

CARLA CASSIDY

Waiting for the Wedding



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Аннотация

They'd waited for their wedding night...the night that never happened. And five years later Sherry Boyd still held fast to her virginity. But it seemed her former fiance, Clint Grahan, had not—the "evidence" lay nestled against his broad chest. Now, the irresistible sheriff came to her—of all people—for help in caring for the beautiful baby who had been dropped in his lap. Well, the man had nerve! Sherry had locked bittersweet memories of Clint in a box with her engagement ring. But here they were, crashing back...and here she was, on her once-beloved's doorstep, taking the child in her arms, her heart fluttering the way it used to...

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Dear Reader,

To me, there is something intensely romantic about a heroine who experiences for the first time the wonder of lovemaking with the hero—the man who will be her first, her last, her only.

Sherry Boyd is a special heroine, a woman who has given up her dreams of a wedding, a family and a future with small-town sheriff and ex-boyfriend Clint Graham. How wonderful it was for me to get to play matchmaker and see that these two loving people got their happily-ever-after.

I hope you enjoy their story and that you will find your own special happily-ever-after.

Best wishes,

Carla Cassidy

Waiting for the Wedding

Carla Cassidy



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CARLA CASSIDY

is an award-winning author who has written more than fifty books for Harlequin and Silhouette Books. In 1995 she won Best Silhouette Romance from RT Book Reviews for Anything for Danny. In 1998 she also won a Career Achievement Award for Best Innovative Series.

Carla believes the only thing better than curling up with a good book to read is sitting down at the computer with a good story to write. She's looking forward to writing many more books and bringing hours of pleasure to readers.

To Kathryn and Carlee, I love you!

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Chapter One

The last thing Sheriff Clint Graham expected to see when he opened his front door on an early April morning was a baby on his doorstep. Yet, there she was, a bundle of sleeping baby wrapped in a pink blanket and resting in a car seat. Next to the car seat on the wooden porch was a small diaper bag.

Clint looked around. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, promising another glorious spring day. The light of a new dawn painted the tidy homes on his street in a lush, golden light. It was the kind of day that reminded him why he loved the small town of Armordale, Kansas.

He eyed the house on the left, then the house on the right. He knew his neighbors on both sides, knew they probably weren't responsible for the surprise package. He studied the shrubs and trees, seeking the person who'd left the baby.

Nobody. There was nobody around, no cars parked on the street, no strangers lurking in the shadows. Nothing seemed amiss. Except there was a baby on his porch.

Unsure exactly what to do, Clint carefully picked up the car seat and carried the baby into the kitchen. He set the seat on the kitchen table and stared at the cherubic little face.

Pale wisps of blond hair adorned the top of her head. Her cheeks were rounded, her lips little rosebuds that trembled slightly with each breath. He had no idea who she was, how old

she was or why she'd been left on his porch.

It was then he noticed the white edge of a folded piece of paper tucked into her blanket. Gingerly he pulled it free, not wanting to awaken her.

He opened the note, frowning as he read.

I've never asked you for anything since Kathryn was born. I've never asked you to be a husband to me or a father to her, but now I need your help. I'm in danger and must be gone for a week or two. Please keep her safe for me. When things are back to normal, I'll return for her, then she and I will once again disappear from your life.

His heart thudded to a halt. The note wasn't signed.

Was it possible? For a brief moment crazy thoughts filled his head.

No, surely not. He'd have heard something. Somebody would have told him. Somehow he'd have known. He shoved aside his momentary, outrageous thoughts.

He stared at the letter again. It was written on plain white notebook paper. There was no clue as to who might have written it. He set it aside, his frown deepening.

Danger. The note said there was danger. Had the mother dropped the baby off here because Clint was sheriff? Before he had time to fully assess the situation, there was a knock on his door.

He hurried to answer, afraid the discordant noise would awaken the slumbering infant. He opened the door and held a

finger to his lips.

“What’s the matter?” Andy Lipkin, Clint’s deputy whispered. He held two foam cups in his hands, steam rising from the hot coffee.

It had become routine for the two men to ride together to the sheriff’s station. Andy bought the coffee in the mornings, and Clint bought the sodas on the drive home in the evenings.

“Follow me and be quiet.” Clint motioned Andy into the kitchen. Andy stopped short in the doorway as he spied the baby in the center of the kitchen table. On tiptoe, the big, burly man walked toward the table. “What’s that?” He set down the two coffees.

“Looks like a baby to me,” Clint replied dryly. “She was left on my doorstep a little while ago.” He handed Andy the note that had accompanied the surprise bundle.

Andy scanned the note, then handed it back to Clint. “You know who she is?”

“I don’t have a clue,” Clint exclaimed.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Clint replied. He stared thoughtfully at the sleeping little girl, then looked back at his deputy. He didn’t even want to think of what would happen when she awakened. He sighed and raked a hand through his hair. “You go on into the office, and I’ll figure something out here. I’ll try to come in by noon.”

Andy grabbed one of the coffees, and together he and Clint

tiptoed out of the kitchen. "You going to call Social Services in Kansas City?" Andy asked.

Clint frowned, thinking of that sweet little baby being swallowed by the system. It was possible if he turned Kathryn in to Social Services, Kathryn's mother would never get the little girl back. Until he knew the mother's identity and the circumstances of the temporary abandonment, he hated to do anything so final.

"Not immediately," he said thoughtfully. "I'd like to try to figure out what's going on before I go the Social Services route. This is a small town, and usually people know each other's business. Maybe somebody will know what's going on with this baby and her mother."

