MILLS & BOON

His Baby Surprise

Kathie DeNosky

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The Miracle Of Birth.

No matter how many times he witnessed it, Tyler was filled with a humbling sense of wonder, as well as a twinge of regret. Since he didn't intend to have children, he'd never have a moment like this to call his own.

This baby boy's father was one hell of a lucky man. And the jerk wasn't even here to realize it.

A mist clouding his eyes, Tyler examined the squirming infant. Ten fingers. Ten toes. He grinned. An impressive sprinkler system.

But as Tyler looked more closely at the boy, his smile faded and the blood drained from his face. A tiny dimple dented the infant's chin, and a telltale cowlick at his forehead parted his thick black hair.

Ty thought back to that night in Chicago. The one and only night he and Lexi had—

He stared in awe at the miracle he held, his gut clenching as realization hit him. The resemblance was more than coincidental. It was undeniable.

Tyler Braden had just delivered his own son.

His Baby Surprise
Kathie DeNosky

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Wayne Jordan, for answering my endless questions.

KATHIE DENOSKY

lives in deep Southern Illinois and enjoys dining out, factory outlet malls, traveling through the southern and southwestern states and collecting Native American pottery. After reading and enjoying Silhouette Desire for many years, she is ecstatic about being able to share her stories with others as a Silhouette author. She often starts her day at 2:00 a.m. so she can write without interruption, before the rest of the family is up and about. You may write to Kathie at P.O. Box 2064, Herrin, Il 62948-5264.

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One

"What's wrong now, Martha?" Tyler Braden asked, sighing heavily.

He picked up a patient file from the top of the well-worn counter. In the three days since his arrival in Dixie Ridge, Tennessee, Ty had learned a very important lesson about Nurse Payne. Whatever thoughts she had, she freely shared.

"Are you gonna wear your Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes every day of the week, Doc?"

Ty opened his lab coat to look down at his white shirt, striped tie and charcoal dress slacks. "What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?"

Martha looked at him over the top of her wire-rimmed glasses as if she thought he might be a bit simpleminded. "Around here, folks don't get gussied up like that unless they're gettin' married or buried."

Ty arched a brow. "What would you suggest I wear, Martha?"

She patted the thick, gray bun at the base of her neck—a gesture he'd quickly come to recognize as Martha's preamble to a lecture. When she walked around the counter to stand in front of him, her gaze raking him from head to toe, he had to fight the urge to reach down and make sure his fly was closed. A quick glance south of his belt buckle assured him it was.

"First of all, you need to lose the tie and white shirt. They

make you look like you're about to choke." Martha looked thoughtful. "Doc Fletcher wears sports shirts, but you ain't as long in the tooth as Doc, so a T-shirt or sweater would suit you best." She pointed to his crisply pressed slacks, the creases razor sharp. "And while you're at it, you might want to buy yourself some jeans and save those for church." She shrugged. "Course it's up to you. But I'm warnin' you. Folks around here don't care too much for somebody puttin' on airs."

"But I'm not—"

"If you don't want to know, don't ask." Having pronounced judgment, Martha walked back around the counter and picked up the ringing phone. "Dixie Ridge Health Clinic."

Ty bit the inside of his cheek to keep his epithet to himself. When he'd first phoned Dr. Fletcher to discuss temporarily taking over the clinic, the older man had warned him about the crusty nurse.

"Old Martha will be your most valuable asset, but she'll also be your worst critic. Be sure to stay on her good side."

But mere words could never have prepared Ty for the reality of Martha Payne. With a pleasant, grandmotherly face and the voice of a drill sergeant, she ran the clinic like a well-oiled machine. Serving as both receptionist and nurse, she demonstrated an efficiency that astounded Ty as much as her outspokenness irritated the hell out of him. Since his arrival, he'd been subjected to lectures ranging from his waste of gauze and tape to the appropriate way of answering the clinic phone. Now

it appeared her opinions were taking a more personal turn.

Ty had noticed a quiet reserve about the patients. But preoccupied with their symptoms and complaints, he'd assumed it was because they didn't know him. He'd never dreamed it could be because of the clothes he wore. Pulling at the knot of his tie, he yanked it free and stuffed it into the pocket of his lab coat. Thank God, when his six months here were finished, he'd head back to Chicago and not have to listen to Martha reiterate his shortcomings.

Fifteen minutes later Ty bid farewell to Harv Jenkins with a reminder to take his medication regularly, then walked up to the reception counter. "Is that it for the day?"

Martha shook her head and shoved a chart across the counter. "Freddie Hatfield just brought Lexi in. Her water broke and contractions are two minutes apart. She's in the birthin' room and I'd say it won't be too long before it's showtime."

"Has she had any problems during the pregnancy?" Ty asked, scanning the chart. Dr. Fletcher had made few notations aside from the patient's weight and blood pressure.

"Nope. I've known Lexi Hatfield all her life and she's always been as healthy as a horse."

"Has she expressed any concerns about the delivery?"

"Nope." Beaming, Martha rounded the end of the counter. "She's doin' pretty good for a first-timer. But Freddie couldn't get past the front door."

"Nervous wreck?" Ty asked, following Martha down the

narrow hall leading to the infirmary.

"Unless it's a matter of life and death, Freddie Hatfield avoids this place like a bachelor avoids a widow's convention." Martha shook her head and laughed. "Always has been delicate. Faints dead away at the smell of antiseptic."

Delicate?

Ty frowned at Martha's description of Fred Hatfield. Of all the terms he thought she might use to describe a man with a weak stomach, delicate wasn't among them.

A low moan from the infirmary broke through his musing. While Martha went to check the patient, Ty entered the locker room to change clothes.

All in all, he'd had a pretty good day, he decided, pulling on the blue scrubs. He hadn't seen anything more serious than Harv Jenkins's sore joints, and anticipated a routine birth.

Rotating his shoulders, Ty found much of the tension that had plagued him in recent weeks had begun to dissipate. Now if he could just get the nightmares under control….

Shaking off the guilt and regret, Ty scrubbed, plastered a smile on his face and shouldered open the door to the birthing room. He wasn't about to let the tragic events that led to his being here intrude on his good mood.

"Where's Freddie?" the patient asked.

Martha laughed. "Where do you think?"

"Over at the Blue Bird."

A tingle raced the length of Ty's spine at the patient's familiar

soft southern drawl. Only one woman's voice had ever affected him that way. He glanced over at the bed, but Martha blocked his view. If he didn't know better, he'd swear—

He shook his head at the ridiculous thought.

