

A Stable Account



Sandi Haddad

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...As if reading her thoughts, Dan asked, “Why did you take off Chad’s ring?”

So that was why he was upset! Maggie swallowed, keeping her eyes focused on the road. “I thought it was time.”

“You’re ready to forget him?”

The note of censure in his voice made her pick her words carefully. As Chad’s brother, he must feel that she was being somehow unfaithful to her husband’s memory. “No. Of course not. I don’t need the ring to remember him. And didn’t you tell me you thought I should start getting out more?”

“I didn’t mean *dating*.”

“Who said I’m going to start dating? No man would want me now!” Her voice cracked, and her eyes filled with tears. She pulled up in front of her shop and turned off the ignition, getting out and striding toward the door without a backward glance...

PRAISE FOR A STABLE ACCOUNT

“...A fantastic new romance! I like Sandi’s romances because they always seem so real. Nothing fake or phony. Just people trying to work it all out for themselves. It’s a tough world out there. Sandi Haddad’s romances make it a little easier to bear!”

—Joyce Lavene
Lagniappe Book Reviews

“The story of how Maggie and Dan come to realize and acknowledge their mutual attraction is a thoroughly romantic story that will uplift your heart and make you smile.”

—Martha McDonnaugh
VCRW Novel Notes

“A tender and heartfelt read...a poignant story about a woman who feels she lost everything, but gained so much, and the man who has always hidden in the shadow of his love, but can now come out of it. By combining angst and romance, Ms. Haddad has penned a tale that doesn’t come off as sappy, but realistic, with characters who are going through their own personal growth...And as always, Ms. Haddad’s love for horses shines throughout the entire story.”

—Courtney Bowden
Romance Reviews Today

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Rawhide And Lace
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Ticket To Romance
Vital Signs

A STABLE ACCOUNT

BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.amberquill.com>

A STABLE ACCOUNT
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Copyright © 2003 by Sandi Haddad
ISBN 1-59279-156-5

Cover Art © 2003 Stacy Anne Haddad and Trace Edward Zaber

Rating: PG

Layout and Formatting provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To my lovely daughter Stacy,
who taught me to follow my dreams,
and who designed the lovely cover
for A Stable Account.*

CHAPTER 1

Ka-thump. Maggie Newman frowned when the three-year-old Honda she drove tilted slightly off-balance. She rumbled over to the grassy shoulder of the country road and turned off the engine.

Heart sinking, she got out and took a look at the tires. As she had feared, the left rear one was flat.

She looked hopefully up and down the road, but saw no other cars in either direction. Of course these days it wasn't safe to flag down passing motorists anyway.

With a sigh, she got back in the car and debated what to do. Although almost to her destination, she was still too far from the small Florida town of Magnolia Cove to walk. The rural road had few houses, none within sight. She had a spare in the trunk, but she didn't think it would be a good idea to try to change the tire in her present condition.

Maybe she could summon help on the cellular phone. She reached for the emergency box her brother had insisted she bring along and breathed a silent thanks to Tony for his foresight.

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Engrossed in trying to figure out how to plug the phone in, she didn't look up until a shadow darkened her window. Her heart leapt to her throat as she grabbed for the tire iron she kept under her seat. Brandishing the tool in front of her, she turned to meet her potential attacker.

Familiar chocolate-colored eyes stared back at her with a shocked expression that mirrored her own surprise.

Maggie recovered first. Yanking open the car door, she jumped out. "Danny! What're you doing here?"

"Maggie!" He stretched out one arm to accept her hug, and she realized why she hadn't heard him drive up. His other hand held the reins to a large bay horse.

She stepped back to appraise her brother-in-law. Her childhood buddy had grown into a ruggedly handsome man. Wearing a Stetson, jeans and boots, he resembled a classic rodeo cowboy. His denim work shirt, rolled back at the sleeves, revealed tanned, muscular forearms.

His dark eyes, so like her late husband's, regarded her with a haunted expression. Wasn't he glad to see her?

"What's wrong, Danny?"

The corner of his mouth curled in a fraction of a smile. "I don't let anybody call me that anymore except my mother."

"Chad did," she reminded him.

His gaze dropped, and his smile disappeared completely as his lips thinned into a grim line. He glanced toward her car. "Do you have a spare?"

"It's in the trunk."

"If you'll hold Sultan, I'll change it for you."

"Thanks." Maggie handed him her car keys and took the reins. Admiring the horse's sleek brown coat and black mane, she said, "He's beautiful. Is he yours?"

Danny nodded without looking up. "I bought him about a month ago. I live here now, not too far from my folks."

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Maggie chewed her lip as she wondered about his cool reaction to her. Could he be angry that she didn't offer to help change the tire? Or had he guessed the reason?

Although starting her third trimester of pregnancy, she hadn't gained a lot of weight. He hadn't hugged her tightly, and she thought her loose shirt covered the evidence pretty well.

She waited while he removed the tire from her trunk, rolled it into position next to the flat and went to work.

How should she break the news about the baby to him? She hadn't purposely kept her pregnancy a secret, but Chad's family hadn't contacted her or returned her calls since his funeral. Now she hoped to get close to his parents again. The elder Newmans had often talked about how they longed for more grandchildren.

Danny's reaction puzzled her, though. She'd always been his friend—at least until her marriage to his brother.

She hadn't seen much of him after she and Chad had eloped and moved to Orlando. Dan had gone off to college, then gotten married himself. She knew he had a daughter but had been divorced for several years now.

Although the brothers had seen each other on occasion, Danny had never come to Chad and Maggie's ranch. The few times she'd seen him at holiday gatherings Danny had been polite, but reserved, like the rest of the family.

She wondered if it could be possible to rekindle their friendship. Would he be happy to learn he was going to be an uncle?

He tightened the last lug nut. After removing the jack, he put the flat in the trunk and slammed the lid.

When he returned to her side, she said, "Thank you, Danny—I mean Dan."

He shrugged. "No problem." Without meeting her eyes, he handed her the keys and reached for Sultan. Gathering the reins, he slid his left foot into the stirrup. "I couldn't very well let a pregnant woman change

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a tire, could I?”

He *had* noticed! Realizing that he couldn't know how far along she was, she finally understood his attitude.

As he started to mount the horse, she blurted out, “The baby is Chad's.”

Dan froze in position. “*What?*”

“I was pregnant before the accident.”

In slow motion, he dismounted. His gaze met hers with an unreadable expression. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I didn't know until well after Chad's funeral. Then I wasn't sure how to bring it up.”

“Do Mom and Dad know?”

“No. I've been trying to reach them, but—”

“They're out of town.” He shook his head as if in disbelief, staring off into the woods. Finally he spoke again. “Look, it sounds like we need to talk. Where are you headed?”

“I have a doctor's appointment in Magnolia Cove. I'm moving here soon. I didn't realize you're back, too. It'll be great to see you more often.”

His gaze still focused on the trees, an enigmatic expression crossed his face. “I have a house on a few acres outside of town and an accounting office on Main Street.”

“That's great!” Remembering he'd gotten custody of his daughter in his divorce, she asked, “Does Jenny live with you?”

He nodded. “Do you have a job and a place to live?”

“Not yet,” she admitted. “I'm hoping to open a tack store, maybe find one with living quarters. My sister-in-law, Trish, told me about a place that might work.”

“She used to live here, too, didn't she?”

“Yes. She and Tony met in high school. Her father is an obstetrician. My appointment is with him.”

“Dr. Cooper? A friend of mine goes to him. I've heard he's good.”