Andy nodded. "Okay, I'll get out of here." He walked to the door and opened it, then looked back at Clint. "So, if anybody calls and needs you, I should just tell them you're playing nanny for the day?" He grinned.

"You tell anyone that, and I'll file the points off your badge. Now, get out of here," Clint said with a laugh. "I'll call you later."

After Andy had left, Clint went back into the kitchen and once again stared at the baby.

Who was she? Kathryn who? Where was her mother? What kind of danger threatened her enough to leave her baby on a doorstep?

He couldn't very well play nanny for the next week or two. If he didn't intend to turn little Kathryn over to Social Services,

then he'd need to make other arrangements.

Sherry. The name instantly came to mind, bringing with it an enormous sense of relief. She would help. After all, she was his best friend.

Without giving himself a chance to think twice, he picked up the receiver and dialed her number.

She answered on the third ring, her voice deeper, husky from sleep.

"Did I wake you?" he asked.

"No. The phone did," she said dryly. "What time is it?" He heard the rustle of sheets, then a squeal of outrage. "Clint Graham, how dare you call me at seven o'clock in the morning. You know I don't do mornings."

"And you know I wouldn't have called if it wasn't important," he replied.

Again he heard the rustle of bedclothes, and, unbidden, his mind filled with a vision of her in bed. Her streaked blond hair would be tousled and flowing down her shoulders. Her cheeks would be sweetly flushed. Her vivid green eyes would be drowsy with half sleep—sexy bedroom eyes.

"Clint?" Her voice held an edge of aggravation, letting him know she'd probably called his name more than once.

He shook his head, dislodging the crazy image. Where had that come from? It had been a long time since Sherry'd had long hair, and he'd never actually seen her in bed. He'd stopped those kinds of fantasies long ago.

“I’m here,” he said.

“I asked you what’s so important it couldn’t wait until a reasonable hour?”

“Darlin’, for most people seven o’clock in the morning is a reasonable hour.”

“If you don’t tell me in the next ten seconds why you called, I’m going to hang up and go back to sleep.”

Clint could tell by her tone of voice that she wasn’t kidding. “I have a sort of situation here, and I need your help. Can you come over?”

“Clint? Are you all right?” Her irritation was gone, replaced by worry. “You haven’t caught that nasty flu again, have you?”

“I’m fine. Nothing is wrong, I’m not sick and I really hate to get into it over the phone. Come over, Sherry. You haven’t even seen my new place. I’ll make you a big breakfast—biscuits and gravy,” he said.

“I smell a rat in the house,” Sherry exclaimed. “The last time you cooked me biscuits and gravy you asked me to take care of a ‘little’ of your laundry.”

Clint laughed. “I was sick,” he protested. “I didn’t realize so much laundry had piled up. I promise this involves no heavy work.”

“Okay...give me half an hour and I’ll be there,” she agreed, then hung up.

Clint also hung up, and gave a sigh of relief. Sherry could help him decide what to do. He leaned back in his chair, his thoughts

filled with the woman he'd just spoken to.

It was odd. Five years ago he'd believed she was the woman he would spend the rest of his life with, that they would marry and have a family and live happily ever after. It was odd that when their plans hadn't worked out, they'd managed to put love behind and hang on to friendship.

There was very little left of the Sherry he'd fallen in love with years before. She'd undergone a dramatic transformation, one that had begun the day she discovered she would never have children of her own.

Clint frowned and stared at the baby. Maybe calling Sherry hadn't been such a great idea. As if in agreement, little Kathryn's eyes opened wide. She took one long look at him. Her lower lip trembled, her face turned red. She opened up her mouth and wailed.

Sherry Boyd took a fast shower, dressed, then jumped into her car and headed toward Clint's new place. Two weeks before, he'd moved from an apartment into a nice three-bedroom ranch house on Main.

As she drove, she tried to think of what situation Clint had that would demand her presence, but nothing concrete came to mind.

Turning left on Main, she stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. She'd worked until three that morning, and her body felt the effects of too little sleep. Her eyes felt grainy, her feet ached from the long hours of waitressing, and a light headache pounded

at her temples.

“This better be good, Sheriff Graham,” she said aloud as she spied his house in the middle of the block ahead.

She and Graham had lived in the same apartment building for the past four years, up until two weeks ago when this gem of a house had come up for sale. Within days Clint had bought the house and arranged his move.

It was a pleasant, white ranch with black shutters adorning the windows. Spring flowers were already pushing up, adding a splash of color against the white siding.

Sherry heard a baby wailing the moment she opened her car door and stepped out. Instantly she tensed and felt a wind blow through her, the desolate wind of barrenness, a mournful cry of what would never be.

The noise couldn't be coming from Clint's place, she reasoned. It was just a trick of the wind. Probably one of the neighbors had a small child.

She reached the front door and knocked, the baby cry louder than before. “Clint?” she yelled. When there was no immediate response, she opened the door and stepped inside.

Clint appeared in the kitchen doorway at the same instant, a sobbing baby girl in his arms. “Thank God you're here,” he exclaimed.

For a few seconds Sherry merely stared at him, her mind working to make sense of the scene. Clint's dark hair stood on end, and the front of his shirt was wet with what she suspected

was either baby spit-up or slobber.

It was difficult to see exactly what the baby looked like. Her face was bright red at the moment, her features all scrunched up with her unhappiness.

“What’s going on?” Sherry asked. She remained standing where she was, refusing to hold her arms out for the baby, even though she knew that was probably what Clint wanted.

For the past five years, Sherry had made conscious choices that would keep her from being in the presence of children. She’d quit her third-grade teaching job and now worked as a waitress in the town’s most popular tavern. She chose her friends carefully, usually people with either no children, or older kids.