"Freddie took off out of here like a scalded dog," Martha said.

As he tied the bottom strings of the mask around his neck, Ty listened to the patient groan, then huff and puff her way through a contraction. When it finally eased, she blew out a deep cleansing breath.

"Freddie's a big wimp," she said, her voice raspy.

He couldn't have said it better. No matter how queasy old Fred was, the guy could at least try to be present for the birth of his child.

"O-o-oh, why do they…have to come…so close together?" the woman moaned a split second before she began panting her way through another pain.

His disdain for the weak-kneed Fred increased. Compelled to reassure his patient, Ty walked over to the side of the bed. "You'll do just…"

His voice trailed off as he stared openmouthed at the woman in the final stages of labor. Alexis Madison, popular talk radio hostess and, until almost a year ago, Ty's next door neighbor, was about to give birth in a rural health clinic in eastern Tennessee.

The last time he'd seen Alexis had been the night before she left Chicago. Due to a station buyout, she'd been told to move her show to Los Angeles or find work elsewhere. She'd chosen to quit

and move back to Tennessee. In fact, she was one of the reasons he'd taken the job in Dixie Ridge. When he'd been looking for a place to hide from the media, he remembered her talking about the peace and quiet of the Smoky Mountains. After sending out a few feelers, he'd jumped at the chance to temporarily take over the clinic.

The disappointment tightening his chest surprised him. He'd been more than a little attracted to her from the moment they met and had intended to look her up while he was here in the hopes of becoming better acquainted. But there wasn't any reason to do that now. She'd obviously found some guy named Fred as soon as she moved back, gotten married and started a family.

He forced a smile as he gazed down at her. "Hello, Alexis."

Lexi figured it had to be the pain causing hallucinations. It had been almost ten long months since she'd heard Tyler Braden's rich baritone. Besides, the location was all wrong. She was back home in the mountains of Tennessee, not the concrete jungle of Chicago.

But when she opened her eyes, the metallic taste of fear spread through her suddenly dry mouth and she let out a horrified moan. "N-o-o-o…not you!"

"You knew Doc Fletcher wouldn't be here for the delivery," Martha reminded her. She reached up to pat Ty's shoulder. "This here's Doc Braden. He's fillin' in."

Panic swept through Lexi and she grabbed the front of Martha's white uniform. "Get him away from me!"

“Simmer down, Lexi.” Martha disengaged herself and turned to Ty. “Don’t take offense. They all act like they’re devil possessed by the time they reach this stage of the game.”

“Please, Martha,” Lexi pleaded. She had to make the woman understand she didn’t want Tyler Braden anywhere near her. “I don’t want him delivering my baby.”

“Lexi, you know there ain’t another doctor within thirty miles of here,” Martha said, her voice stern.

“Then you do it!”

“Now, cut that out.” Martha shook her finger. “You know the only time I catch a baby is when the doctor can’t get here in time.”

“Then go tell Freddie to get the car…and take me to Granny Applegate!” Lexi felt like a beached whale as she struggled to sit up.

“Who the hell is Granny Applegate?” Ty asked.

“An old woman up on Piney Knob,” Martha said, pushing Lexi’s shoulders back down when she finally managed to prop herself up on her elbows. “Granny takes care of some of the folks around here with her home remedies. And she’s delivered more babies than a porcupine has quills or time to count ’em.”

Upset and completely unprepared for the next contraction, Lexi moaned. Pain pulled at her insides, demanding her body take action. Closing her eyes, a guttural sound rumbled in the back of her throat as she strained with all her might to push her baby into the world.

When the contraction ended, she opened her eyes to see Ty

shaking his head. “Don’t be ridiculous, Alexis. There’s no other choice. You wouldn’t make it as far as the front door before you give birth.”

“You two know each other?” Martha asked curiously, her keen eyes assessing the situation.

“We’ve met,” Ty said, a muscle along his lean jaw tightening.

“A long time ago-o-o,” Lexi added as her body demanded another push.

Ty frowned and stepped to the end of the bed. “Unless I miss my guess, your protest is about to become a moot point. How long have you been having contractions, Alexis?”

When he tried to lift the sheet, Lexi planted her feet on the end of it. “My name is Lexi. And leave that sheet alone.”

He pulled at the linen. She pressed her feet down more firmly.

“All right, Lexi. How long have you been in labor?”

“Since early this morning.” She couldn’t think of a more humiliating situation than her current position, and where Ty was about to look. They were really no more than casual acquaintances. “Get away from me.”

He ignored her protest, freed the sheet and arranged it over her bent knees. “Why did you wait so long before you came to the clinic?”

“I didn’t realize…I was in labor-r-r.” Another wave of pain swept over her and she completely forgot her embarrassment as she rode the swell of the contraction. “I just…had a backache…until my water broke. That’s when…the pain really became

intense."

Ty's examination confirmed his earlier suspicions. Alexis was fully dilated and the fetus had entered the birth canal. "We'll have to put this argument on hold for a while, Lexi. You're about to have your baby."

Pushing his personal feelings aside, Ty's physician instincts took control. "We need to get her feet in the stirrups, Martha."

Martha nodded and moved the retractable equipment into place. "These new birthin' beds are the best thing to come along since penicillin. Maybe we'll get more maternity cases here at the clinic now that we have this little jewel."

"Where do most of the women go?" Ty asked as he tied his mask in place. "Granny Applegate?"

"Yep. Most of the women on the mountain have Granny come to their house." Martha chuckled at his disapproving frown. "Now, don't go gettin' your shorts in a bunch, Doc. She's a licensed midwife and when she runs into trouble, she always gives us a holler."

Ty didn't have time to respond to Martha's explanation when Alexis moaned and voluntarily lifted her feet to brace them in the stirrups. As he positioned himself at the end of the bed, his gaze locked with hers. Limp from perspiration, her golden brown hair had been pulled back with some type of clip, drawing his attention to the exhaustion marring her beautiful face. His chest tightened at the tears filling her emerald eyes, the trembling of her perfect lips, and the bright spots of color staining her

creamy cheeks. She was extremely tired, in tremendous pain and understandably frightened. She needed the baby's father at her side, lending his strength, letting her know he was there for her when she needed him most.

"You're doing great, Lexi," he encouraged. "I can see the baby's head."

She nodded and squeezed her eyes shut. "It really hurts, Ty."

He felt her pain all the way to his soul. On impulse, he reached out, took her hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. "It won't be much longer. I promise."

