it, get Val to convince Maya to at least accept help in clearing out this mess.

Sawyer turned to Maya with the idea of trying one more time

to get her to see reason. But she'd fallen asleep.

The fire had chased the chill from the room and the warmth had put a slight flush on her cheeks. Her lips slightly parted, her breathing slow and even, she'd curled up, hugging her arms around her knees. Without thinking, Sawyer reached out and gently brushed an errant strand of hair from her face, his fingertips just skimming her skin. The bare touch of her tempted him to linger, to explore the soft curves and planes of her face.

It was a temptation he couldn't afford to indulge, not even for a stolen moment. Drawing back, he laid his head back against the couch, distracting himself from thoughts of touching with ideas for helping her.

It had been a long week and, despite the coffee, he could feel the string of nights with little sleep catching up with him. He closed his eyes and told himself he'd rest for just a minute or two. A minute or two and then he'd head home and get some real sleep.

A pounding in his head jerked Sawyer awake. He instinctively started up thinking it was an alarm, until he realized he wasn't in his bunk at the station but still sitting in the middle of the Rainbow living room, propped in a corner of the couch, with Maya sleeping snuggled against his side, his arm around her.

The feel of her pressed close to him was more disconcerting than being jolted awake. He didn't want to examine the weird combination of uneasiness and intimacy he was feeling, and the banging again, more insistent this time, gave him an excuse to

ignore the sensations.

Someone was at the door and, from the sound of it, not going away anytime soon. Moving slowly, Sawyer tried to get up without waking Maya, but she sighed and made a little protesting sound when he eased her away from him and then opened her eyes enough to look at him.

"What—what's the matter?" she said, rubbing at her eyes as she straightened. "Did I fall asleep?"

"We both did, and now someone's trying to knock your door down. Stay here," he said. "I'll get it."

Sawyer almost groaned when he glanced out the window and saw Valerie. She stood on the front porch, three enormous bags at her feet, her hand raised as if she was about to start the pounding again. He seriously considered not answering the door, but with his truck in the driveway advertising he was there, leaving Val on the doorstep would only feed her already overactive imagination.

"The door's not going to be able to stand much more abuse," he said as he opened it to her.

"And hello to you, too. What's the matter, not enough caffeine this morning?" Val studied him for a moment, then glanced at her watch. "Ten minutes. Interesting."

"Not," Sawyer said flatly. "So don't go imagining something that never happened." The last thing Maya needed right now was more gossip about her.

Val laughed as she picked up one of the bags. "Why, Sawyer, I don't need to imagine anything. Your face says it all." And with

a wink she walked around him and into the house.

Chapter Four

Hearing Val's voice, Maya scrambled to her feet, her legs still wobbly with sleep, and attempted to straighten her hopelessly wrinkled sweater and smooth her hair, then gave up, figuring she was only making her appearance worse.

A moment later Val came inside, followed by Sawyer carrying three overstuffed grocery bags. Maya avoided looking anywhere near his direction. The scent of him, clean and masculine, lingered on her and she wondered just how close they'd been sleeping. He'd been on his feet by the time she'd fully awakened, but Maya had a vague memory of his solid warmth pressed against her body as she slept. For some reason she felt vaguely guilty, as if she were a teenager caught by her parents making out with her boyfriend. Of course, her parents would have just smiled and told her to carry on. And besides, she and Sawyer hadn't done anything naughty enough to inspire even a raised eyebrow.

And Val knew she'd just had a baby. Surely she wouldn't imagine Maya being up to much more than heavy napping. Although the slightly amused smile on Val's face coupled with Sawyer's obvious discomfort made Maya squirm.

"What's all this?" she asked quickly. "Here, let me help."

"Hands off," Val said. "You don't need to be lifting anything heavy. It's just a few basics to help you set up housekeeping." She stopped and looked around. "Madre de Dios, this is worse

than I imagined. I don't even want to see the bathroom."

Sawyer shifted the bags in his arms. "Good, I have an ally."

"Val, don't you need to put those down? In the kitchen? And you," Maya said, glaring in his direction, "let's not have this conversation again."

"Sure, not a problem," he said with an infuriating smirk. "But two against one, you're gonna lose."