“I can’t make her stop crying,” Clint said frantically. As he talked, he jiggled the baby in his arms. Up and down, up and down, the motion made Sherry feel half-sick, and she had a feeling it wasn’t soothing the baby at all.

“Is she wet?” Sherry asked, still not moving a single step forward.

“I don’t know. I’m wet. She must be,” Clint replied, raising his voice to be heard above the sobbing child.

Sherry could stand it no longer. Despite her reluctance, she moved to where Clint stood, and took the baby from him. The little girl snuggled against Sherry’s chest, her sobs ebbing as if she was comforted by the feminine arms.

As the baby quieted, Sherry fought her impulse to scream at Clint, to vent the anger, the sense of betrayal that swirled inside

her. How dare he! How dare he call her over here to help him with a baby.

He knew more than anyone the utter torment she'd gone through when she'd discovered she would never get pregnant, never carry a baby inside her, never have a child of her own. How dare he bring her here where a baby was present, knowing her own particular heartache.

"Come on in the kitchen," he said. "I think there are diapers and stuff in there."

"Are you going to tell me what's going on? Who is she?" Sherry asked as she followed him into the cheerful kitchen, where the morning sunshine streamed through the windows.

"Her name is Kathryn, and that's about all I know," Clint replied. "If you'll take care of her for a few minutes, I'll start the biscuits and gravy."

Sherry sat at the table and waved one hand, dismissing the idea. "I'm not hungry. What do you mean, that's about all you know?"

Clint leaned against the sink cabinet and plucked at his wet shirtfront. "She was on my doorstep this morning." He pointed to the diaper bag. "There should be stuff she needs in there."

Sherry didn't move. "What do you mean, you found her on your doorstep?" She felt ridiculous, echoing him in an effort to get answers.

She looked down at the baby and found herself staring into the biggest, bluest, most trusting eyes she'd ever seen. Sherry

flinched, her heart lurched, and she stiffened in defense.

She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to hold this sweet little bundle in her arms. It only served to remind her of her loss and aching emptiness and dreams shattered.

Clint raked a hand through his hair, again making the dark, rich strands stand on end. "When I opened the door this morning, there she was. She was in a car seat, and a diaper bag was next to her. There was a note tucked inside the blanket." He gestured to a piece of paper on the table.

Sherry shifted the wiggling baby in her arms and picked up the note. She scanned the contents, the words creating a strange, new ache in her. She placed the note back on the table, then looked at Clint.

"Is she yours?" she asked softly. The question hung in the air between them.

Clint's face blanched and he swiped a hand across his lower jaw. "I don't know," he finally said. "I've consciously not thought about the possibility since the moment I read that note."

"You'd better think about it now," Sherry replied, fighting the odd ache the note had evoked. She'd wanted Clint to have children of his own, that's why she'd broken their engagement so long ago.

"It's hard to know, since I don't know how old Kathryn is," he replied.

Sherry shifted the baby from one arm to the other. As she did, she felt the warmth of a soggy diaper. She stood and placed

Kathryn on her back on the table, then reached into the little bag and withdrew a diaper.

“I’d say she’s about six months old,” Sherry observed as she wrestled to change Kathryn, who laughed and kicked her feet. “So, who were you dating about fifteen months ago?” she asked.

Clint walked from the sink to the window. For a long moment he stared outside, his broad shoulders blocking the warm stream of sunshine. When he turned back to look at her, his brow was creased in thought. “It had to have been Candy.”

Sherry grimaced. Candy. The sexy divorcee from Kansas City. Sherry had hated the attractive, flirtatious woman the moment she’d met her. “Well, the note says the mother is in danger, that’s certainly not out of the question where Candy is concerned. She’s probably being threatened by some poor wife whose husband Candy was sleeping with.”

The left corner of Clint’s mouth rose upward. “You never did like Candy,” he observed.

“That’s probably the understatement of the year,” she returned. She finished with the diaper, then set Kathryn on her belly on the floor next to the table. “She was a man-eater, and you were her main dish.” Sherry closed her mouth, not wanting to say anything more, aware that the woman she was talking about just might be the mother of Clint’s child.

“Right now this is all speculation,” Clint said, his gaze on Kathryn, who was on her hands and knees and rocking as if by will alone she could scoot across the floor. He looked up at

Sherry. "It's possible the mother chose to leave her here because I'm sheriff, not because I'm related in any way."

"Yeah, and it's possible tomorrow I'll be voted mayor of this town," Sherry replied dryly.

She stood, needing to escape from this conversation, from the little girl who sat looking up at her as if somehow Sherry was her salvation. "She's stopped crying now, her diaper is clean. Looks like you're on your own, Sheriff Daddy." She started for the kitchen door.

"Sherry...wait!" His voice held a note of utter panic. "I've got a favor to ask you."

"No. Whatever you're about to ask, the answer is no. You can cook me biscuits and gravy every morning for the rest of my life and the answer is going to be no." She left the kitchen and headed for the front door.

"Sherry, please wait a minute. Hear me out," he called after her.

She didn't stop. She left the house and walked hurriedly toward her car. She had a feeling she knew exactly what he wanted, and there was no way, no how.

She'd just slid behind the steering wheel when Clint came barreling out of the house, Kathryn crying in his arms.

He raced to her open window. "Sherry, I need your help," he said, once again having to raise his voice to be heard about Kathryn's cries. "I need somebody to help me with her until I can figure out what's going on. I need you to take off work a couple

of days, stay here and help me out.”

“You’re crazy,” she exclaimed, trying to ignore the plea in his gorgeous blue eyes. “What do I know about taking care of a baby?” she asked, trying to keep the bitterness from her voice.