The simple act of reassurance quickly had his insides churning with emotions he didn't have the time, nor the inclination, to sort through. Another contraction demanded their attention.

Supporting the baby's emerging head, he automatically urged, "I need you to give me one more big push and it will all be over."

As Alexis pushed with all her might, first one shoulder, then the other slipped free and the baby slid into Ty's waiting hands. Quickly suctioning the mucus and blood from the baby's mouth and nose, he watched the infant stare at him bleary-eyed for a moment, scrunch its little face, open its mouth and wail at the top of its tiny lungs.

The kid had the temper of a Chicago cab driver and enough volume to put a banshee to shame.

Ty smiled. "Martha, mark the time of birth," he said, clamping the umbilical cord in two places.

"It's a boy, Lexi!" Martha said happily, recording the

numbers.

Alexis laughed. “Are you sure? I just knew I’d have a girl.”

“Unless little girls have started comin’ with extra plumbing, that’s a boy,” Martha said, chuckling. “What are you gonna name him?”

“Matthew.”

Ty barely heard the two women as a crushing tightness filled his chest. No matter how many times he witnessed the miracle of birth, it never failed to fill him with a humbling sense of wonder, as well as a twinge of regret. Since he didn’t intend to have children, he’d never have a moment like this to call his own.

Fred the Cream Puff was one hell of a lucky man. And the wimpy little jerk wasn’t even here to realize it.

A mist clouding his eyes, Ty examined the squirming infant. Ten fingers. Ten toes. He grinned. An impressive sprinkler system.

But as Ty looked more closely at the baby, his smile faded and he felt the blood drain from his face. A tiny dimple dented the infant’s chin, an inch of black hair covered his head and a small cowlick at his forehead caused his hair to part on one side.

Ty thought back to that night in Chicago. The one and only night he and Alexis had—

He stared in awe at the miracle he held, his gut clenching painfully as realization slammed into him with the force of a physical blow. The resemblance was more than just coincidental. It was undeniable. And that telltale little cowlick proved it. It had

been a family trait for generations.

Tyler Braden had just delivered his own son.

Two

Ty handed Lexi her son, and while he dealt with the usual postpartum procedures, she focused her attention on the squirming infant in her arms. Matthew Hatfield's tiny fists flailed the air like a frustrated prizefighter, and his displeasure with the whole business of being born was written all over his little red face.

Love like she'd never known surged through her.

With a full head of black hair, a tiny dimple in his chin and a cowlick at the edge of his forehead, he was the most beautiful baby she'd ever seen—and the spitting image of his father.

The realization caused Lexi to glance up at the man who had unwittingly helped create the infant she held. How could fate be so cruel? Of all the hundreds of thousands of licensed physicians in the world, why did Tyler Braden have to be the one to take over the Dixie Ridge Health Clinic while Doc Fletcher had his knee replacement surgery?

Ty was an experienced trauma specialist, for heaven's sake. One of the best in his field. Why wasn't he in some huge hospital, taking care of real emergencies? Why wasn't he seven hundred miles away—in Chicago—where he belonged?

A mixture of fear and apprehension filled Lexi to the depths of her soul as she watched Ty. Was he aware the miracle he'd participated in just happened to be the birth of his own son? And

if he did realize the baby she held had been the result of their only night together, how would he react? Would he even care?

He hadn't said anything, but that did little to alleviate her fears. She didn't know him well enough to know how he'd react. He might be the type of man who could be a seething caldron of rage on the inside, yet appear to be the epitome of calm. She just didn't know.

When Ty reached over to lift the now sleeping infant and place him into Martha's outstretched arms, Lexi tensed. "Where are you taking my son?" She'd tried to keep her voice steady, but exhaustion and panic sharpened her tone.

"Don't worry, Lexi," Martha reassured. She hefted the baby onto her ample bosom and headed for the door. "I'm just gonna give this little man his first bath. Then, after Doc checks him over, I'll bring him in for you to nurse."

Lexi quietly watched Ty take her blood pressure and listen to her heart, when what she really wanted to do was jump out of bed, grab her son and put as much distance as possible between them and the clinic. Draping the stethoscope around his neck, Ty reached down to place his fingers on her wrist. Her skin tingled at the contact and her breathing became shallow.

Dear heavens, had she lost her mind? She'd just had a baby and her body felt as if she'd pushed a bowling ball through a keyhole. That should be enough to make her swear off men for life. The very last thing she should be feeling was any kind of awareness.

But whether she should or not, there was no denying its

presence, or its cause. Ty had always had that effect on her. She could still remember the first time he'd spoken to her in the elevator of their apartment building. It had been the day he'd moved in. When he'd said, "Hi. I'm your new neighbor," his smooth baritone had surrounded her like a soft velvet cape. And it had taken her a good fifteen minutes to get her pulse back down to normal.

After that they'd rarely seen each other. Until the night she'd lost her job and—

No. She wouldn't—couldn't—think about that now. If she did, panic would set in and she might give away her secret. At the moment, she was at his mercy and there wasn't any way she could get away from him.

"When will the baby and I be able to go home?" she asked cautiously.

Ty ignored her question as he fought the turmoil raging within. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the feel of her soft skin beneath his fingers, the heated current traveling the length of his arm and exploding in his gut. How could he feel anything but contempt for Alexis after what she'd done? The shock of finding that he was the father of her child had damn near brought him to his knees only minutes ago.

"Everything appears to be fine with you and the baby," he finally managed to say. "Looks like the two of you will be going home in a couple of days." He hurriedly scribbled notations on her chart, snapped it shut and headed for the door. He had to

get away from her before his cool facade cracked and his tangled emotions spilled out with the force of a raging river. “I’ll be in to check on you later.”

Knees that threatened to buckle carried him from the room, down the hall and into his office. Closing the door behind him, Ty leaned heavily against it.

He wanted answers and he wanted them now, but reason won out. Alexis needed to rest, and an upsetting confrontation at this point would be counterproductive. Besides, he wasn’t sure he could talk to her without a serious breach of his professionalism.

A light tap on the door signaled that Martha had finished bathing the baby.

“He’s ready for your examination, Doc,” Martha called from the other side. “We’ll be in exam room one.”

Ty tossed the chart on the desk, then sank down in the chair behind it. “Bring him in here, Martha.”

“While you get acquainted with our newest patient, I’m gonna run over to the Blue Bird Cafe and tell Freddie that everything went just fine,” Martha said as she entered the room and handed Ty the precious bundle she carried. She paused for a moment, watching him cradle the infant to his chest. “I know this sounds like I ain’t got the brains God gave a squirrel, but that baby sorta looks like you.”