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“My doctor in Orlando says so, too. That’s another reason I decided to move here.”

He absently stroked Sultan’s neck. “Is the place Trish told you about on Main Street? There used to be a tack store there, across the street from my office. It’s been closed for a while so will need some work. The location has potential, though.”

“That sounds like the one.”

“I can show it to you, if you like. I know a real estate agent who’ll give me the key.” He checked his watch. “I’ll need to take Sultan home, and Jenny will be back from school soon. Why don’t you meet me at my house?”

He gave her directions to his ranch, and Maggie promised to come over after she saw the doctor. “See you later,” he said, tipping his hat and mounting the stallion.

* * *

Dan loosened the reins to give his horse freedom to pick his own way over the pine needle-strewn path through the dense woods. Sultan knew the way home and, unlike his rider, had nothing else to worry about.

Dan had set out for a trail ride to give both his mount and himself a break from structured training sessions. The last thing he’d expected was to run into Maggie. If he had known she was the woman inside the stranded vehicle he’d spotted when he had come out of the woods, he would have been tempted to turn tail and run the other way.

It had certainly been a surprise to find her there—even more of a shock when he’d seen her condition. He should have known better than to think she would have already replaced her husband with a new man, though. Maggie wasn’t that kind of woman at all. She never had been.

That was one of the reasons he’d always been crazy about her.

And why he could never have her.

Guilt washed over him as he remembered his jealousy when Maggie, his childhood friend, had developed a crush on his big brother.

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He'd done everything he could to keep them apart. But when Chad had taken him aside the night before they'd eloped and had told him they were in love, Dan had given up. He'd cared about them both too much to interfere with their happiness. After that he had stayed away, seeing Maggie only when necessary—and never alone. She'd probably never suspected his childish pranks were his adolescent way of trying to get her attention.

He thought he'd done a good job of forgetting her. But, after seeing Maggie today, he realized his feelings had just lain dormant.

The years had been good to her. At Chad's funeral, when she'd been haggard with grief and lack of sleep, he had still thought her beautiful. And now, with a rounded figure and that special glow on her face, he found her more attractive than ever.

Forget it, he reminded himself. *She loved Chad, not me. If she decides to find someone new, it won't be her husband's kid brother.*

Sultan shied at a rustling in the bushes and sidestepped, nostrils flaring.

Dan instinctively shifted with the horse. He crooned to the stallion, reassuring him, glad to have a reason to get his mind off Maggie.

It was a quiet spring morning, his favorite time to ride. As usual when he was on horseback, the forest animals ignored his presence, continuing to scurry about in the trees and palmettos. He caught sight of several rabbits, and a pair of squirrels chattered at him from the trunk of a tree as he passed. A small Florida deer stared at him with wide eyes for several seconds before bounding into the brush.

Sultan rounded a bend, and Dan once again caught sight of Maggie's little red car heading toward town. He gave his head a grim shake. Since his divorce, he'd had little interest in a new relationship. Of all the women in the world, why did the first to really get his aching heart thumping again have to be the one he wanted most to avoid?

* * *

As she walked out of the medical complex, Maggie felt happier

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than she had in weeks. Smiling to herself, she unlocked her door, set the pile of brochures she had picked up on the passenger seat, and got in the car.

She liked her new doctor. The kind gray-haired physician had assured her that she carried a healthy baby. Although the other doctors she'd seen had said the same thing, it was always reassuring to get another opinion. She hoped things would work out, allowing her to stay in Magnolia Cove so Doctor Cooper could deliver her baby.

Her thoughts drifted to her meeting with Danny. Had it been her imagination or had he seemed uncomfortable around her?

Of course he must have been surprised to see her, especially when he'd noticed her pregnancy. And it had been a long time since they had spent any time together, even longer since they were close. Both of them had been through a lot of changes and done a lot of maturing since then. Maybe once they got reacquainted they could be friends again.

At least she would try.

Trish had said her father could probably recommend a real estate agent to show her around. But since Dan had an office in town, he should be able to tell her if the store she had in mind would make a wise investment. She knew his character well enough to trust him. And since he was an accountant, he might be able to help her with the business end of her enterprise, as well.

The directions Dan had given her were easy to follow, and she soon pulled up in front of his two-story brick house. She saw Sultan grazing in a pasture to one side, two mares, one gray and one dark bay, in another. A small barn and empty corral sat behind the backyard of the house, separating the pastures.

A small girl played with a black cat in the yard. When Maggie shut her car door, the child turned and stared in her direction.

Realizing the girl must be her niece, Jenny, Maggie waved. Dan's daughter had grown up a lot since the last time she'd seen her. Jenny

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had been visiting her mother when Chad had died, so she hadn't been at the funeral.

The front door opened, and Dan stepped out. He'd changed to a clean pair of jeans and a red polo shirt.

"Ready to show me the store?" Maggie asked, smiling.

He nodded toward the backyard. "As long as you don't mind if I bring Jenny along. I don't have a sitter."

"That's fine. I'd like to get to know her better."

He waved and called to his daughter. She skipped over and came through the gate, giving Maggie a shy smile.

"Hi, Jenny. Do you remember me? I'm your Aunt Maggie. You've gotten so big since I saw you last! How old are you now?"

"Five." Jenny held up all the fingers on one hand. "I go to kindy-garden."

"Your dad is going to help me find a store to buy. Would you like to come?" Maggie asked.

Jenny reached for her father's hand. "Sure!"

A few minutes later, all three were seated in Dan's blue Chevy truck. Effectively steering the topics of discussion away from personal subjects, he pointed out places of interest along the way. Jenny seemed happy to show Maggie her school and the houses of some of her friends.

When they reached the main business section of town, Dan pulled his truck into a parking spot along the street. He climbed out and went around to Maggie's side, reaching the door as she opened it.

The helping hand he offered felt strong and solid as she placed hers in it. Reluctant to let go, she raised her eyes to meet his dark gaze...so like Chad's. A shiver lanced through her.

"Thank you." She blinked away the memories as she stepped onto the sidewalk.

"The real estate agent left a key in my office," Dan said, "so we can go there first." He indicated the buildings across the street. "The empty

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store is over there.”

Maggie’s heart sank. Apparently Dan’s assessment had been right. While an ideal location, the place required a lot of work. The front of the store, next to a bookshop, desperately needed painting. The windows were either boarded up or so dirty she couldn’t see through. A faded sign, announcing the previous owner’s name, hung by one nail.

She followed Dan inside the door labeled NEWMAN ACCOUNTING, then asked, “Why did the original tack store go out of business?”

“The owner died, and the son who inherited the building wasn’t interested. It’s been vacant for awhile, so you should be able to get it at a good price, if you want it.” Dan showed her to a chair in front of his desk.

As Maggie seated herself, Jenny bounded over to the bookcase and pulled out a coloring book and box of crayons. She exchanged a smile with her dad and then sat cross-legged on the floor in the corner, obviously at home in her father’s office.

Maggie turned her attention to Dan as he sat behind the desk, needlessly re-stacking a sheaf of papers.

“This town could use a good feed and tack store,” he said. “Probably twenty to thirty percent of the population has horses. Orlando is too far away for people to drive if they just need a bale of hay or a few odds and ends. Almost every time I decide to ride, I discover a broken or worn part on a saddle or bridle. If I can’t borrow it or jury-rig something to work, I put off the ride instead of making the long trip to the store. If you can offer fair prices on horse equipment right here in town, you’re bound to succeed.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for. At least I’ll have one customer.”

Catching her eye, he smiled. “Count on it.” He reached in a desk drawer for the key. “This is it. I can show the store to you now, and then later take you to see the realtor to find out what else is available.”