“You knew which end to diaper,” he returned evenly. “I imagine you can figure out which end to feed. What else do you need to know?”

Sherry said nothing.

“I’ll pay you for your time...whatever your average earnings at the bar are, I’ll double them. Sherry, I’m desperate here. I can’t stay home for the next several days and leave this town without a sheriff.”

Sherry wanted to tell him it was his problem, that it was really none of her concern. She wanted to slam the car into reverse and escape, but she didn’t. She sighed wearily and rubbed the center of her forehead—a headache was just beginning to send tentacles of pressure around her head.

“Sherry.” Clint leaned down, so close she could see the silvery flecks that made his eyes so startlingly blue, close enough that she could smell the familiar scent of his pleasant cologne.

“Sherry, please. If you care about me at all, do this for me.” He lightly stroked the top of the baby’s head. “If...if she is mine, you’re the only one I’d trust to watch her.”

Something in his eyes, something in their soft appeal, touched her in places in her heart she thought no longer existed.

In an instant of staring into his eyes’ blue depths, she

remembered too many moments from the distant past, too many dreams that would never come true.

Damn him. She knew exactly what he was attempting to do. He was calling not only on their friendship, but on the love they'd once felt for each other.

And in that instant she thought she might hate him just a little bit, for knowing her well enough to be able to try to manipulate her emotions.

He reached out and curled his fingers around her wrist. His fingers were warm against her skin—skin that she knew was frigid and aching cold.

“Please, Sherry,” he entreated. “You’ll never know how much it will mean to me,” he said. “I’ve never really asked you for anything before now.”

She jerked her arm away from him, her anger returning to sustain her original decision. “And you, of all people, should realize just what you’re asking of me,” she returned, trying to keep her tone cool and even. “You, of all people, should know I can’t do this. I’m sorry.”

Without waiting for any reply, she shifted the car into reverse and pulled out of the driveway.

Chapter Two

Clint stared after the disappearing car, Kathryn's cries a resounding siren in his ears. He looked at the baby in his arms. Once again her face was red, her eyes squeezed shut as high-pitched noise spewed from her little mouth. How could something so small make such an incredible amount of noise?

Her cries momentarily overrode Clint's feeling of guilt. He carried the baby back into the house, trying to avoid thinking about the look on Sherry's face as she'd driven off.

A bottle. Maybe the baby was hungry. He mentally corrected himself. Kathryn...her name was Kathryn. He placed her back in her car seat, buckled her in, then rummaged through the diaper bag. "Ah-ha!" he proclaimed in triumph as he pulled out an empty plastic bottle. Milk. Didn't all babies drink milk?

He poured milk into the bottle, then frowned. Warm or cold? Damn. He was clueless when it came to these kinds of things.

He placed the bottle in the microwave for a few seconds to take off the chill, then sat down at the table and offered the bottle to Kathryn.

Magically her crying stopped. Her big blue eyes widened and her fingers opened and closed as if urging him to place the bottle where it counted.

Clint did just that, and sighed in relief as she gulped the liquid hungrily. Now that her cries had stopped, Clint was faced with

his remorse over Sherry.

It had been thoughtless of him to call her, foolish not to think about how painful this all might be to her. Hell, he'd thought she'd come to terms a long time ago about not being able to have children.

He sighed, remembering her pale face as she'd driven away. Her pain-filled eyes haunted him. But he hadn't known what else to do. He hadn't dated anyone for a month, had no family members he could call upon for help.

It had been sheer instinct to contact Sherry for help. He'd called her when he'd had the flu. She'd been there for him when his best friend had died. For the past five years Sherry had helped him through each life crisis that had come his way. It had only been natural that he'd called her for this particular crisis.

She would be back. Despite his guilt, despite her parting words to him as she'd driven away, he knew she'd return. She wouldn't let him down. She never had.

"Is she yours?"

The question Sherry had asked him returned to haunt him. He'd consciously not thought about the possibility from the moment he'd seen the baby on his porch. Now he could think of little else.

He stared at the little girl, whose eyes stared back solemnly. Was she his child? Had Candy had a baby, his baby, and never even told him?

He couldn't imagine a woman doing such a thing—having a

baby and not informing the father. But Candy had been nothing if not unpredictable. Besides, who understood the forces that drove women to do what they did?

He touched one finger to a chubby little cheek, his heart constricting with an alien emotion. "Are you mine?" he asked softly. The only reply was soft sucking sounds and a single blink of those wide, blue eyes.

She drank almost the entire bottle, then her eyes drifted closed and she fell back asleep. For a few minutes Clint simply stared at her, trying to see if the mark of his fatherhood showed anywhere on her features.

She had blue eyes, like his own. But his hair was dark and Kathryn's was a pale strawberry blond. Of course, Clint had been told that he'd been born with a headful of blond ringlets.

He sighed. It was impossible to tell if she looked like him. At the moment she simply looked like a content baby.

Knowing that she was sleeping soundly, Clint got up from the table and went into the spare bedroom. He'd done nothing with this room since moving in two weeks before. The bed was bare, the dresser and old rocker dusty.

Knowing in his heart Sherry wouldn't let him down, he quickly made up the bed with fresh sheets, then dusted the few pieces of furniture the room contained.

He'd just finished with the room when he heard a knock on the front door. Sherry stood on the front porch, a small suitcase in hand.

“Three days,” she said as she stepped inside. Her delicate features were pulled taut in a combination of rebellion and determination. “That’s all I’m giving you. Three days, then you’ll have to figure something else out.”