Ty couldn’t have responded if his life depended on it. When Martha quietly closed the door behind her as she left, he barely noticed. A lump the size of his fist clogged his throat, and the

moisture suddenly misting his eyes was dangerously close to spilling down his cheeks. When the baby wrapped tiny fingers around one of his own, the lump in Ty's throat felt as if it grew to the size of a basketball.

Love, so fierce it was almost debilitating, raced through him as he stared down at his son. Ty had never allowed himself to believe a moment like this would be his to treasure. Never let himself entertain the thought of having a child of his own.

But no matter what reasons Alexis had for keeping her pregnancy a secret, Tyler Braden did have a son. And he'd be damned before he sat idly by and watched another man take his place in raising the boy.

For all he cared, the very squeamish, thoroughly inadequate Fred Hatfield could take a short leap off a tall cliff.

As long as it was in his power to prevent it, history would not repeat itself. Unlike Ty, Matthew was going to know his father and never feel the social inferiority that Ty had always felt.

He placed a kiss on the baby's forehead and made a solemn promise to himself and his son. "You're going to know I love you and that I'll always be there for you." He hugged the baby close. "And I'll walk through hell before I let Fred Hatfield or your mother stand in my way."

Lexi woke with a start, her heart pounding. She sat up and frantically searched the dimly lit room for the wicker bassinet Martha had placed Matthew in after he finished nursing.

It was nowhere in sight.

Panic tearing at her insides, Lexi reached for the call button, but her hands trembled so badly she couldn't engage the switch. Tossing it aside, she threw back the sheet and tried to get out of bed.

Her sore body protested the rapid movement and her knees threatened to give way when she stood, but she ignored the warnings. She had to find her baby.

By the time she crossed the room and made it down the long corridor to the deserted reception area, her flagging strength was all but spent and she had to lean against the wall for support.

"Martha—"

"Lexi, what in the name of all that's holy are you doin' out of bed?" Martha sent her swivel chair skating backward as she rose and hurried to Lexi's side. "I told you the first time you got up, I had to be there in case you needed help."

The room began a sickening swirl and Lexi felt herself start to sag. "Where's…my baby?"

"Doc, get out here," Martha yelled when Lexi leaned heavily against her. "Now!"

Just before Lexi lost her battle with the dark curtain closing around her, strong arms scooped her up and lifted her to a wide chest. Her nostrils filled with the essence of the man holding her. He smelled of spice cologne and…baby powder.

He must have been holding the baby when Martha called for help. The thought instantly cleared her fog-filled head.

Strength flowed from Ty's body to hers as he cradled her to

him, and Lexi squeezed her eyes shut against the wave of emotion welling up inside her.

"Please, put me down."

"No."

"I can walk," she insisted.

"Yeah, right." Ty laughed, but the sound held little humor. "Trying to walk is what damned near had you kissing the floor."

Without another word, he carried her down the corridor to her room and tucked her into bed. At the loss of contact, Lexi suddenly felt cold and abandoned. It was a ridiculous feeling, considering the circumstances, but it was still very real.

With calm efficiency, Ty wrapped a blood pressure cuff around her upper arm, pumped air into it, then slowly released the valve as he listened with his stethoscope. Apparently satisfied with the reading, he took her pulse, recorded the numbers on her chart, then folded his arms across his chest to stare down at her.

"It isn't called labor for nothing, Alexis," he said, his voice stern. "Your body had to work very hard and use a lot of energy in order for you to give birth. And although I don't advise a patient staying in bed more than a few hours following a routine delivery, I do expect her to listen to orders."

Lexi ground her teeth to keep from screaming that it was his fault she'd gotten up, that she'd had a terrible nightmare in which he'd taken her baby. But caution forced her to remain silent. In no way did she want to arouse Ty's suspicions.

"As you recently found out, feeling faint is not uncommon

the first time a woman tries to walk after giving birth," Ty continued to lecture. "That's why you were told to wait for Martha's assistance."

Lexi glared at him. "Are you quite finished, Dr. Braden?" When he gave her a slight nod, she asked the question foremost on her mind. "Where's my son?"

"He's right here," Martha said, wheeling the bassinet to the side of Lexi's bed. "He's been visitin' with Doc while you took a nap." Turning to Ty, she asked, "Are you sure you don't want me to stay?"

"Go ahead, Martha," Ty said, nodding. "I can handle things from here."

"Doc Fletcher always wanted me to be here when we had an overnight patient," she said, clearly miffed.

Ty shrugged. "Dr. Fletcher had a wife to go home to. I don't. Besides, I'll be here anyway. I have to get caught up on some paperwork and it'll take most of the night to get it done."

Hoping Martha proved to be as stubborn as always, Lexi's heart sank when she saw Martha hesitate. "Are you sure?"

"I promise I'll take good care of them," Ty said, smiling. "Now go home and get some rest."

Lexi watched with growing horror as Martha finally nodded and walked toward the door. "If you need me, you've got the number," Martha said, waving goodbye.

The very last thing Lexi wanted was to be left alone with Ty. In fact, she didn't want to be anywhere near him. The more time

they spent together, the bigger the chance he'd realize he was Matthew's father.

As if to draw attention to that very fact, the baby let loose with a lusty cry.

"It appears somebody wants his dinner," Ty said. He picked the infant up, but seemed in no hurry to place him in Lexi's outstretched arms. "You said his name is Matthew?"

"Yes." Her apprehension intensified as Ty smiled fondly at the angry baby he continued to hold.

"Have you and Fred picked out a middle name?" he asked without looking at her.

Watching him stare down at the baby, Lexi frowned. "Did you meet Freddie this afternoon?"

"No." Ty chuckled when Matthew tried to find nourishment from the tip of his little finger. "I was with a patient. Maybe Fred and I will have the chance to get acquainted when he comes to take you and the baby home."

"Maybe," Lexi agreed.

All she had to do was keep the two from meeting. It shouldn't be hard, Lexi decided. She was quite confident that Freddie would be more than happy to wait outside the clinic.

"So, does this little guy have a middle name?" Ty asked again, interrupting Lexi's thoughts.

She searched his face, but his expression gave no indication of what he might be thinking. "Scott," she answered cautiously. "Why do you want to know?"

Ty finally handed the baby to her when Matthew found Ty's finger to be less than satisfying. "I need his full name for the birth certificate."

Relieved, Lexi managed a weak smile as she held her son close. "His name is Matthew Scott Hatfield."