“Are there any other suitable buildings nearby?” Maggie asked.

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"That one looks in pretty bad shape."

"Don't be discouraged by the outside. This place looked just as bad a few months ago."

"Really?" She glanced around the immaculate office. His desk and computer sat in front of one paneled wall. A bookcase held a number of research books. The non-paneled walls appeared newly painted. The bright carpet remained unstained and held few wear marks. Although nothing about it was ostentatious, the office seemed successful.

"You must have done a lot of work," she said, impressed.

He shrugged. "It's worth it now, knowing I'm making a success out of something that wasn't worth much before. I can set my own hours and make appointments around Jenny's school schedule."

"It sounds ideal."

"Most of the time it works out pretty good for us. But lately, with my parents out of town, I've had trouble finding a reliable baby sitter. I don't think Mom realized she would be leaving at my busiest work time."

"Who takes care of their ranch?"

"They sold it and moved into an apartment not long after Chad died." He sat back and stared out the window, a distant look on his face. "They took his death real hard."

"When will they be back in town?"

"I'm not sure. Probably in time for Easter. They're on a cruise, but they may visit some friends on the way back. They didn't give me an exact arrival date."

"I just wondered if I should try to let them know about the baby or wait until they return."

"They'll probably check in with me soon. If you want, I'll tell them."

She nodded. "That might be easiest."

He opened his mouth as if about to say something else, then glanced at Jenny and seemed to change his mind. "Anyway," he said, standing

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up, “there are a few other empty buildings around town that could be converted into a store. Unless you’re interested in a vacant lot?”

“No,” Maggie said. “I’m anxious to open, and if I had to build first, it would take too long.”

“Okay, let’s go take a look.” Bringing the key and a flashlight, he led her outside.

After crossing the street, he unlocked the door of the empty store, and they stepped inside.

Something scurried around in the shadows, and Maggie shivered. “Don’t worry,” Jenny reassured her, taking her hand. “That’s just rats. Daddy’s office used to have them, too.”

Maggie smiled at the matter-of-fact tone in the child’s voice. She gave the small hand an affectionate squeeze. “Thanks for telling me,” she said, glancing at Dan.

He appeared to stifle a grin. Turning away, he flicked the light switch. “I guess the electricity isn’t hooked up.” He walked to the back of the store and disappeared through a doorway. “Neither is the water,” he said, returning. “Let’s check out the living quarters.”

Dan switched on his flashlight to indicate their path.

Maggie looked around speculatively as they picked their way to the stairs. Although the store needed cleaning and considerable repairs, it should still be well within her price range.

She liked the location, near other non-competitive businesses. There was even a nursery school right down the street for when the baby got too active to stay with her in the store. It seemed like an ideal place for her tack shop.

When they reached the stairway, Jenny dropped her hand to run ahead of them. Dan offered his arm, and Maggie gratefully let him guide her up the steep steps. After they reached the top, she reluctantly let go.

Jenny opened the door, and they stepped into the ring of light coming through the dusty gabled window.

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"It's not as big as I thought," Dan said, walking in behind Maggie to look around.

Her heart sank. The small room would make an excellent office, or even a nursery for later. But it certainly wouldn't be large enough for a mother and baby to live in for long.

"Well," she said, trying not to let her disappointment show in her voice. "Maybe I could stay here temporarily and get a separate, bigger place later."

Dan shook his head. "No, this place barely has room for a bed, much less a crib. Let's look around some more." He turned toward the stairs.

"Why do you need a crib?" Jenny asked. "Are you going to have a baby? Is that why your tummy is so big?"

Maggie smiled at the innocent young face. "Yes. You're going to have a little cousin in a few months."

"Really?" Jenny's face lit up. "I always wanted a baby brother. A cousin is almost like a brother, isn't it?"

"Yes," Maggie agreed. "Or a sister."

"That would be even better!" Jenny squealed in an excited voice. "Then I'd have someone to play dolls with."

She turned to her father. "Daddy, we have a big house. Why can't Aunt Maggie and her baby come live with *us*?"

CHAPTER 2

Maggie met Dan's gaze over the top of Jenny's head. A flush crept through his tan. Did the idea of proximity to her bother him, or was he just flustered by the unexpected and inappropriate situation?

Not wanting to embarrass him further, or dwell on why her own heart sped up a little at the thought, she turned to her niece. "Thanks, Jenny. That's very sweet of you, but I need to find someplace to live near where I work."

Seeming satisfied by the answer, the girl skipped on ahead.

Maggie followed a bit slower. As she started down the stairs, Dan took her elbow to assist her. She resisted the urge to lean on his steadying arm. Had he always been so muscular? Strange she'd never noticed before.

When they reached the bottom, he said, "Why don't we have some lunch next door? By the time we get done, the realtor should be back."

Maggie and Jenny readily agreed, so all three of them walked together into the café and slipped into a booth.

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A waitress appeared at their table. She greeted Dan and Jenny by name, casting a speculative look toward Maggie as she handed out menus.

Father and daughter gave the attractive redhead broad smiles. "Hi, Bonnie," he said.

After they ordered, Jenny turned her attention to coloring her children's menu.

Maggie met Dan's eyes and smiled. "How do you like living here?"

"It's still a quiet little town." He watched his daughter with a slight grin creasing his lips. "Jenny has a good school and nice friends." His mouth turned down as he added, "Her mother lives in Orlando. She can see her when she wants to."

Maggie thought she caught a note of bitterness in his voice but ignored it for the child's sake. "What made you decide to move back?"

"One day I was driving home after visiting my parents and spotted the FOR SALE sign on the ranch. It was just what I wanted, so I made an offer and bought it. I gave my partners at the firm in Orlando notice and started my own business here in town. The accounting work has been good. In fact, with tax season here it's almost *too* good."

"It must be. The ranch looks great."

He gave a modest shrug. "It was a fixer-upper. But I enjoy doing the work. It's good therapy."

"Are all the horses yours?"

"You didn't recognize Smokey Jean?"

Maggie blinked. "Really? Your old mare? She must be..."

"Twenty-one. My parents sold their other horses when they decided to retire from ranching. But I couldn't bear to see Smokey go to strangers."

"I should have taken a closer look! I had no idea you would still have her. She was quite a horse."

He nodded. "Still is. Jenny's learning to ride on her."

"That's great! What about Sultan and the other mare?"

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"My investment in the future."

"What do you mean?"

"I plan to start a breeding program with them. Their first foal is due next January."

"Sultan seems gentle, even for an Arab," Maggie said.

He nodded. "My dad and I helped raise and train him. I wouldn't have a stallion I couldn't trust around Jenny." He paused as the waitress set three lemonades in front of them and retreated. "How about you?" he asked. "What will you do with Pine Haven?"

"Sell it. Tony and Trish are doing a great job with the ranch. They don't need me, and even though they've been really nice, I feel as if I'm in the way. Besides, there are too many memories there. For some time, I've planned to move out as soon as I find somewhere new."

She paused as she waited for the familiar wave of sadness that usually accompanied mention of her life with her husband to wash over her. Instead she felt only a fraction of the previous emotion.

"Chad and I had a good life," she added. "But it's over, and I want to start fresh."

She glanced at Dan as she sipped her lemonade. His face clouded momentarily, but he nodded. "I can understand that. I felt the same way after Tiffany and I split up."

His expression softened when he looked at his daughter. Chad had told Maggie that Dan asked for the divorce. She wondered if he ever regretted his decision.