“Sherry—”

She held up a hand. “Don’t thank me. I’m not happy about this, but I can’t stand the thought of that baby being turned over to Social Services, or worse, baby-sat by you and that dingbat deputy of yours.”

He nodded, knowing better than to say anything. He was just grateful she’d come. “I’ll show you to the spare bedroom,” he said, gesturing her to follow him down the hallway.

He opened the door to the room, and she stepped in. She sniffed, then turned and eyed him accusingly. “I smell lemon wax. You just dusted. You knew I’d be back.”

He smiled sheepishly. “I hoped.” He could tell it annoyed her. Her jaw tightened, and her green eyes blazed a warning.

She set her suitcase on the bed. “Three days, Clint. I swear that’s it. You find that man-eater Candy and figure out what’s going on.”

“No problem,” he agreed instantly. Together they walked back into the kitchen. Sherry barely looked at the sleeping child.

“I fed her a bottle of milk. It seemed to satisfy her,” he explained. He grabbed his keys from the holder next to the refrigerator. “I’ve got to get to work. Andy’s holding down the fort, and who knows what he’ll mess up.”

He waited for one of her smiles in return, but none was forthcoming. He sighed, wondering how long she would punish him. "I'll be home for supper by six."

Minutes later as Clint drove to the Armordale Sheriff's Office, his mind whirled with thoughts of Sherry and the baby.

If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he'd never understood the depth of Sherry's pain when she'd discovered that a severe case of endometriosis had left her unable to have children. In any case, that had been five years before. He'd thought she'd come to terms with that pain, but the look in her eyes when she'd seen baby Kathryn told him otherwise.

Clint had never thought much about having kids. Years before, when he and Sherry were making lifetime plans together, he'd talked theoretically about having children, but it had never been a driving, burning need inside him.

When Sherry had called off their wedding plans, he'd tried to convince her that he didn't care whether or not she could have children, that he would be satisfied just having her in his life. But that hadn't been enough for her. She had insisted that her feelings for him had changed, that she no longer loved him. He hadn't been enough for her.

He shoved these thoughts away. They came from a distant past, one he rarely thought of anymore. He and Sherry had managed to put aside their romantic feelings for each other and build a caring, special friendship.

He parked before the small, brick building that was his home

away from home. As he got out of the car, he only hoped he hadn't in some way jeopardized that special friendship by asking her this latest favor.

Sherry stood at the kitchen window, her back to the sleeping infant, wondering why in the heck she had agreed to this.

When she'd pulled out of Clint's driveway earlier, she'd been adamant that she wouldn't return, that he was asking far too much of her.

She'd gone back to her apartment and had desperately tried to ignore thoughts of the little girl, those sweet chubby cheeks, those trusting blue eyes, the natural way the infant had snuggled into Sherry the moment she'd taken the baby in her arms.

Before she knew what she was doing, Sherry had packed a bag and called her boss at the bar to request the next week off. Madness. Sheer madness.

She turned away from the window and stared at the sleeping child. Wispy blond hair adorned the top of her head, and her tiny lips were curved into a smile, as if her dreams were pleasant.

Sherry would change her diapers, feed her when she was hungry, but she refused to allow her heart to get involved. It was the only way she would be able to get through the next couple of days. She had to keep a high, impenetrable barrier around her heart.

She frowned, remembering his parting remark—that he'd be home for supper around six. What did he think? That he'd

suddenly acquired a wife for the next three days? If he thought she was going to cook and clean for him as well as look after the baby, he had another think coming!

The day passed quickly. The baby slept until almost noon, then Sherry fed her another bottle, set her on the floor of the living room on a blanket and gave her some plastic spoons, lids and small bowls to play with. However, the baby eschewed the makeshift toys in favor of playing with her toes.

Sherry knew what she was doing...thinking of the baby as “the baby” instead of as Kathryn. She was keeping her distance, refusing to allow her heart to get caught up in the wonder of a child.

Kathryn was a good baby. She occupied herself, playing first with her toes, then attempting to catch the afternoon sunbeams that shone through the window.

When she fell asleep once again, Sherry covered her with a light blanket, then stroked the fine, downy hair atop her head.

Was she Clint’s baby? Sherry’s heart jumped a bit at the thought. There had been a time when she’d dreamed of carrying Clint’s child, a time when the possibility had filled her with joy and awe.

Clint had said it was possible Kathryn was his. That meant Clint and Candy had slept together.

Sherry frowned, wondering why that should bother her. She’d long ago quit fantasizing about making love with Clint. She’d long ago quit fantasizing about making love to anyone.

She figured she was probably the oldest living virgin in Armordale. Twenty-eight years old and she'd never been lost in mindless passion. Twenty-eight years old and she'd never experienced the total possession of a man's lovemaking.

It wasn't that she hadn't had offers to rectify that particular condition. Every night at least one half-drunk cowboy professed his undying love for her and offered to take her home and show her delights beyond her imagination. Unfortunately, she had too good an imagination.

She figured maybe someday she'd meet an older, divorced man, one who'd already had his family and wanted no more children. In the meantime she wasn't holding her breath.

By five o'clock Kathryn was fussy and Sherry assumed it was probably hunger. With the baby once again safely buckled into the car seat, Sherry stared at the contents of Clint's refrigerator.

It definitely showed the eating habits of a bachelor. Milk... mustard...ketchup and a pound of hamburger thawing in plastic wrap. She knew Clint ate most of his meals down at the Armordale Café, but he'd obviously planned on something with the hamburger for dinner.

Fine. He and the hamburger were on their own. In the cabinet she found a can of tuna, canned peas and peaches. She made herself a tuna sandwich, then mushed up peas and cut the peaches into tiny pieces for Kathryn. She made a mental note to tell Clint to pick up some baby cereal and food.