"Of course," Ty agreed. Then, to her immense relief, he turned and left the room.

His son cradled to his chest, Ty sat in the darkened room, his eyes fixed on the sleeping woman in front of him. The months since she'd left Chicago had done nothing to lessen the effect she had on him. From the first time he'd laid eyes on her that day in the elevator, Alexis had taken his breath away with her beauty, had made his heart skip a beat when she spoke. She still did.

And earlier, when he'd carried her back to bed, the bittersweet memories of their night together had been overwhelming. The feel of her softness against him, the sweet smell of her honeysuckle-scented hair where it brushed his cheek, had made him feel as if he'd go up in flames.

But Alexis was off-limits now, married to another man. A man she was trying to pass off as Matthew's father. His jaw tightened involuntarily. Ty didn't think he'd ever forgive her for that.

He gazed down at the baby he held. Alexis may have replaced him with someone else, but Ty would never stand by and watch his son call another man "Daddy."

He smiled as his tension eased. He fully intended to let Alexis

know he was aware of the truth.

And Ty knew exactly how to go about telling her.

Lexi's nerves were stretched to the breaking point. Time was slipping away. Fast.

If Freddie didn't show up soon to take her and the baby home, Ty would be back from his house calls. Her whole plan hinged on being gone before that happened.

When Martha walked into the room carrying an armload of fresh linens, Lexi tried to keep the anxiety from her voice as she asked, "Is Freddie out in the reception area?"

Setting the sheets on the bedside table, the older woman shook her head and began stripping the bed.

"Ain't seen hide nor hair of Freddie. And unless I miss my guess, we won't either."

Martha was right.

The smell of antiseptic and Freddie's delicate stomach were a dangerous combination. It would take a matter of life or death before Freddie Hatfield risked coming anywhere near the inside of the clinic.

Lexi walked over to the window on the far side of the room and parted the calico curtains. The sight of Freddie pacing uncertainly between the car and the clinic door made Lexi smile with relief. "I wonder how long Freddie's been out there."

Martha came over to peer out the window. "No tellin'." She laughed when Freddie stopped, glanced at the clinic door, then shook her head and started pacing again. "Goin' back and forth

like that, Freddie's gonna wear a trench in the pavement."

As they watched Freddie's obvious dilemma, a shiny, red four-wheel-drive pulled into the parking lot. When the driver got out, pulled a black bag from the back seat and walked over to where Freddie stood looking helpless and forlorn, Lexi's blood turned as cold as ice.

Ty had returned and it appeared he was going to exchange polite conversation with her "husband," Freddie.

"Is something wrong?" Ty asked the obviously nervous woman.

"No," the blonde answered. A rosy glow tinged her cheeks when Ty's expression turned skeptical. "Well…sort of." She pointed a shaky finger at the clinic door. "I need to go in there… but I can't."

"Why not?" Ty asked, confused. "The clinic is open to everyone."

Her blush deepened as she struggled to explain. "It's…well, you see…I have this problem."

"What is it?" he gently coaxed. "I'm Dr. Braden. Maybe I can help."

"I don't think so," she said, her ponytail swaying from side to side as she vigorously shook her head. "I've tried to get over it. Really, I have." Her eyes pleaded for his understanding. "But there isn't anything I can do about it. It's a curse."

"What makes you think you're cursed?" Ty asked. He made a mental note to check the list of psychiatrists in Chattanooga. He

just might be sending one of them a referral.

The woman closed her eyes, took a deep breath and blurted, “Aw, hell, Doc. The place makes me sick.”

Ty wasn’t sure what explanation he’d expected, but this wasn’t it. “Excuse me?”

“It’s the smell of antiseptic,” she explained, clearly embarrassed. Her anxiety increasing, she twisted her hands into a tight knot. “Just one whiff of that stuff and I’ll hurl in all directions.”

Ty coughed to keep from laughing at her impassioned description. “I can see where that would present a problem,” he agreed. “But I can’t examine you out here in the parking lot.”

“Oh, I’m not here to see you,” the woman said hastily. “When I need a doctor, I go see Granny Applegate up on Piney Knob.”

Ty frowned. Every time he heard the old woman’s name or thought about her approach to medicine, he envisioned black cats and a steaming caldron of witch’s brew. How could a young, seemingly intelligent woman place herself in the care of a quack like that?

“If you’re not here to see me, then—”

“I’m here to take my sister-in-law and her new baby home,” the woman interrupted. She gave the building a nervous glance. “But I can’t let her know I’m here unless I go inside. And if I do that—”

“You’ll get sick,” Ty finished for her.

She seemed pleased he understood. “If you could just tell Lexi

I'm here, I'd really appreciate it."

"Sure," Ty said, heading for the clinic entrance.

His disgust for Alexis's husband grew by leaps and bounds as he thought of the pretty blonde's dilemma. Evidently queasiness plagued the whole Hatfield family. Good old Fred had to have known the kind of anxiety his sister would suffer.

But did the man care how much hell he put the women in his life through? No. The ever-concerned Fred was a complete washout in the sensitivity department. How could any woman be attracted to a jerk like that?

Ty shook his head as he entered the clinic. There were some things about women he guessed he'd just never understand. He was beginning to think he didn't even want to.

Lexi turned away from the window, walked over to the bassinet and picked up the baby. In a few minutes Ty would be in to confront her with what he'd learned about her "husband." From there, it would be easy for him to figure out the rest of what she'd tried so hard to keep hidden.

She drew in a shuddering breath as she lowered herself into the rocking chair and, holding Matthew close, set the chair in motion.

It wasn't that she wanted to keep Ty in the dark forever about his son. She'd never wanted that. But fear had kept her silent through the long months of her pregnancy, and now she needed time to come to grips with all that had happened. How was she supposed to tell a man who never intended to have a child that

he'd fathered one?

"Lexi, do you feel all right?" Martha asked, concerned. "You look like you've seen a saint."

She wished what she'd just witnessed had been an apparition. At the moment, seeing a ghost sounded far more appealing than facing Ty.

"I'm fine," she answered, her voice far more calm than she felt. "I just want to take Matthew and go home."

"Can't say I blame you. Everybody rests better in their own bed." Martha finished tucking the corners of the sheet. "I'll get the birth certificate and a discharge paper for you to sign. Then you and that little angel can be on your way."

"I've taken care of it, Martha," Ty said, walking into the room.

Martha propped her hands on her ample hips. "If you keep doin' my job for me, we're gonna be havin' another long talk." Her menacing glare never wavered as she breezed past him.