"Anyway," she said, "they made me a good offer for the ranch, more than enough to buy a store. I love ranching, but during my pregnancy, I shouldn't be doing any heavy work, and it would be too difficult with a baby. I've always wanted to put my business degree to use. A tack store will keep me around horses and horse people without the physical strain."

A worried frown crossed his face. "Is anything wrong? What did the doctor say?"

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"Everything's fine," she assured him, feeling a warm glow inside at his concern. "Dr. Cooper even said there's no reason to stop riding. But I don't want to take any chances with this baby. It's my only chance to have Chad's child, or maybe *any* child."

Dan opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, glanced at Jenny, then took a long swallow of lemonade.

Maggie frowned as she watched him. Was his consideration for her merely because she carried his brother's child? They'd been close once, in what now seemed like a lifetime ago. Could they get some of that friendship back?

When Dan spoke again a few minutes later, he asked about Maggie's mother and stepfather, whom he'd known before they retired to the mountains.

Maggie filled him in on the latest news. "I love them a lot," she concluded. "I visited them over the Christmas holidays, right after I found out I was pregnant. And I enjoyed seeing them, but I couldn't live with them again. I was barely eighteen when I left, still a child in their eyes. They don't realize that I'm an adult now, used to making my own decisions.

"I had to grow up fast as a young bride, but I did it. I can't go back to being dependent on someone else. Even though I'd be willing to pay rent, I'd be a drain on their retirement income."

"How did your brother and his wife end up buying Pine Haven from you?"

"When he and Trish told me they were looking for a ranch in Orlando, I suggested mine. My friends David and Cassy ran it for me while I was out of town. But they both have other jobs and didn't need the full time job of running a ranch besides. They bought a house between the hospital, where she works as a nurse, and Greenwood Stable, where they both teach riding lessons."

The waitress brought their lunch, and conversation lapsed as they began eating.

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* * *

Dan surreptitiously studied Maggie. Her black, naturally curly hair was longer than he remembered, tied back from her face with a blue scarf that set off the color of her eyes. Her thick black lashes still curled prettily over her attractive almond-shaped eyes.

That was what was different about her, he realized. The sparkle was back. The last time he'd seen her, six months ago as a new widow, all the life seemed to have been drained out of her. Now, as she talked about the baby and the new life she planned for the two of them, she seemed happy, almost glowing.

A smile tugged at his lips when Jenny offered Maggie the pickle from her sandwich and she accepted. She polished it off along with her entire lunch, then picked up the dessert menu.

When she noticed him watching her, Maggie grinned. "My doctor said I need to gain more weight."

He chuckled and motioned for the waitress to return. "How about a piece of Della's famous strawberry pie?"

Maggie shook her head. "I'll have ice cream. I'm supposed to have several helpings of milk products."

"Chocolate ice cream for the lady. Jenny and I will share a slice of pie," he told the waitress. Noticing Maggie's raised eyebrows, he asked, "Aren't you still a chocoholic?"

Her dimples appeared, and she nodded. "Yep. You remembered right. I have to limit it now that I'm pregnant, though. It's not good for the baby to have too much caffeine."

Leaning back, he absently ran his hand over his cold lemonade glass as he watched her drink hers. It seemed so natural to be sitting here in a restaurant with Jenny and Maggie. Why had he avoided her for so long?

She looked up and met his eyes. He swallowed the knot in his throat and asked, "What did you think of the store we looked at?"

"I like it. Would I have trouble finding workers to make the

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repairs?”

He shook his head. “No, I know some good people. And I can help.”

Maggie leaned across the table and gave him a pointed look. “Oh, no. I don’t want you to feel you have to help me just because I was married to your brother. You have your own business and a ranch to run.”

“Once tax season is over, I’ll have more free time.”

Maggie tossed her head, spilling black curls over her shoulders. “Look, Danny. I didn’t know you lived here when I decided to move to Magnolia Cove. Part of the reason I chose this town was because I wanted to start fresh, without having to depend on friends and family to get by.”

“You knew my parents live here.”

“I want them to be able to enjoy Chad’s baby, but I don’t plan to depend on them.”

“You always were stubborn, weren’t you?”

She crossed her arms and sat back. “You learned that a long time ago.”

He clenched his jaw, but kept his tone even. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

The arrival of dessert ended further argument.

As he ate, Dan tried to sort through his feelings about Maggie and her baby. Jenny’s innocent suggestion her aunt move in with them had taken him by surprise.

Of course his daughter had no idea he thought of her aunt as anything other than her uncle’s wife. And hopefully, neither did Maggie. He’d done his best to stifle any other, more intimate, feelings for her years ago. His love and respect for Chad had demanded he not show anything else.

He felt a stab of guilt, knowing he still coveted his brother’s wife, even though he had never acted on his feelings.

So what should he do now? Should he act as the dutiful brother-in-

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law, helping her as he would if his brother were still alive? After all, she was carrying Chad's child—his own niece or nephew.

He wondered why she had said this baby might be her only chance to have a child. She was only twenty-six, with plenty of time left. Could there be a medical reason?

Or did she think she would never marry again? She'd loved Chad and, as far as Dan knew, she and his brother had had a good marriage.

Maybe she thought she could never find that kind of love again.

Dan clenched his teeth as he thought back six months. Maybe if he had agreed to visit them that night instead of having his brother meet him, Chad would still be alive. Or maybe *he'd* have been the one involved in the fatal accident.

It might have been better all around if he had died that night instead of his brother.

His gaze fell on Jenny, and he sighed. If he'd been the one who hadn't survived, Chad would have wanted to raise Jenny. He and his brother had even talked about that when Dan had made out a will after his divorce.

He glanced at Maggie as she ate, and a wave of tenderness washed over him. Of course he'd help her any way he could. Chad would have wanted him to do that much.

But where would it lead? Could he be just a friend to his brother's wife, considering the way he still felt about her?

* * *

While Maggie finished her ice cream, she observed Dan's tender interaction with his daughter. He cut off a piece of his pie to share with Jenny. After the child finished, his strong hand gently wiped the corner of her mouth with his napkin.

Maggie was fascinated at the transformation from the boy she'd grown up with to the man in front of her. Her childhood buddy had grown from a teasing adolescent into a thoughtful and kind father. She realized he would be a wonderful uncle to her baby. And she hoped that

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she could be his friend as well.

The waitress returned and set the bill in front of Dan. As he reached for it, Maggie placed her hand on his. "This one's on me."

He raised an eyebrow.

"As a thank you for your help today," she added.

Dan shrugged, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a grin. "As you already pointed out, I learned a long time ago not to tangle with you." He glanced briefly at her hand resting on his before slipping his fingers away.

He and Jenny headed outside while Maggie paid the bill, ignoring the waitress's surprised expression.

When she joined Dan and Jenny, he glanced at his watch. "The realtor should be back from her appointment by now. We can walk to the office."

A few minutes later they entered Magnolia Cove Realty. A beautiful young woman with stylishly cut golden hair stood up when she caught sight of them. Surprised by the warm look that passed between the blonde and Dan, Maggie wondered if they were more than friends.

He introduced the real estate agent as Gail Reynolds. She gave Maggie a friendly smile and returned her attention to Dan.

"Did you show her the old Marshall's shop?" she asked him.

"Yes." He produced the key and handed it to her. "She'd like to see what else you have, though."

Gail nodded agreeably. "Okay, let's have a seat while I check."

Turning to Maggie, Dan said, "I need to get back to work. How about if you call me when you're done, and I'll come get you?"

"I can drop her off," the realtor offered.

He nodded at the blonde. "Even better. Her car is at my ranch."