"If he's talking about the state of this house, he's right," Val said. When Maya started to protest, Val held up a hand. "I'm sorry, I like your parents. I don't understand them, but to each his own. But this is just plain bad." Val planted her palms on her hips. "You're coming home with me."

Sawyer came back from setting down the groceries and stood in the kitchen doorway, leaning against the jamb, with every appearance of enjoying himself.

The smirk was still there but Maya decided to ignore him. Right now she had a well-meaning but misguided friend to contend with. "I know you're only trying to help, but—" She saw the line of her friend's jaw tighten as Val gritted her teeth.

"But nothing. You were just in a serious car accident and you have a newborn baby, a tiny premature baby, to think of. He's fragile, Maya. If you bring him home to this…this dump, who knows what he might catch."

Val almost succeeded in making Maya feel guilty. Almost. "You're exaggerating just a bit, don't you think?" She stepped closer to Val, laid a gentle hand on her arm. "I'm feeling better

already. I plan to clean things up before Joey's released from the hospital. It'll be okay, really."

"Feeling better?" Val rolled her eyes. "Right. That's why you were dead asleep on the couch when I got here. I've had three kids honey, I know what you're feeling like right now and better isn't on the list."

"See how sensible she's being," Sawyer said, smiling when Maya answered him with a glower.

"I just had a baby," she said. "Of course I'm tired. But it's not terminal. And I'm not working right now, so I have nothing but time to clean up around here."

"Who are you trying to kid?" Val countered. "Let's see." She started counting off on her fingers. "You'll be at the hospital, say, eight, ten hours a day, if I know you. Sleeping and eating will take up another ten. So I'm figuring you ought to have at least an hour, maybe two every day to make this place livable. With that schedule you should be done cleaning up about the time Joey is ready for kindergarten."

Sawyer covered a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Maya wasn't amused. Her patience wearing thin, she stubbornly stuck to her defense of her plan to temporarily move Joey here, even though a small part of her agreed with Sawyer and Val. Getting her parents' house into shape was probably going to be a much bigger job than she'd bargained for.

"Look, both of you, I appreciate your concern, I really do. But this is my home—Joey's and my home—for now. I know the pair

of you would just as soon see it demolished, but believe it or not, this place has a lot of happy memories for me. And the junk has meaning to me. That hideous painting over there, for example," she said, pointing to a large framed painting of splattered colors. "I painted that for Shem when I was in the third grade. When he framed it and hung it on the wall right smack in the middle of the living room, I felt like a real artist. It might not look like much around here, but it's all we have and we will make do."

Val glanced at the picture, then at Maya. She shook her head, smiling a little. "You always were stubborn, girl. And you know you have me, too, mi amiga."

"And me," Sawyer said before realizing exactly what he was saying. Both women turned to stare at him—Val with speculation, Maya as if she wasn't quite sure what to make of him. What the hell, it was too late to back down now. "I already told you I'll help you get this place in shape for Joey. And I'm sure you can count on Val and Paul, too."

What he really wanted to say was he'd help her out of here as soon as possible and find her a place that didn't reek, wasn't a fire trap and didn't have an open invite to any vermin and vagabonds in the neighborhood.

Like my house he thought and then immediately squashed that idea. Get a grip, Morente. He'd had no business suggesting that in the first place and no business even thinking it now. Man, do I need a good night's sleep.

"Absolutely," Val said. "We're all here for you 24-7."

“Thank you, I know that.” Maya smiled at Val and avoided looking at Sawyer. For some reason she didn’t want to consider too closely, his words stung. I’ll help you get this place in shape for Joey. Of course he wanted to do the decent thing and rescue Joey from what he considered a disaster. Not her, Joey, she thought with a pang.

In the next instant she felt ashamed at herself. How ridiculous was she, feeling disappointed because gorgeous rescue-hero Sawyer Morente was more interested in her days-old baby than in his less-than-stunning mother.

“I’m really grateful for all you’re trying to do,” she told Val. “But we have to find our own way from the start. Actually it’s probably better that Shem and Azure aren’t here. They’d only try to tell me how I should be nurturing Joey’s spirit and trying to read his aura and chart his stars.” She couldn’t help but laugh. “Then they’d just mess the place up even worse by throwing me a big congratulations party.”