As she fed Kathryn, the little girl opened her mouth like a

baby bird awaiting a worm. She tried to help Sherry, grabbing for the spoon, laughing when she managed to grasp it.

“Don’t be so cute,” Sherry said, finding the little girl’s laughter infectious, her antics far too adorable to ignore. Kathryn kicked her feet and grinned, displaying the tiny white nub of a first tooth.

Sherry was grateful when dinner was over. She wiped Kathryn’s face, cleaned the kitchen, then deposited the baby back on the blanket in the center of the living room floor.

“I’m only here for a couple of days,” she said to Kathryn, who sat facing her, a wide grin still curving her rosebud lips.

Sherry turned her head away from the smiling little girl. “I don’t want to care about you,” she whispered to herself, as if afraid the child might hear, might understand and be hurt.

Kathryn laughed, as if to get Sherry’s attention. Sherry felt a sudden sting of tears. “If I let you, you’ll break my heart. I can’t let that happen.” Kathryn laughed again, as if Sherry had just said something extraordinarily witty.

The distant sound of a car door slamming prompted Sherry to get up from the sofa and go to the front door. She sighed in relief as she saw Clint’s car. She watched him as he walked around to the back of the car and opened the trunk.

The late-afternoon sun played on his dark hair, pulling forth highlights of deep mahogany. Clint was one of the few men she knew who wore a uniform well. The dark-brown slacks fit his long legs and lean hips as if tailor-made just for him. The tan shirt stretched taut across his broad shoulders as he reached into

the car trunk and withdrew what appeared to be the wooden parts of a crib.

She knew she should go out and help him with the load, but she still harbored a touch of resentment that he'd managed to involve her in this whole situation. He'd manipulated their friendship and her genuine caring for him, and she was—exactly where she didn't want to be.

However, her irritation with him didn't stop her from opening the door for him as he stepped up on the front porch.

"Where did you get that?" she asked as he maneuvered the wooden railings and child-size mattress through the door and into the living room.

"Etta Mae let me borrow it." He leaned the pieces against the wall and threw a smile in Kathryn's direction. "I've got more stuff out there," he said. "Be right back."

Once again she watched as he raced back out to the car. He waved at one of his neighbors, then opened the back car door and pulled out several plastic shopping bags.

As he walked back toward the house, Sherry wondered what it was that had kept him single all these years. He was a handsome man, with clean-cut features and blue eyes that promised intelligence and humor. He was considered the major catch of Armordale, yet rarely dated and had never come close to marriage other than with her.

"Etta Mae made me a list of things I'd need," he said when he was back in the house and unloading the shopping bags.

Etta Mae was the fifty-six-year-old woman who worked as a dispatcher at the sheriff's office. She was combination co-worker, mother and confidante to the men she worked with, calling out codes and procedure with the same confidence she offered wisdom and advice.

"Rice cereal, baby food, more diapers..." He crouched and pulled each item from the bags and placed them on the floor next to him. "Rattles, teething ring, sleepers."

Sherry eyed the array of items. "This doesn't look like a two-week stay," she observed.

Clint stood and shrugged. "Babies require a lot of stuff." He pulled the last item from the bag, a stuffed white bear with a bright pink bow.

"Ah, yes, that definitely looks like a must," she observed dryly.

He shrugged again and smiled sheepishly. "I couldn't resist." His blue eyes danced with pleasure as he set the soft bear next to Kathryn.

Of course he couldn't resist, Sherry thought with a pang to her heart. Every daddy should buy their daughter their first teddy bear. "I already ate supper and fed her. Her diaper has just been changed so she shouldn't need anything for a little while. Since you're home now, I'll go unpack and get settled into the spare room."

He looked at her in surprise, his dark brows pulling together. "You already ate? I thought maybe we'd, you know, eat dinner together."

“You can’t fool me, Clint Graham,” she replied as she picked up the baby paraphernalia from the floor. “You assumed you would come home to a nice, home-cooked meal—a meal I would have slaved over all afternoon.” She grinned at him knowingly. “I always suspected you harbored a latent streak of chauvinism in your heart.”

He laughed and raised his hands in surrender. “All right. I’ll confess, I did have a little fantasy of walking in this evening and smelling the savory scent of dinner cooking. As I remember, you used to make a mean hamburger casserole.”

“That was a long time ago. I don’t do much cooking anymore.” Sherry carried the teddy bear and other items into the kitchen, aware of Clint trailing behind her. “I’m here to take care of the baby while you’re at work,” she said as she placed the baby food in the cabinet. “But I’m not here to take care of you.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” he said, his voice ringing with sincerity. “And I do appreciate what you’re doing for me...and for Kathryn.” He said the baby’s name with a lilt in his tone, a tone that told her he’d not only accepted the possibility that Kathryn was his but considered it probable.

As Sherry placed the last of the items in the cabinet, Kathryn let loose a wail from the living room. Sherry turned and looked at Clint. “I’m officially off duty. I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

Without waiting for his reply, she left the kitchen, went down the hallway and into the spare room. She closed the door and leaned against it for a moment, conflicting emotions bubbling

inside her.

Baby beds and baby food. Rattles and stuffed bears. They were all things she'd put behind her, wishes that belonged to another woman, a lifetime ago.

She shoved herself away from the door and unpacked the few articles of clothing she'd brought. It's not Clint's fault, a little voice niggled inside her. And it isn't Kathryn's fault. Neither of them had manufactured the situation, yet Sherry had been subtly punishing them both from the moment she'd reluctantly agreed to help Clint out.