"Great," Ty muttered, drawing Lexi's attention. "Another lecture."

Lexi's breath lodged in her throat at the sight of Ty, her fears and anxiety fading as she watched him cross the room.

Ty was, and probably always would be, the sexiest man Lexi had ever seen. In a suit and tie he was sexy. But in jeans and a T-shirt, the man was downright sinful. The knit fabric, stretched across his wide shoulders and upper arms, drew attention to his well-formed chest muscles and bulging biceps. The royal blue color highlighted his deep, azure eyes.

The faded denim of his jeans hugged his long, muscular legs and emphasized his narrow hips. But from her seated position, it put certain other outlined areas on eye level as well.

Lexi swallowed hard when her pulse took off at an alarming rate. She had to have some kind of record-breaking hormonal imbalance. After the ordeal of giving birth not forty-eight hours ago, she shouldn't want a man within a hundred miles of her—and especially not Tyler Braden.

"I need you to sign this release form before you go," Ty said, handing her a paper and pen.

He reached down to take the baby and Lexi watched him cradle her son—their son—in the crook of his arm. Ty smiled when he put his index finger close to the baby's hand and Matthew wrapped his own tiny fingers around it. The sight was so poignant, Lexi had to look away.

Tears filled her eyes as she signed the release form Ty had given her. She wanted to tell him Matthew was his son, wanted Ty to be as happy about the baby as she was. But he'd told her once that he never wanted a child. And he'd been quite adamant about it.

When she'd asked him why he felt that way, his eyes had taken on a fierce gleam and he'd mumbled something about not being good with children. But watching him with Matthew now, Lexi knew for certain that wasn't the case.

"Your sister-in-law is waiting for you in the parking lot," Ty said.

Prepared to face the music, Lexi took a deep breath, rose from the rocking chair and handed him the paper. The moment of truth had arrived. She'd known a showdown with Ty was inevitable once he learned Freddie wasn't her husband. But she'd hoped for more time, hoped to put things in perspective before they discussed their son's birth and the bizarre circumstances of meeting again.

"Freddie has a real problem with the clinic—"

"I know," Ty interrupted, his disgust evident. "Doesn't he realize his sister suffers from a weak stomach, too?"

Shocked, Lexi barely managed to keep her mouth from dropping open. Evidently, Freddie hadn't introduced herself.

Lexi knew she was opting for the coward's way out, but at the moment, a hasty exit was far more appealing than a confrontation she wasn't prepared to deal with.

"I'm, uh, pretty sure Freddie knows the effect the clinic has on her." Lexi tried to keep her voice even as she reached for her son. "We'd better not keep your aunt waiting, Matthew."

When Ty continued to hold the baby, their eyes locked for a long, tense moment before he finally said, "You have to wait for a wheelchair."

"I don't need—"

"It's standard policy, Alexis."

"But that's ridiculous," Lexi protested. She waited for Ty to place Matthew in her arms, but when he just stood there glaring at her, she waved her hand to encompass the room. "Look

around, Ty. You're in the Dixie Ridge Health Clinic. This place is a million miles away from the protocol that dictates a big city hospital. Besides, I'm perfectly capable of walking out of here."

"That may be, but for insurance purposes we have to follow procedure," he argued.

Martha wheeled the chair into the room, her expression revealing how she felt on the subject. "For what it's worth, Lexi, I think it's pretty silly myself." She gave Ty a withering glare. "Doc Fletcher never got bent out of shape when I let a patient walk out of here on their own steam."

"I'm not Dr. Fletcher," Ty stated flatly. He turned back to Lexi. "Now, if you'll have a seat, I'll take you and Matthew out to the car."

Desperation clawed at Lexi's insides. She didn't want to run the risk of Ty talking to Freddie again. With each meeting, the odds increased that he'd learn the truth. And although she fully intended to tell him everything, she didn't want or need the added complication of explaining in front of her sister-in-law.

"Alexis?"

"I told you my name is Lexi."

"All right, Lexi," Ty said, emphasizing her name. "Sit down."

Lexi glared at him. "And if I refuse?"

A gleam of determination lit his dark blue eyes. "I'll pick you up and carry you out."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me." His smooth baritone carried just enough edge to it

that Lexi had no doubt he meant exactly what he said.

Several tense seconds stretched between them before she reluctantly gave in and lowered herself into the chair. “Now are you satisfied?”

He placed the baby in her waiting arms and didn’t even try to hide his smug smile. She felt like punching him.

When Ty moved to take hold of the rubber grips on the back of the chair, Martha shook her head. “I’ll take care of getting Lexi and the baby out to the car, Doc. It’s my job. You’re needed in exam room two, anyway. A thump rod on one of Carl Morgan’s barrels popped loose and he’s gonna need a couple of stitches to close a cut on his hand.”

Ty looked bewildered. “Thump rod?”

Martha winked and Lexi smiled in spite of herself. “You can tell he’s a city boy, can’t you, Martha?”

Laughing, Martha nodded. “Stands out like Harv Jenkins’s big toe when his gout’s actin’ up.”

“You still haven’t answered my question,” Ty said stubbornly.

Relieved Ty wouldn’t be taking her and the baby out to Freddie’s car, Lexi managed to grin. “A thump rod is a part on Carl’s…boiler.”

“It’s a technical term used by people in Carl’s line of work,” Martha added, her eyes twinkling merrily.

Ty frowned. “What line of work is Carl in?”

Lexi glanced at Martha, but the woman just shrugged. How much should they tell Ty? After all, he wasn’t from the mountains

and he certainly wasn't accustomed to mountain ways.

"He raises pigs," she said, finally settling on a half-truth.

"Then why would he need a boiler?"

"He uses it to cook up pig feed, Doc," Martha answered. Her air of innocence almost made Lexi laugh out loud.

When Ty didn't make a motion to leave, Lexi asked, "Was there something else?"

He suddenly flashed a smile that sent a warm, fluttery feeling all the way to the pit of her stomach, then handed her an oversize envelope. "Here's Matthew's birth certificate."

The warmth remained with her all the way out to the base of Piney Knob Mountain. Freddie turned the car off the main highway and announced, "Mary Ann Simmons was right. That doctor is a real hunk."

"I suppose," Lexi said, trying to sound completely indifferent. Her attempt failed, but fortunately Freddie didn't seem to notice.

"He's real understandin', too." Freddie glanced in the rearview mirror at Lexi, where she sat next to the baby's car seat. "He didn't even bat an eye when I told him how I couldn't go inside the clinic because of the place makin' me sick."