“All the more reason to get out of here before they come back,” Sawyer muttered.

“All the more reason you should accept a little help from your friends,” Val said. “You and your little boy are going to need all the help and support you can get. It’s not going to be easy for either of you.”

Maya looked at Sawyer, and for a moment Val wasn’t in the room.

Sawyer could hear Val’s unspoken message: Raising a

fatherless baby is going to be hard—for both of you.

Still looking at him as if she understood exactly, Maya said, "Joey has me and I'll love him enough for two. He doesn't need a father who doesn't want him."

From the recesses of his memory, Sawyer heard his mother saying the same thing to him. You don't need a father who doesn't want you.

He recalled the times, as a boy, he'd gotten into fights because kids at school had teased him about not having a father come to watch him play baseball or because he was clumsy in shop class. He'd never had a father to teach him how to use tools the way the other boys had. His mother had always chided him and reminded him that he didn't need a father who didn't want him.

And all his life he'd told himself the same thing. Until he'd looked into Joey's innocent blue eyes and seen a reflection of himself. Now the idea of that little boy growing up with the same doubts and fears he'd had bothered him more than he cared to admit.

Fighting off a surge of unwelcome emotion, he abruptly turned back into the kitchen and began unloading groceries.

There was a silence and then he heard Val say, "Well, how about this? Why don't you stay with us, just until we get this place into shape? It'll be cozy, but we don't mind if you don't."

"Val, you are not listening to me. I'll have a job soon and Joey and I will move into our own place. Try and understand. "

Val heaved a sigh. "I don't understand, but obviously I can't

change your mind right now. But I'm not taking my groceries back, so don't even start with me on that. Speaking of which, I'll give you a hand putting them away."

"I can do that," Sawyer said as they walked into the kitchen. He hoped Val would take the hint and leave. "Why don't you stay and let me make you lunch?" Maya asked, unaware of Sawyer's wish. "It's the least I can do after all this."

"I'd love to but I have to get back home. The girls have ballet class and Paul's taking our little one for his checkup." A feline smile slanted her lips. "But maybe Sawyer is hungry."

The woman didn't know when to quit, Sawyer decided. Fantasizing about a good use for duct tape, Sawyer resisted telling her to give up on her very obvious and misguided attempt at matchmaking. "Actually I'm more tired than hungry. I think I'll take off as soon as I put the last of these away."

"I'll get those," Maya said, reaching for a can. He caught her gaze, her eyes brimming with a combination of sympathy and apology.

"Fine, then I guess I'll head back to my place," he said, inwardly wincing at the brusqueness in his voice, especially when Maya looked a little taken aback.

She followed him to the door, and when he turned to tell her goodbye, she averted her eyes, her face a becoming pink. "Um, thanks for everything," she said quickly. "I really—"

"Appreciate it, I know. Forget it," he said roughly. He looked down at her upturned face, those wide green eyes locked with his,

and wondered why he couldn't just walk away and forget about her.

"I should go," he said. Fishing around in his pocket, he pulled out his sunglasses and shoved them on. "Call me if you need or want anything." He opened the door and stepped out, paused and turned back. "You know where to find me."

She smiled at that, soft and full. "And you know where to find me."

His arms laden with a pile of dirty clothes he'd kept throwing in his truck from the station but forgetting to bring home, Sawyer kicked his door shut with his heel. Regina had come this morning, and the place smelled fresh, of lemon oil and floor wax. His housekeeper would ream him for bringing her the heap of sweaty, smoky clothes from work, but he was used to that.

Regina Cortez had been taking care of him and Cort one way or another since they'd moved to the estate. She'd been working for his grandparents for a couple of years before his mother had come to live there with her two young sons and asked Regina to be their part-time babysitter. From the beginning Sawyer and Cort considered Regina family rather than hired help. Even now she fussed over the both of them and had made it her life's work to find them both nice girls to settle down with, since she was firmly convinced both of them were overdue for marriage and family.

Tugging off his boots, Sawyer left them by the door, lest she have another reason to curse him out in Spanish for leaving black

scuff marks on her shiny beige ceramic tiles.