Dan looked at Maggie. "This lady knows her stuff and can show you what's available. Then I'll be happy to offer my advice."

"Thanks. I'll see you later, then."

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When he and Jenny had left the office, Gail motioned Maggie to a seat in front of her desk. She was friendly and businesslike, and Maggie liked her. After patiently explaining the different types of empty stores that were for sale and determining which ones Maggie wanted to see, Gail drove her to look at them.

As they left the last building, Maggie sighed with fatigue. "I still think the one on Main Street is the best location."

"It's a good price, too," Gail pointed out. "Well within the range you told me. And it already has the right zoning."

"I know. But the living space is too small. I'd have to find somewhere else to live."

"There are several apartments in town I could show you," the real estate agent said, without looking away from the road.

Maggie shook her head. "Eventually I want to have horses again. I think I'll hold out for a small ranch. Something like the one Dan has."

"Okay. I can check the listings to see if there's anything available. Would you like to look today?"

"Thanks, but I'm beat. I think I'd better head home."

"Should I take you back to Dan's?"

"Yes, please." Maggie again felt a tinge of surprise when the other woman didn't have to ask directions. Relax, she told herself. The realtor had probably sold him the ranch.

Besides, there wasn't anything between herself and Dan, so why should she care who his women friends were?

* * *

When Maggie and Gail arrived at Dan's ranch, Jenny came running out to meet them. She explained her father was busy working in the barn.

Gail wrinkled her nose. "Tell him I'll see him another time." Turning to Maggie, she asked, "Would you like to look at the Marshall place again tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll come back in the morning."

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“Good. In the meantime, I’ll check on ranches for sale.”

After saying goodbye, Maggie got out of the car and followed Jenny to the barn.

Dan was feeding the horses when they entered. “How’d it go?” he asked, tossing a flake of hay into the stall next to him as Jenny skipped into the feed room.

“Okay.” Maggie walked over and let the mare nuzzle her. “Hello, Smokey,” she said. “You sure look great for an old girl.”

Dan chuckled. “Don’t let her age fool you. She’s still got a lot of spirit.”

“I believe it. I’d love to ride her again sometime.”

“Sure. As long as it’s okay with your doctor.”

Jenny returned with a flake of hay, and Dan helped her heave it into Sultan’s hayrack. “You’ll have to ask my daughter, though,” he added with a paternal smile. “Smokey is *her* horse.”

“You can ride with me,” his daughter said. “I’ll teach you.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Dan said, grinning. “Your Aunt Maggie has been riding since she was your age. She and your Uncle Chad won a lot of ribbons in shows.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Maggie smiled proudly. “It’s been quite a while. I don’t think I should ride now until I have my baby. After that I’d like to go with you.”

Jenny happily went back to helping with the rest of the chores, and Maggie smiled at the cooperation between father and daughter. Obviously they were used to teamwork.

“Do you still have horses of your own?” Dan asked as he dragged a hose into the barn.

Maggie shook her head. “No. I sold Lady to Cassy Carlyle.”

“David’s new wife?”

“Yes. She took some lessons on Lady when David taught a clinic at Pine Haven. Her horse turned up lame at the next Greenwood Stables

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show, and I let her use Lady for a few of the events.”

Dan positioned the hose over Smokey’s water bucket. He signaled Jenny to turn the water on, then glanced at Maggie. “You didn’t show her yourself?”

“Only in a few of the Western events. Cassy entered the English Walk/Trot equitation classes. They did well together.”

“So did you, as I recall.”

Once again, Dan’s interest in her life both surprised and pleased Maggie. “Yes,” she said. “Lady is a good horse. That was our last show together because shortly after that, I found out I was pregnant. While David ran the ranch for me, Cassy exercised my mare, and she got attached to Lady. It worked out well for all of us to let them buy her. After they married, they moved her to Greenwood since they’re there more often than at my old ranch.”

“I haven’t been to Greenwood Stables in a while,” Dan said. “Do Mr. and Mrs. Dobranski still own it?”

She smiled with fond memories. “Yes. Age hasn’t slowed them down much, though they have help for all the hard labor now. I haven’t been out there since that last time I showed.”

“Why not?”

It’s too hard without Chad. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Just too busy.”

Dan threw her a suspicious glance, and she knew he could tell she’d lied. Did he realize how hard it was to go on alone?

He finished filling the other buckets and motioned to Jenny to turn off the water. “Do they still have a horse show at Greenwood every month?”

“Yes. There’s one coming up in a couple weeks. Maybe I’ll go, just to watch.”

“Can we go too, Daddy?” Jenny piped up.

Dan sighed as he rewound the hose. “Maybe the next one. I’ll probably have to work weekends until tax season is over.”

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Jenny's face clouded. "You always have to work when there's fun stuff to do."

Dan ruffled his daughter's hair. "You're really neglected, aren't you, punkin?"

Jenny rolled her eyes, and Maggie smiled. "Maybe once I find a place to live and open my store, we can spend some time together when your dad is busy."

"That would be great!" She turned to her father. "Can we, Daddy? Please?"

* * *

His daughter's pleading tone twisted Dan's heart. "We'll see. Why don't you go get washed up?"

When Jenny ran off toward the house, he leaned one hip against Sultan's stall and faced Maggie. "How did the store-hunting go after I left?"

Maggie sighed. "I still like the one you showed me the best. Since it was already a tack store, I wouldn't have to do much remodeling—just repairs and cleaning. I should be able to afford it, even with all the materials and labor to get it in shape."

"The tack shop sounds ideal except for the cramped living space. What would you do about that?"

She reached over to pat the stallion's neck. "I don't know. Gail is going to see if there are any ranches available nearby."

Dan frowned. "I thought you didn't want the heavy work of a ranch."

"I don't. But I've been around horses my whole life. I already miss having them. Eventually I know I'll want to own them again, when the baby is old enough to ride with me."

He nodded thoughtfully. After a moment, he said, "Jenny wants to go out for a pizza. Would you like to join us?"

"That sounds great, but I need to head back to Orlando. I want to get home before dark."

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“That’s probably wise.” *And safer for both of us.* “I need to work on taxes anyway. Are you still staying with your brother Tony?”

She started to head out. “Yes. But I’ll be back tomorrow. I want to take another look at the tack shop and try to make a decision.”

He fell into step with her. “I’ll either be here or at my office. Call me if I can help.”

“I’ll do that.”

They reached her Honda, and he opened the door. A few minutes later, she sped away.

Dan watched Maggie’s car drive off. She looked tired. He wished she’d found a place to stay in town. It was a long drive for a woman alone.

Then he shook his head with self-rebuke. Maggie was one woman who could take care of herself. If he hadn’t come along to change her tire, she would have managed. She’d been in plenty of tough situations and come out okay. As a kid, she had always refused help with everything from repairing her broken skates to bandaging her cuts and bruises.

He grinned as he remembered the look on her face as she had brandished the tire iron before she’d recognized him earlier today.

No, Dan decided, if anyone tangled with Maggie, that person would be the one needing help.

* * *

The next morning Maggie went to the real estate office as soon as she arrived in Magnolia Cove. After checking the tack store again and deciding to make an offer, she looked at several ranches. Nothing in her limited price range seemed to be quite right. Gail promised to keep checking for new listings and in the meantime agreed to present the contract to the owner of the tack shop.

When she left the realtor’s office, Maggie saw Dan’s truck in front of the accounting firm. She pulled in behind it, parked and went inside.

Jenny jumped up from her position on the floor where she was

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coloring and came forward to greet her. "Aunt Maggie!"