"That's nice," Lexi said absently. Listening to Freddie extol Ty's many virtues was the last thing she wanted or needed to hear. To distract herself from her sister-in-law's chatter, Lexi removed the decorative parchment from the large envelope Ty had given her earlier.

Scanning the document, she felt her heart lurch to a stop,

then take off at an erratic gallop. It wasn't the official birth record. That would be filed at the county clerk's office. But the complimentary certificate did reflect Ty's intentions.

And they couldn't have been more clear.

Matthew's surname had been recorded as Braden. And Ty had listed himself as the baby's father.

Three

Fall had always been Lexi's favorite time of year, but as she stared out of the car window, she saw none of the fall colors painting the mountain. One question kept swirling through her mind, screaming for an answer, blinding her with its implications.

What did Ty intend to do next?

By listing himself as Matthew's father on the birth certificate, he'd let her know—in no uncertain terms—he had something in mind. But what?

He thought she was married. Didn't he care about the problems his actions could cause if she really did have a husband?

"Lexi, are you all right?" Freddie asked when she opened the car door and peered into the back seat. "You look like you stuck your finger in a light socket."

Dazed, Lexi looked around. They'd driven up the narrow, winding road to her cabin and parked without her even noticing.

The leaves on the maple and oak trees continued their daily transformation from green to shades of rust and gold. The marigolds she'd planted at the beginning of summer still bloomed heartily despite the crispness of the early fall nights. Birds still sang with the sweet purity of freedom. The chipmunk living under her front porch still scurried about, gathering acorns for the upcoming winter.

When so much in her life had changed, how could everything look just as it had only two days before?

"Oh, Freddie, nothing is ever going to be the same," Lexi said helplessly.

"Of course it won't," Freddie agreed. She unbuckled the seat belt holding the baby's car seat and lifted it from the back seat. "But don't worry. I'm sure every first-time mother feels a little overwhelmed at the thought of taking care of her baby."

Lexi glanced down at the birth certificate she still held. "I wish that was my only worry."

"You know Jeff and I will help." When Lexi made no move to get out of the car, Freddie gave her an exasperated look. "What's gotten into you, Lexi? You couldn't wait to get away from the clinic. Now you act like you don't want to go inside the house."

Sliding the parchment back into the envelope, Lexi slowly got out of the car. She'd fully prepared herself to shoulder the responsibility of being a single mother, had completely accepted how things had to be.

But the rules of the game had changed radically with Ty's unexpected reappearance in her life. By listing himself as the baby's father, did he expect to help her raise their son? Would he try to obtain custody of Matthew?

The thought sent a chill all the way to her soul. She needed someone to confide in. Someone who would listen and at least try to understand.

Lexi stared at Freddie for several seconds as Grandma

Hatfield's sage words whispered through her mind. "A burden is sometimes easier to carry if you share it with someone you trust."

She had a burden, all right, and it weighed a ton.

Taking the handle of the baby carrier in her right hand, she hooked her left arm through Freddie's. When she spoke, her voice sounded surprisingly steady, considering her insides quivered like a bowl of gelatin in an off-the-scale earthquake. "Let's go inside, Freddie. There's something I need to tell you."

It wasn't as difficult as Lexi had thought it would be, and by the time they walked into the living room, Freddie was gaping at her.

"He's what?"

"You heard me," Lexi said calmly. "Tyler Braden is Matthew's father."

Freddie collapsed on the couch, her eyes wide. "But when did you two—I mean, where—"

Lexi placed the baby in the antique cradle that had held four generations of Hatfield infants. "When? Nine months, two weeks, and four days ago. Where? Chicago." She turned to give her sister-in-law a sardonic smile. "And before you ask how—the usual way."

Her sister-in-law shook her head as if to clear it. "You mean to tell me he's a doctor and he didn't recognize the symptoms of pregnancy?"

"We…" Lexi hesitated. No matter how she said it, it was going to sound bad. "We only spent one night together." She tiredly

lowered herself into the rocking chair beside the cradle. She felt as if the weight of the world rested squarely on her shoulders. “It was the night before I left to come back home.”

“But what about birth control?” Freddie asked. “I mean, him bein’ a doctor and all, you’d think—”

“We did use something,” Lexi interrupted. She shrugged helplessly. “But there isn’t any method that’s one hundred percent effective.”

“Except abstinence,” Freddie corrected. “And if you’d picked that method—”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation,” Lexi finished.

Freddie rose from the couch and began to pace the length of the room. “Does he realize Matthew is his?”

“Yes.”

When Freddie whirled around, her long, blonde ponytail slapped the side of her face. “I thought you told me he didn’t know about the pregnancy.” Her eyes narrowed and she propped her fists on her hips. “That woodpecker knew and waited all this time—”

“No,” Lexi interrupted. “I haven’t said anything to Ty.”

“Then, how are you sure he knows?”

Lexi handed Freddie the birth certificate. “He must have figured it out, because he listed himself as the baby’s father and Matthew’s last name as Braden.”

Freddie scanned the document, an incredulous expression crossing her delicate features. “Granny’s garters! What do you

think he'll do now?"

"I wish I knew." Lexi closed her eyes and rested her head against the high back of the rocking chair. "But that's not all."

"There's more?" Freddie looked at Lexi as if she'd sprouted horns and a tail.

Lexi nodded. Any other time, they'd find humor in Ty's assumption about her marital status. But at the moment, Lexi couldn't find anything even remotely funny about the situation.

When Lexi remained silent, Freddie frowned. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Probably not." Lexi grimaced as she struggled for the courage to meet Freddie's suspicious gaze. "He thinks I'm married to you."

Freddie looked as if she'd been pinched. "Grandpa's long johns! Where did he get a goofy idea like that?"

"Ty heard Martha and me talking about you," Lexi explained. "I guess he assumed by the name that 'Freddie' was a man and my husband."

"And you didn't set him straight." It was more an accusation than a question.

Lexi shook her head and stared down at her tightly laced fingers. "No."

Clearly confused, Freddie plopped back down on the couch. "Why not?"

Biting her lower lip, Lexi tried to keep a sob from escaping. When she finally gained control of her emotions, her voice

quavered. “I guess I was trying to buy some time…until I could figure out what to do.” Tears filled her eyes as she met her sister-in-law’s disbelieving gaze. “Oh, Freddie, how could I have made such a mess of things? And why couldn’t he have stayed in Chicago where he belongs?”