Sawyer strode to the gleaming kitchen and tugged open the stainless-steel fridge. “Beer, beer or beer?” he muttered to himself, rummaging through shelves largely empty except for the bonanza of imported beers. “Come on, Reggie, didn’t you leave me some of your world-famous tamales? Ah, there they are.” He pulled a tray from behind a six-pack. “Atta girl, I knew you wouldn’t hold that gouge in the coffee table against me forever.”

He snapped the beer and drank it while he shoved the tamales in the microwave to warm, then wandered into his living room and snatched up the TV remote. He sat back in his favorite leather chair and propped his legs up on the coffee table. He began channel surfing, not really watching anything. His thoughts weren’t here in his gorgeous, custom-decorated hacienda. His thoughts were back at the Rainbow love shack. His thoughts had never left Maya.

Why was she so attached to that run-down excuse for a house? Maybe because it was a home, he mused.

Sawyer looked around him at the beautiful Spanish antiques, Indian rugs, pottery. Most of it, including the rich leathers and upholstery, had been given to him by his mother from the estate house furnishings. His mother had bought the house shortly after Sawyer had joined the Air Force, with plans of finally moving off her parents’ estate. But she’d always found a reason not to make the move, and when Sawyer came back to Luna Hermosa, she had insisted he move in to this house. She had offered the

house to Cort, but he had flat-out refused to live there. Sawyer hadn't been excited about a house, either, because he thought it was too big and too fussily decorated for his taste. And if his mother hadn't been ill at the time and determined he accept, he would never have agreed to live here.

The house had every amenity money could buy. And yet it was still only a house, a shell. Impersonal. Cold. The house had almost nothing of him in it except his old leather chair—and that he'd had to fight his mother tooth and nail to keep after she'd consigned it to the junk pile.

He smiled, thinking of Maya's grade school painting on the wall. Hardly the Gorman that hung over his fireplace. But it was a part of Maya, like her mother's pillows and heaven knew what other trinkets and odd junk. All of it worthless, except to Maya. He took another swig of his beer, his other hand still impatiently surfing his hundred-plus channels of cable service for something worth watching.

Hell, if that place means so much to her and she won't leave it, then at least it's going to be up to code and safe for her to bring Joey home to.

Sawyer dug his cell phone out of his jeans pocket and punched in his brother's number. "Hey, Cort, you wanted to talk, right?"

"Yeah, but—"

"How about now?" Sawyer suggested. He figured Cort would make the time for a brotherly heart-to-heart, especially since Sawyer hadn't bothered to tell him what their talk would be

about.

Half an hour later Sawyer slung a towel around his waist and went to answer the doorbell only to nearly get hit in the face by the door when Cort shoved his way through the entrance. “Come on in,” Sawyer said.

“Sorry. I got tired of waiting for you to answer,” Cort grumbled. He looked harried and not at all glad to be there.

Sawyer pulled the towel from his waist and dried his chest. “Go grab a beer while I throw on some pants,” he said, heading for the bedroom, where he tugged on a fresh pair of black jeans.

“Where’s my brew?” Cort yelled from the kitchen.

“I don’t stock rotgut beer.” Sawyer strode into the kitchen, still bare-chested, and prodded his brother away from the fridge.

“You used to. But that was when we saw each other once in a while.”

“Stop bellyaching. Here, I found one.” Sawyer handed the bottle to Cort, thinking he must have been working out like a fiend. His younger brother had always had strong arms and broad shoulders and he’d always worked out, but he looked a size larger in the faded black T-shirt and worn jeans.

“So, you finally ready to at least talk about this?”

Sawyer fingered his damp hair back from his face. “Yeah, whatever. But first I need a favor.”

Cort set his beer down, leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. “I knew it. The invite was a ploy. And I’ll wager it’s another Sawyer-to-the-rescue stunt, isn’t it?”

"It's a worthy cause."

"And does that cause have green eyes and red hair?"

"Actually he doesn't have any hair yet."

"What?"

"Her baby, Joey."

Cort looked unconvinced. "Like I believe that. Saving babies in distress isn't exactly your style. You usually prefer rescuing someone when it requires you to jump out of a plane or climb a mountain through ten feet of snow or— What's that latest rescue group you're heading up now? The mounted saviors, led by Zorro himself? Last I heard, you were riding poor old Diablo through the rapids of the Rio Grande to drag some drunken rafter out of the river."