After returning the child's hug, Maggie glanced around for Dan. Jenny was the only person in sight, but voices came from inside the inner office.

"Daddy has a 'pointment," the girl explained with a slight pout. "He doesn't have time to play with me."

"This is a busy time of year for him," Maggie said. "I'm sure his schedule will be better in a few weeks."

"That's what he told me, too," Jenny sighed.

Maggie studied the girl, sympathizing with her loneliness. When Dan stuck his head out of the inner office a few seconds later, she looked up and met his eyes.

Appearing somewhat distracted, he said, "I thought I heard someone come in. I'm in the middle of an appointment right now, Maggie..."

"That's okay, I'll come back later. Is it okay if I take Jenny shopping with me?"

His gaze shifted to his daughter's brightening expression, and he smiled. "That would be great. She's feeling kind of left out."

"Okay, we'll see you in a few hours, then."

Dan nodded and went back into his office.

Jenny happily put away her coloring materials and hurried over to join Maggie. "Where are we going?"

"How about clothes shopping? I'm getting too fat for most of my outfits."

Jenny laughed. "You're not fat, you're pregnant," she said precociously.

Maggie smiled and reached for the girl's hand. "I can tell we're going to get along fine."

A few minutes later they went inside the main department store in town and found the small maternity section. After deciding to buy a pair of jeans with an expandable waist, Maggie tried to choose a blouse

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to go with them.

“Buy this one,” Jenny told her. “Daddy likes blue.”

“He does?”

“Uh-huh. But Mommy hates it and won’t ever wear it.”

Maggie held back a grin. “Okay,” she agreed. “I like that one best, anyway.”

A helpful saleswoman came along and pointed out some bargains. Maggie left the department with a large bag of new items.

“Now, let’s find you something,” she told Jenny. “Do you need any clothes? How about a new dress?”

Jenny wrinkled her nose. “I hate dresses. Besides, Mommy sent me some for Christmas.”

Maggie wondered why the gifts were sent instead of delivered in person if Tiffany lived as close as Orlando, but she stifled her curiosity. “Something else, then?”

“Jeans. These are getting kind of small.”

Maggie looked at the hemline of Jenny’s pants and realized the child was telling the truth. “Okay, jeans it is.”

They headed for the children’s department. After choosing a few pairs that appeared to be the right size, they went to the changing area. “Would you like your mother to go in with you?” the helpful sales clerk asked.

Jenny giggled as though the woman had told a joke. Covering her mouth with her hand, she said, “She’s not my mommy!”

The saleswoman appeared flustered. “Oh...I just assumed...”

“I’m her aunt,” Maggie hastened to explain.

“Oh. That’s why she looks so much like you,” the relieved clerk mumbled before walking away.

Apparently used to going in by herself, Jenny slipped into the changing cubicle without waiting for help.

Maggie smiled, amused by the clerk’s mistake. Jenny did look as though she could be blood related. Both of them had blue eyes and

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curly hair, although Jenny's was dark brown like her father's instead of black. It was an easy mistake to make. She wondered if other people in town would assume the same thing.

Jenny came out to get approval, and they chose two pairs of jeans, one the same shade of blue as the maternity pair they'd chosen earlier. Starting to enjoy the idea of having a little girl to dress, Maggie said, "Now we have to find you a shirt like mine."

They chose a blue blouse very similar to Maggie's, then paid for their purchases and went to Della's Cafe for milkshakes.

After they placed their orders, Maggie asked, "Does your mother ever take you shopping?"

Jenny shook her head. "She doesn't have time."

"What does she do?"

"Works in a big office building. I don't really understand it," Jenny explained with a childish shrug.

"That must be an important job. Do you get to see her very often?"

"Sometimes on holidays. It's kind of fun."

The waitress set large chocolate milkshakes in front of them and withdrew. Maggie inserted the straws and smiled at her companion before taking a sip.

Jenny twirled her straw and frowned at the table. "I don't like when she visits here, though."

"Your mother?" Maggie raised her eyebrows in surprise. "You don't? Why not?"

"She and Daddy always fight. I don't like when people fight."

Maggie nodded her understanding. Although she and Chad had had their share of arguments, they'd always made up. But she knew plenty of people who didn't, and she thought it must be difficult for the children when the parents couldn't get along. "It must be hard for you," she said sympathetically.

"What must be hard?" Dan asked, sliding into the booth next to Jenny.

CHAPTER 3

Maggie caught Dan's questioning look. "Oh...hi."

His dark eyes narrowed with a suspicious glint, and she realized he might disapprove of her asking about his ex-wife. As she tried to think of a tactful white lie, she concentrated on finishing her milkshake.

Luckily Jenny changed the subject. "Daddy! Wait till you see what we bought!"

He gave Maggie another pointed glance, then leaned back and focused his attention on his daughter. "What did you buy?"

"Aunt Maggie got me some cool clothes!"

"I'll reimburse you," he told Maggie.

She set her empty glass aside and shrugged. "It wasn't much. Consider it a late Christmas present."

Before he could argue, Maggie changed the subject again. "Did you finish your appointments?"

Shaking his head, he sighed. "No."

The waitress returned to see if he wanted something. Picking up the

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bill before Maggie could object, he declined ordering for himself.

After Bonnie left again, Dan said, "I saw you pull in here from my office and thought I'd better slip over and claim my daughter. I still have two more people to see and a stack of paperwork. I can take some of it home, but I don't think I'll have time to talk to you about your shop."

"That's okay," Maggie said. "I made an offer and can't do anything else until I hear if the owner accepts. I should probably be heading back home."

"Oh, no," Jenny begged. "Don't go yet!"

Maggie felt torn between the pleading look on the child's face and not wanting to interfere. She looked at Dan. "Do you have something for Jenny to do this afternoon?"

"Not really," he admitted. "I was going to take her back to the office with me." When his daughter groaned, he gave her a stern look. "Now, Jenny, you know I have to work. I told you we'll be able to do fun things again after tax season."

The unhappy expression on the girl's face tore at Maggie's heart. "Well," she began, "I don't really *have* to go back yet. But I'm kind of tired. Could we go to the ranch for a while? I could keep an eye on Jenny there, and she'd have more to do."

"Oh, yes! Daddy, please? I could watch TV while Aunt Maggie takes a nap, and then she could help me feed the animals!"

Dan hesitated. "I hate to impose on your aunt."

"I really wouldn't mind," Maggie said. "A nap sounds like a good idea. Jenny and I are getting along great, and I would enjoy staying with her until you get done."

Dan's gaze held hers for a moment, then he spoke to his daughter. "Jenny, why don't you go say hello to the Johnsons? They're sitting in the booth by the door. I'd like to talk to your aunt for a minute."

He stood, and the firm look on his face allowed no argument. Jenny slid out of the booth and scampered over to their friends' booth. When

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she arrived there, Dan resumed his seat across from Maggie.

Seeing the disapproval on his face, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"I don't want you prying into Jenny's relationship with Tiffany. She may not be around much, but she *is* Jenny's mother. My daughter is hurt enough by the situation without you adding salt to the wound."

"What do you mean? I haven't done anything—"

He leaned forward, eyes narrowed. "I heard enough of your conversation when I came in to know what you were talking about." He gave a disgusted snort. "And taking her shopping, buying her clothes? Who are you trying to impress?"

His attitude rankled. Maggie sat up straight, pursing her lips as she wiped them with her napkin. She sat back and stared at him.