She finished unpacking her few toiletries, then sank down on the edge of the bed. Clint's baby. It's what Sherry had wanted for him. It was why she'd broken their engagement years before. She'd wanted him to have all the things she'd never have...like babies.

If the baby did belong to Candy, then what on earth would possess the woman to leave her on Clint's doorstep with nothing but a vague note?

Of course, in Candy's case the dire circumstances might be anything from a jealous wife after her hide, to the lure of a Caribbean cruise, where a small child would cramp her style.

In any case she was once again brought back to the fact that none of this was Clint's fault. When he'd asked for her help, she'd had the option of giving it or not. She'd chosen to be here, but so far had acted rather poorly.

She stood, deciding an apology was in order. Before she could

reach the door to leave the room, a knock sounded. "I'm sorry to bother you," Clint said when she opened the door.

He'd changed out of his uniform and was now clad in a pair of worn jeans and a navy T-shirt. "Could you help me put the crib together? It would be easier with two people instead of one." He held up a screwdriver and a pair of pliers.

"Of course," she agreed. "Where are you going to set it up?" she asked as they went back into the living room.

"Uh..." He frowned a moment, thinking. "I guess in my bedroom. If you'll grab Kathryn, I'll carry all the parts in there."

"Okay," Sherry agreed. She swooped the baby up in her arms, drawing in a deep breath of baby fragrance. The scent created a blend of joy and torment inside her.

Clint's large bedroom was a study in masculinity. A navy spread adorned the king-size bed, and a heavy, dark-wood double dresser took up much of the length of one wall. Scenic pictures of trout streams adorned the walls. A wooden mallard duck with a scooped-out back for pocket change sat on the dresser amid a variety of cologne bottles.

Clint carried the baby-bed parts to the empty space in front of the single window the room contained. Sherry placed the baby on her back in the center of the bed, where Kathryn cooed and aahed, perfectly satisfied to once again find her toes.

"Clint, I'm sorry I've been a jerk," Sherry said as she held the crib's side panel against the foot rail.

He smiled, the familiar gesture that created attractive

sunbursts of lines at the corners of his eyes. “Beggars can’t be choosers. I’d rather have a cranky Sherry than no Sherry at all.”

His smile faded, and he covered her hand with his own. She’d always loved his hands. Big, strong, capable hands, his all but engulfed her smaller one. “I am grateful for your help, Sherry. I meant what I said earlier this morning. I wouldn’t want to trust her to anyone but you.”

The warmth of his hand on hers seemed to seep up her arm, across her body to embrace her heart. It was not the warmth of a friendly touch, but rather something deeper, more provocative.

She averted her gaze from his, confused by the strange heat that suffused her. She breathed a sigh of relief as he removed his hand from hers and picked up the screwdriver and got to work.

“Did Walt give you a hard time about taking off work?” he asked as his long fingers nimbly placed a brass screw in the appropriate place.

“Walt doesn’t know how to do anything but give me a hard time,” she replied.

Clint laughed. “He’s the biggest curmudgeon this town has ever known. I’ve never seen a man who takes such misery in each and every day.”

Sherry’s laughter joined his as she thought of her boss at the bar. “If Walter isn’t moaning, he’s whining.” She picked up the second railing and held it in place for him.

Clint paused and looked at her, his eyes searching hers. “Don’t you ever miss teaching?” he asked.

She felt the barrier fall into place, the self-protective wall that kept her from feeling the emotions of the woman she'd once been...and would never be again. "Never," she replied more sharply than she intended. She forced a light smile. "I love working at the bar. I love the nighttime hours, all the people I meet, and I make a pretty decent wage with tips." She raised her chin a notch, as if defying him to say anything to the contrary.

Clint studied her for a long moment, then nodded and went back to work.

Within a few more minutes the crib was together and the mattress was in place. Sherry placed the sheets Etta Mae had sent with Clint on the mattress as Clint picked up the little girl from the bed.

"I'm going to fry a couple of hamburger patties," he said as they left his bedroom. "Sure you don't want something to eat?"

"No, I'm fine. I was up late last night, and I'm exhausted. If you don't mind, I think I'll just call it a day."

She didn't want to sit in the kitchen and watch Clint cook while the baby cooed and kicked in her car seat. It felt too intimate, too domestic.

"Towels are under the sink in the bathroom, and if you need anything else, just ask," he replied. He looked so darned handsome standing there, the tools in one hand, the baby in his arms.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Sherry replied. "I'll see you in the morning," she added, then turned on her heels and headed for

her room.

She grabbed her nightgown and robe, then went into the bathroom, intent on a nice long shower to ease the tension that had tugged at her back and shoulders all day.

She hadn't lied when she'd told Clint she was exhausted. She'd worked until after three the night before, then his phone call had awakened her at just a few minutes after seven. She usually required at least eight hours of sleep to function properly.

As she stood beneath the hot spray of the shower, she thought again of that moment when Clint's hand had covered hers.

For just a brief moment she'd remembered when the touch of his hand had made her knees weaken, her breath catch in her throat. She'd remembered how Clint's touch, his kiss, had made it so difficult for her to keep her vow to be a virgin bride.

Definitely a lack of sleep, she decided. Those days of romance and chemistry were long gone where they were concerned.

She took an unusually long shower, relaxing muscle by muscle beneath the warm water. When she finally finished, she dried off and slipped into her nightclothes, then eased the bathroom door open. The scent of cooked hamburger hung in the air, and she assumed enough time had elapsed that Clint had already finished eating.

As she started to open the door to her bedroom, she heard the faint murmur of his deep voice coming from the living room. She peeked around the corner of the hallway and saw Clint sitting on the sofa, Kathryn snuggled against his chest.