"Diablo likes adventure," Sawyer said, not bothering to defend himself. Cort didn't exactly spend his time in sheltered safety.

"He told you that, did he?"

"I know my horse."

"Sure you do," Cort said, smirking. "The poor beast doesn't have much chance to avoid potential loss of life and limb with you around. So, anyhow, what's with this baby? I'm guessing this is the kid you delivered the other night."

Sawyer nodded. "He was premature and he needs a safe place to come home to after he's out of the hospital."

"And this is your responsibility because…?"

"Because he's a helpless baby and his mother doesn't have many options right now. Besides," Sawyer said, searching

for some reasonable explanation that would cut short Cort's questions, "we went to school together."

"Oh, well, that makes perfect sense then," Cort said. "I'm sure the other dozens of women you went to school with would love to hear about this."

"Will you cut me some slack here?"

Cort took a lazy swig from his bottle. "Okay, okay, so I've heard. Maya Rainbow is back in town, unmarried and unemployed, and she's moved into the love shack. And you're so taken with this baby that you've decided it's your duty to rehab the place for her. I get the picture."

Ignoring the heavy sarcasm in Cort's tone, Sawyer said, "You haven't seen the place lately. It ought to be condemned, but she's determined to live there with Joey. So, will you help me?"

Cort shoved away from the counter to toss his empty bottle in the trash can. "Of course I'll help you. Don't I always?"

"Thanks, I knew you'd see it my way, little brother."

"I'll help," Cort added, "on one condition."

Sawyer's grin faded. "I figured that was too easy. As if I have to ask what this condition of yours is."

"After you're done with this latest rescue mission, we set a date to go see Garrett. I want to get this over with once and for all." Cort hesitated, eyeing Sawyer as if he was trying to gauge his reaction, then said, "I talked to him a couple of days ago."

Sawyer looked at him in disbelief, then shook his head. "Great, good for you. So, what, you're all ready to forgive and

forget now?"

"No, but I'm ready to listen. How about you?"

"Listen to what?" Sawyer moved past Cort and went to the refrigerator for another beer, not because he particularly wanted one but because he wanted an excuse to break off the conversation and get his temper under control. Getting mad at Cort wouldn't solve anything, but he was getting tired of Cort's campaign to bring about a family reunion.

"I don't know," Cort said. "And we're never going to know unless we talk to him. If nothing else, maybe we can finally bury it."

"Talking to him isn't going to make it any deader for me than it already is." But even as he said the words Sawyer knew that they weren't quite true. A small part of him still did want answers, if only to know what had been so wrong that his father despised his oldest sons.

"Will you at least think about it?" Cort asked quietly. "I told him I'd call back in a couple of weeks and let him know."

Sawyer started to refuse outright, but Cort had always been there for him and obviously this was important to his brother for some reason Cort hadn't bothered to reveal yet. "I'll think about it, okay? That's all I can promise."

And as soon as he'd said it, Sawyer began to wish he hadn't agreed to even that much.

Joey's big blue eyes fluttered closed and Maya shifted him in her arms. He'd just finished nursing and now he lay contented

against her breast, his little breaths coming in short, even puffs.

Maya pulled her blouse down and shifted her small bundle to her shoulder. Gently, her hand covering his entire back with each pat, she burped him. His tummy full, he let out a satisfied sigh and drifted into a deep sleep.

The door to the hospital room opened quietly and Dr. Kerrigan stepped in. “Is he finished?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, he’s been nursing for the last half hour straight. Here —” Maya moved Joey back to her arms “—touch his belly. It’s hard as a rock.”

Lia reached over and laid a palm on the rounded pink mound. “Well there’s certainly nothing wrong with his appetite. He’s gained five ounces already.”

“Really? That much? Does that mean I can take him home?”

“Patience, Mom.” Lia moved her hand from Joey to lay it on Maya’s arm. “He’s on a roll here, so let’s not interrupt it. You see, there may be latent effects from the trauma of the accident that haven’t surfaced yet. I want to keep him under round-the-clock observation a little longer.”

“I know, it’s better for him.” A tear welled in Maya’s eye and rolled down her cheek. “I miss him every minute of every hour of every day I’m not with him, but right now I have nothing to offer him to come home to.”