"I'm not trying to *impress* anyone," she said. "I have no intention of trying to come between your daughter and her mother. I *like* Jenny. She's a great kid. It's not my fault I didn't get to see more of her when she was younger. If you remember, I invited all of you to visit several times, both before and after your divorce. You always had an excuse."

Her eyes started to mist with remembered hurt, and she blinked back the tears before continuing. "I thought you approved of my taking her out this afternoon. You made it sound like I was doing you a favor!"

Dan took a deep breath and sighed. He started to reach for Maggie's hand, then picked up Jenny's water glass instead. After taking a quick swallow, he put the drink down and met her gaze with an apologetic one of his own.

"You're right," he said. "I'm sorry if I sounded like I don't appreciate what you're trying to do. And I *do* want you to get to know Jenny. I know you'd be good for her. I just don't want you to come between her and her mother. There's not much of a relationship there as it is."

"Then you'll let me take her this afternoon?"

"Are you sure it wouldn't be too much for you? She can be a

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handful sometimes.”

Maggie shook her head. “I’d love it.”

He looked into her eyes and smiled. “Okay, thanks. I’ll see both of you back at the ranch, then.” He slid a key off his ring and handed it to her as he stood and caught Jenny’s eye.

* * *

Although there weren’t many personal touches like pictures or handmade items around, Maggie felt at home the minute she stepped inside Dan’s house. Even with modern conveniences, there was a rustic appeal.

The clothes strewn around and general disarray attested to the owner’s busy schedule. She suggested, “Why don’t we straighten up a little?”

Jenny agreed to help when Maggie promised they could bake cookies after they were done. The afternoon passed quickly, and when hunger pangs attacked, they made dinner.

By the time Dan drove in, Maggie and Jenny happily munched cookies as they played Monopoly on the living room floor. All the animals had been fed and bedded down for the night, and a casserole baked in the oven.

Dan walked in with raised eyebrows. “Wow! What a nice surprise. Something sure smells great.”

Maggie warmed at the pleased look on his face.

“This wasn’t necessary,” he said, his smile fading as he glanced around.

Maggie shrugged. “I know, but I enjoyed it. And we had fun, didn’t we, Jenny?”

His daughter nodded, her mouth full of chocolate chips. Her happy face acclaimed her agreement.

“You were supposed to take a nap,” he reminded Maggie.

“I know. But we got busy, and I forgot all about it.”

“You still have a long drive ahead of you. Or did you find a place to

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stay in town?"

Maggie shook her head, puzzled at his reproachful tone. "No," she said, "I'm going to stay with Tony and Trish until I find a ranch to buy."

When he continued to watch her without replying, she turned to Jenny. "I need to go soon, so let's have dinner now, okay?"

* * *

As Maggie and Jenny headed to the kitchen, the phone rang. Dan reached for the living room extension.

"Dan?" a familiar voice said. "This is Tony Carter."

"Well, hello, Tony. How are you?"

"Fine, but I'm worried about Maggie. Is she still there?"

"Yes, she's planning to head back to your place as soon as we have dinner."

There was a pause at the other end of the line. Then Tony spoke again. "Is there a hotel nearby? I don't think she should attempt the long drive tonight."

"She should have time to make it home before dark."

"I don't think so. Have you seen the weather report?"

"No, I just got home. Why?"

"We're having a heck of a storm over here, and it's headed your way. There are tornado warnings out, too. You know it was like this the night Chad—"

Dan's gut knotted. "Yeah, I know." He swallowed hard and spoke again. "You're right to worry. She can stay in our guestroom. I won't let her drive tonight."

"I hoped you'd feel that way. Thanks, Dan." Tony sounded relieved.

"Would you like to talk to her?"

"No, we'd better get off the phone. It's thundering and lightning pretty bad here now. Have her call Trish or me in the morning."

"Okay." Dan frowned as he hung up and turned toward the kitchen.

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Maggie watched him with a worried expression. “What is it?” she asked.

“That was Tony. There’s a storm headed this way. We agreed you should stay here tonight.”

Her face paled. “Oh.” She stared into space for a moment. “Are you sure? I don’t want to impose—

“We have plenty of room,” Dan said, his voice coming out gruffer than he intended. “Come on, let’s eat.”

He strode into the kitchen, where the table was already set and the food laid out. Looking at the appetizing meal, he wondered why he wasn’t more pleased. Although he was a decent cook, he never had time to prepare anything fancy like this. And Jenny had probably never baked cookies before in her life. He should be thanking Maggie instead of resenting her interference. Shouldn’t he?

He forced a smile to his face as he took a seat. Noticing Maggie’s nervous glance at the window, he followed her gaze. The sky had already darkened much more than normal for the time of day. There was a storm approaching, all right.

Was she remembering, as he was, the night Chad had gone out in a storm and not come back? Or did she not like the idea of spending the night here?

Not that it would be easy for him...

He gritted his teeth and forced his thoughts down a safer path.

* * *

After dinner, Dan complimented Maggie on the meal, but insisted she rest while he and Jenny did the dishes.

Feeling a warm glow of pleasure, Maggie wandered into the other room. She found a mystery novel—old, but one she hadn’t read—and settled down to read.

As soon as Dan finished in the kitchen, he set up his accounting papers on the table and got to work.

Jenny pleaded for Maggie to play with her, so they took out a deck

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of cards. By the time the storm hit, they were engrossed in their game and barely noticed the light sprinkle of rain on the roof.

Suddenly a loud clap of thunder sounded overhead, causing Maggie to jump. "Oh, my," she said, trying not to frighten Jenny. "That was a loud one."

"Daddy says thunder is just the angels moving furniture," Jenny said, pulling another card from the deck as though nothing had happened.

Maggie smiled. "That's a nice way to think about it."

The girl kept her eyes on her cards, but a thoughtful line creased her forehead. "Is Uncle Chad an angel now?"

Taken by surprise, Maggie dropped her cards. "Oh...yes...I think he is," she said after a moment as she scooped up her fallen cards. When she noticed the child watching her speculatively, she smiled. "I'm sure he's in heaven," she explained. "He was a very good man. Like your daddy."

"Do you miss him?"

Maggie could feel her eyes filling with tears. "Yes, I do. Very much."

Jenny put down her cards and scooted across the floor. "Don't cry."

Maggie smiled and pulled the child into her arms, hugging her. "It's okay," she said. Suddenly sensing that she was being observed, she looked up.

Dan stood in the doorway, arms crossed as he leaned one hip against the jamb, a shuttered look on his face.

Forcing back further tears, she told Jenny, "I think it must be bedtime."

"Where will you sleep?" the girl asked.

"The guest room," Dan said.

"I'll show you where it is." Jenny agreeably jumped up and reached out her small hand to help Maggie, who got to her feet more slowly.

"Goodnight, Maggie," Dan said. "Thanks again for dinner." He

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focused his eyes on his daughter, his expression softening. "I'll be in to tuck you into bed in a minute, punkin."

Abruptly he turned back to the kitchen.

* * *

Maggie slipped off her outer clothes and stood sideways in front of the guest room mirror, studying her expanding middle. Soon there would be no doubt in anyone's mind about her condition, she realized, no matter what she wore.

Hearing the storm rage outside, she remembered how she used to enjoy being safe inside during a storm, listening to the rain. But now it always reminded her of the horrible night Chad had been killed.

Her husband had gone to visit his brother the night of the accident. She wondered if Dan still reacted to stormy nights the way she did. The haunted look in his eyes tonight after the call from Tony told her he probably did.

She shuddered, trying to forget the past. Now it was important to focus on the future...