“Sweet little baby girl, I’m right here for you. I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere.” His voice was softer than Sherry had ever heard it, a deep, melodic singsong of love. His hand stroked the top of the baby’s head, lulling her to sleep.

This was what it could have been, she thought, as fantasies danced through her head. She could easily imagine herself on the sofa, a baby in her arms, both of them surrounded by Clint’s strong embrace.

She blinked to erase the deceptive image, her vision blurring with a trace of tears. A fool’s fantasy, that’s what it was.

She backed away and retreated to her room, swallowing against the tears that still threatened. She’d always known Clint would make a wonderful father, and the scene she’d just witnessed attested to that fact. Already his heart was embracing the child he thought to be his.

Yes, it’s what she’d always wanted for him, but having Kathryn here, seeing Clint and the baby together, had stirred up emotions Sherry had believed were behind her. She’d thought she could handle it, but it was too much.

First thing in the morning she had to tell Clint that she couldn’t help him anymore. As much as she cared for Clint, as much as she would like to be here for him, she had to protect her own heart.

Chapter Three

Clint groggily opened one eyelid, vaguely wondering if he'd fallen asleep the night before with the television on. No...he wasn't on the sofa. He was in bed, and the noise that had awakened him wasn't the television.

As the last of sleep fell away and consciousness overtook him, he sat up and realized exactly what the sound was that had awakened him from his slumber.

Kathryn. She lay on her back, arms waving and legs flailing. Her hands opened and closed as if in an attempt to capture the pale light of dawn that seeped through the window.

Although she wasn't fussing at the moment, she'd been up and down all night. And consequently so had Clint.

At midnight he'd given her a bottle and changed her diaper. At two o'clock he'd sat next to the crib and stroked her cheek until she'd fallen back to sleep. At three he'd rocked her in his arms and sung her every lullaby that had not been sung to him as a child.

Although it was early and Clint felt the weariness of too little sleep, he also felt the profound joy of fatherhood. With each and every moment that passed he was more and more certain that Kathryn was his.

He wasn't sure why Candy hadn't told him, didn't know what kind of game she might be playing, but if it was a ploy to gain

support, both emotionally and financially from him, that wasn't a problem.

Clint intended to be a father in every sense of the word to the little girl. He'd pay support and demand liberal visitation. If he discovered that Candy wasn't a fit mother, then he'd fight her in court for full custody. But first he had to find out exactly what was going on. And that meant he had to get up out of bed.

He rolled out of bed, pulled on a pair of jeans, then walked over to the side of the crib. Kathryn smiled. Like a ray of sunshine, the toothless gesture warmed him through and through. Kathryn. His child. His daughter.

"Hi, sweetheart," he said, and touched a finger to her cheek. "Are you ready for a diaper change?" She kicked her legs, as if urging him to hurry. "Okay...okay." He changed her diaper, then picked her up and carried her into the kitchen.

The minute he placed her in the car seat she started to fuss, and he knew it was probably hunger. He moved quickly to make her a bottle, then propped it up with a dish towel so she could drink while he made a necessary pot of coffee.

He wondered if Sherry was up yet. He hadn't heard any noise from her room as he'd walked past it. He knew she was accustomed to keeping odd hours because of her waitressing job. But she'd gone to bed the night before at a ridiculously early hour.

Clint looked at the clock on the stove. It was just a few minutes before six. He'd give Sherry an hour or so, then he would need to wake her up so he could get ready for work.

A moment later he poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table, his head filled with thoughts of the woman who slept in his spare room.

Normally there was very little awkwardness between them, but since she'd arrived to help him out with Kathryn, there had been a strange energy between them...one he wasn't sure he understood.

He only knew one thing. He would never want to do anything to jeopardize the friendship they'd managed to develop when they'd outgrown their case of puppy love. They'd only been twenty-three and it had been a first serious relationship for both of them.

Puppy love. Was that what it had been? What he and Sherry had shared? He'd told himself often in the past five years that that's what it must have been—an innocent first love that couldn't sustain itself outside childish fantasy.

However, at the time he'd been in it, it hadn't felt childish or fanciful at all. Loving Sherry had consumed him. Planning for their future together had filled his life with a happiness and contentment he'd never known before or since. But it was done, a part of the past he rarely took out to examine.

She'd chosen not to be with him, insisted that her love for him had changed, and nothing she'd said or done in the intervening years had indicated anything different. She'd made her choice where he was concerned, and she seemed satisfied with that choice. End of story.

By the time he finished his cup of coffee, Kathryn had taken most of her bottle and had fallen back asleep. He checked the clock once again and realized he needed to get Sherry up.

He poured another cup of coffee, added two scoops of sugar and a liberal splash of milk, just the way Sherry liked it. Carrying the cup, he walked down the hallway to her closed door.

He rapped his knuckles gently against the wood, then waited for a reply. Nothing. No sound of stirring, no sound of anything remotely alive on the other side of the door. He knocked louder.

“Yes...” The sleepy reply drifted out, and Clint took it as encouragement to go in.

The moment he opened the door, he realized his mistake. She sat up and grabbed the sheet to her chest, but not before he saw the dainty spaghetti straps of her burgundy nightgown, not before he'd seen the expanse of creamy skin, the swell of her breasts barely hidden by the silky material.

Heat flooded through him. Unexpectedly. Spontaneously. He felt as if he'd been plunged into a fiery inferno.

“Uh...I brought you coffee,” he said, then cleared his throat in embarrassment. The room seemed smaller than it ever had before, and he felt as if somehow the air had gotten thicker, more difficult to breath.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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