“Hey, you have you. That’s all he needs.” Lia pulled up a chair and sat next to Maya. “What’s going on here? This doesn’t sound like you. Has something happened?”

“Something else, you mean?” Maya tried to laugh. She impatiently swept the tears from her face. “No. It’s probably just postpartum depression.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. In your case, I think maybe not. Why don’t you tell me what’s really bothering you?”

Maya’s pride warred with her need to release her pain, her fears, the emotions she’d been keeping bottled up, hiding from everyone, herself included. “It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” she burst out at last.

“Well, no, having a baby in the middle of a storm after a car accident isn’t ideal, but you both came out of it basically unscathed,” Lia said, smiling a little. “Joey is thriving, and you’re recovering from the accident and childbirth faster than just about anyone I’ve ever seen in similar circumstances.”

“I know. We are very lucky. But I wasn’t talking about the accident. I was talking about everything else. I was supposed to be married, with a loving husband, a job, a nice, clean home to bring our baby back to.”

“Oh, that.”

Maya managed a laugh between tears that now flowed freely. “Yeah, that. The reality is Joey has no father, a sad excuse for a home and an unemployed mother who bursts into tears at every opportunity.”

Lia laid a gentle hand on Maya’s shoulder. “Maya, listen to me. Do you know how many women I see who are bringing their babies back to homes where they wind up abused, neglected,

abandoned?”

Maya shook her head. “I can’t even think about that.”

“Believe me, I don’t want to. Especially when there’s little or nothing I can do about it. But my point is Joey has more than a lot of kids I see every day,” Lia said firmly. “He has a mother who adores him and who knows how to take care of him. He has a mother who will get a job, who will make a home, who will be there for him. That can be enough. If you let it be.”

“I hope so,” Maya murmured, gazing down at her little boy. She took a deep breath and started to thank Lia, but a slight noise turned them both to the door.

Sawyer stood there, his eyes on her and Joey, and Maya had the sinking feeling he’d just overheard way more than she had ever wanted him to.

Chapter Five

Great, just great, Maya thought as she turned away and hastily rubbed her fingers over her face. Of course, any pitiful attempt to pretend nothing was wrong would be wasted since it was obvious from the way he was looking at her that Sawyer had overheard her crying on Lia Kerrigan's shoulder. She didn't know which bothered her more—him seeing her in tears or that he always had to see her at her worst.

He already thought she needed constant rescuing. Now this probably made him more determined than ever to fix everything in her life.

"Well, you've got company and I've got to finish my rounds. Don't worry," Lia said, patting Maya's shoulder, "I promise this little guy is going home very soon and then you'll have him all to yourself."

As Lia started past Sawyer, she smiled up at him. "Good to see you again, Sawyer."

"Yeah, you, too," he said, his eyes on Maya and Joey.

Lia hesitated, but Sawyer seemed not to notice, and after a moment she moved out into the hallway—disappointed, Maya thought. Her competition was Joey, Maya wanted to tell her, since Joey's mom wasn't likely to figure in any man's fantasies right now.

Sawyer came over to stand close, looking down at her gently

rocking Joey as her little boy began drifting off to sleep again. Maya looked up and caught an odd expression on his face, something both soft and fierce, that made her throat tighten and her eyes blur with tears because it echoed her own feelings about her baby.

"Hi," he said quietly. This near to her, Maya could feel the warmth of his body, almost touching hers.

"Hi, yourself. I wasn't expecting to see you here again."

Sawyer shrugged, shifting his focus to Joey. "I wanted to see how the two of you were doing." Almost as if it were an involuntary gesture, he reached out and very gently brushed a finger over Joey's cheek. Joey gave a little gurgling sigh and seemed to look in Sawyer's direction.

Sawyer smiled and Maya blinked, swallowing hard.

"I think he remembers me," Sawyer said.

"Well, you do make a pretty good first impression," she managed around the lump in her throat. "And I think you've been here with him as much as I have."

"Not quite." He went down on one knee, draping an arm over the back of Maya's chair and reaching out to touch Joey's tiny hand. The baby latched onto the end of his finger. "Hey, you've got a pretty good grip for a little guy."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.