Freddie left the couch, knelt beside the rocking chair and put her arms around Lexi. “Do you love him?” she asked gently.

“To tell the truth, I’d have to say I don’t even know him,” Lexi sobbed.

“Oh, holy cow! This just gets more and more bizarre every time you open your mouth.”

Tears spilled down Lexi’s cheeks, and she tried to swipe them away with the back of her hand. “Ty and I were neighbors. He lived down the hall and we rarely ever saw each other. We’d pass in the hall and speak, or say ‘hello’ as we got on or off the elevator. But that was it. Until…the night I quit the radio station.”

“What made that night different?” Freddie asked.

Lexi took a deep breath. She’d started explaining things. She might as well finish. Besides, keeping secrets was precisely what got her into this mess to begin with.

“After a meeting with the corporate wonder boy in charge of restructuring the radio station, I decided there was no way I’d move my show to L.A. I didn’t want to move that far from home, so I turned in my resignation—effective immediately—and cleared out my office. Everything I’d worked to build in the last five years had just disintegrated in less than thirty minutes,

and I doubt I could have felt any lower." She sniffed back a sob. "When I went back to my apartment to pack, Ty had just gotten off duty at the hospital. He looked even worse than I felt."

Freddie nodded. "But how did you two get together?"

"He said he'd had a really bad day in the E.R. and I told him about losing my job." Lexi gave her sister-in-law a watery smile. "Ty suggested that we share dinner and a bottle of wine, since we'd both had a rotten day. I should have refused, but I didn't feel like being alone. So I accepted."

"Who ended up where? Was the deed done at your place or his?"

"Freddie!"

"Sorry, Lex, but this is just like a soap opera."

Lexi shrugged. "My apartment had a gas fireplace and we picnicked in front of the hearth. He brought two bottles of wine and I supplied the cheese. We talked about being disillusioned with life and I told him about the peace I'd always found in these mountains and how I intended to come back here. Somehow, one thing led to another, and before either of us knew what happened, we were gathering our clothes and saying an awkward goodbye."

Sitting back on her heels, Freddie shook her head. "Geez, when I have a bad day, I feel lucky if Jeff plays a Garth Brooks CD and pops a pizza in the microwave so I don't have to cook supper."

They remained silent for several minutes as the gravity of the situation sank in.

“I wonder what he’ll do now,” Freddie finally said.

“I’d like it if he just left me and the baby alone.” Lexi wiped at a tear as it slid down her cheek. “Forty-eight hours ago all I had to worry about was having a baby. Then, in less than a split second, my whole world is turned inside out.”

Freddie nodded sympathetically. “I can imagine it was a real shock to find out the daddy of your baby was gonna be the one to do the deliverin’.”

“You have no idea.” Lexi hiccuped. “There I was, ready to give birth, when Ty walked in. What was I going to say? Oh, by the way, you just happen to be the father of the baby you’re about to deliver. A child—” her voice caught “—you never wanted.”

“Now hold it.” Freddie’s pixielike features mirrored her confusion. “How do you know he never wanted kids?”

“He told me that night.” Lexi closed her eyes to hold back the threatening tears. “Ty didn’t say why, but I’m sure it had something to do with what he sees every day in the E.R.”

Suddenly overwhelmed, Lexi finally gave into the wave of emotion she’d held back since seeing Ty again. She cried for the circumstances surrounding their son’s birth and the uncertainty of what Ty intended next.

Freddie held her while she sobbed, then handed her a tissue once the tears finally subsided. “Maybe you’re wrong about him not wantin’ a baby.”

“I don’t think so,” Lexi said, wiping her cheeks.

“Jeff is never gonna believe this.”

"No!" Her voice desperate, Lexi pleaded, "Please don't tell anyone. And especially not Jeff. At least not until I have a chance to work this out with Ty."

Her sister-in-law's hazel eyes filled with understanding. "That would probably be best. Knowin' your brother, he'd go after the man with his double-barrel shotgun—"

"And all hell would break loose," Lexi finished for her.

They sat in silence for a time before Freddie asked, "What's he doin' in Dixie Ridge, anyway?"

Lexi shook her head. "I wondered that myself."

Freddie rose to her feet. "When do you think he'll let you know what his intentions are?"

"I don't know." Lexi rubbed at the pounding in her temples. "But I don't think I'll have too long to wait. I think what he did with the birth certificate is proof enough that Ty isn't the type of man to bide his time once he's decided on a plan of action."

Ty started counting mailboxes when he spotted the old wagon wheel leaning against a rail fence. In the city, he'd used building numbers, street names and well-known landmarks to find his way around. But here in the mountains, addresses weren't always that easy. He found himself looking for stumps and wagon wheels, counting mailboxes and relying on a tremendous amount of luck to find where he needed to go.

He turned onto the steep lane past the sixth box, a self-deprecating smile curving the corners of his mouth. When Martha informed him that he'd have to make house calls in order

to treat a few of his older, less mobile patients, he'd thought the practice inefficient and outdated.

He'd been wrong.

The more he drove the winding roads snaking their way up the side of Piney Knob, the more Ty appreciated the morning ritual, felt a little more tension drain away. For the first time in more years than he cared to count, he was taking life at a slower pace, paying attention to things he'd never had time to notice before. He was beginning to like the difference in the way it made him feel, too. He liked being able to gear down and lower his guard. Not only was he getting to know the people on Piney Knob, he was beginning to know himself.

Ty gazed out the windshield at the panoramic view. Making house calls gave him the chance to enjoy the earthy tones of autumn painting the mountains with their rich hues, to see the ancient peaks and valleys shrouded with the smoky mists the area had been named for. He found he liked the frosty bite of the morning air, the clean smell of pine, instead of the sulfuric smog of the city. And this morning the practice provided another bonus.

Glancing at the packages in the passenger seat, his smile widened. Every patient on this morning's list of house calls had heard about the baby and asked if he would mind taking their gifts to Lexi. In doing so, they'd inadvertently handed him the perfect excuse to check on his son.

"Not that I need one," he muttered.

As far as he was concerned, being Matthew's father was reason enough for him to stop by the Hatfield place any time he damn well pleased.

He steered the truck around a sharp bend in the road, pulled to a stop in front of a small rustic cabin and looked around.

The place was nothing like he'd thought it would be.

In Chicago, Alexis's apartment had been highly fashionable, ultra modern and very expensive. But Lexi's house was humble and unassuming. The place looked like it had been constructed of giant Lincoln logs and might possibly have a little shed out back with a crescent moon carved in the door.

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