Maggie suddenly realized she'd been idly twirling her wedding ring. At least continuing to wear Chad's ring made her still feel married. Maybe she would take it off some day. For now, it was a link to Chad she wasn't ready to lose.

The baby moved. Maggie placed her hands over her bare abdomen and sat on the bed to enjoy the moment. This stage of pregnancy was almost pleasant. The queasiness of a few months ago had passed and, except for feeling a little awkward and clumsy, she didn't mind the weight gain.

Her eyes once again filled with tears as she thought about how different things would be if Chad were still alive. It would be so wonderful to put his hand on her belly and let him feel his baby move.

With a sigh, she got into bed and pulled the covers up. No point in wishful thinking. She had to raise this baby herself, no matter how much she wished things could be different. At least she and the child

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would have each other, and she'd still have a part of her husband with her.

And making a fresh start in Magnolia Cove would be a good beginning, she told herself as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Dan opened one eye and frowned. Sitting up groggily, he looked at the clock on his nightstand. Eight-thirty. He hadn't slept this late in years. Why hadn't Jenny woken him?

The enticing smells of coffee and bacon drifted to him. What in the world was going on? Jenny couldn't cook.

Suddenly he remembered. *Maggie is here!* He pulled on a pair of jeans and T-shirt and went into his bathroom to wash and shave before joining his daughter and their guest.

A few minutes later, when he entered the kitchen, Maggie stood at the stove, stirring a pan of scrambled eggs. Jenny already sat at the table, excitedly babbling away about her escapades at school in between mouthfuls of toast. Both turned to smile at Dan as he entered.

"Good morning."

Maggie wore a blue blouse the same shade as her eyes. Her black curls were tied back from her face today with a white scarf. Cheeks flushed from the heat of the stove, she looked...enchanted.

He pulled his gaze away and glanced at his daughter. Frowning, he did a double take. Jenny's new outfit seemed to be almost identical to her aunt's. She had even found a white scarf to tie back her dark brown curls. Although the girl's hair was much shorter than Maggie's, the style was obviously an attempt at a look-alike hairdo.

Remembering his warning to Maggie yesterday, he felt a twinge of irritation. Still, they both looked adorable. He wasn't sure he should disapprove, so he remained silent.

"Breakfast is ready," Maggie said. She carried one of the already prepared plates to the table. After setting it down, she went back for the coffeepot.

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Dan picked up the other plate and slid onto his chair. He watched with speculation as Maggie poured the coffee and then sat next to Jenny.

"These are great," he told Maggie sincerely when he tasted the eggs.

She smiled as she chewed. Apparently she had a healthy appetite in the morning, too.

"Don't you get morning sickness?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Only at first. I didn't even suspect I was pregnant so I thought it was the flu. Since it passed pretty quickly, I guess I was lucky."

Dan nodded and resumed eating. Tiffany had claimed illness through most of the nine months she'd carried Jenny, he remembered. Of course there wasn't much about her pregnancy his wife *had* liked. Maggie seemed to be adjusting to the condition as if it really agreed with her.

As Jenny once again began animated chatter and Maggie listened attentively, Dan watched the developing camaraderie between his daughter and her aunt. He was beginning to realize her mother's disinterest hurt the girl more than she normally let on. Jenny probably missed having a woman around to teach her how to cook and do feminine things like style her hair. He and his daughter had a close relationship, but he knew there were certain things he couldn't share with her.

Although his mother enjoyed spending time with her only granddaughter, she didn't have any more free time than he did. She was always telling him he needed to look for a new wife. Sometimes he did long for someone special in his life, but Dan was in no hurry. The woman he married would also have to be a stepmother for Jenny, so he was being extra careful this time around. He knew if he chose incorrectly, he wouldn't be the only one getting hurt.

Since she'd had a head start, Jenny finished eating first and asked if

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she could be excused to watch cartoons.

After his daughter bounded off to the next room, Dan fastened his gaze on Maggie, noticing again how pretty she looked this morning.

She glanced up over her cup and caught him watching her. Eyes crinkling with pleasure, she set the mug down and smiled. "That's quite a daughter you have there. I'm glad you're giving me a chance to get to know her."

"Me, too." Dan lingered over his coffee, knowing he needed to get to work, but not wanting to leave Maggie's company.

"Do you have to go to the office again today?" she asked.

He nodded. "I finished everything I could bring home last night."

"You look tired."

"I was up most of the night." He gave a wry smile. "But I guess I shouldn't complain about too many clients."

The phone interrupted them. As he rose and went to answer it in the next room, Maggie picked up their empty plates and headed to the sink.

She looked up when footsteps announced Dan's return. He wore a worried frown.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He sighed. "That was my baby sitter. She canceled out on me...again."

"Would you like me to stay with Jenny today?"

"Don't you have things to do at home?"

She shook her head. "Nothing that can't wait. I'll just need to call Tony and Trish so they won't worry."

His mouth quirked into a sheepish grin. "I hoped you'd offer. I've been having a hard time finding a reliable sitter, especially with Mom gone."

Maggie sent him a reproving look. "You should have just asked."

He shrugged. "I guess. But after what I said yesterday... And you've already done so much—"

"I've enjoyed it." She finished washing the last pan and turned as

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she set it on the dish rack. "Have you told your parents about me yet?"

"Do you mean about the baby or about being here?"

"Both."

He ran a hand through his thick brown hair, shaking his head. "No. I'm not sure how to reach them, or if I should try. They'll be coming back in a few weeks anyway and I'd hate to have them cut the trip short. They really needed this vacation."

"Do you think they'll be glad I'm moving back to town?"

"Why not? I'm sure they'll be happy about the baby, but I think it might be better to wait until they get back and tell them in person."

"Maybe." Maggie picked up the dishcloth and walked over to the table, intending to wipe it. When she looked up, the expression on Dan's face stopped her in mid-motion. "What is it?"

He stared at her for a long moment, then the teasing gleam she remembered so well came into his eyes.

"Sit down, Maggie. I have a proposition for you."

CHAPTER 4

Maggie raised her eyebrows as she looked into Dan's eyes. "What do you mean?"

He took a deep breath. Glancing down, he drummed his fingers on the table. "I've been watching you with Jenny, and it's obvious she already loves you. I realize I was wrong to criticize you for trying to take her mother's place. Tiffany could spend more time with her daughter if she really wanted to. I try to cover for her, but Jenny can tell, and it hurts her."

"What can I do?"

He raised his gaze to lock with hers. "Why don't you move in with us for a while, until you find a place of your own?"

She blinked at him, wondering if she had heard right. "Move in *here*?"

He nodded. "Like I said before, I need a baby sitter. You're great with Jenny, and if you'd be willing to take care of her after school, you'd be doing me a big favor. By the time you're ready to open the

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shop and find a ranch of your own, tax season will be over, and I'll have more time to spend with her again."

Maggie frowned. "But wouldn't I be in the way? I mean, you and Jenny are used to being a twosome. I'd feel like I was imposing."

"Did you feel like that yesterday? Or this morning?"

She shook her head. "Nooo...I enjoyed it."

"Good. Me, too." He drained his coffee and stood. "Think about it, okay? I have to get down to the office."

When he was gone, Maggie began to clean up as she thought about his offer. While the idea of living here was tempting, wouldn't it be awkward?

The phone rang and, a few moments later, Jenny entered the kitchen.

"It was for Daddy," the girl said. "I told her he's not here, so she wants to talk to you."

Puzzled, Maggie took the phone. "Hello?"

"Maggie? It's Gail Reynolds. I didn't get an answer at the number you gave me, so I thought I'd ask Dan. I didn't know you were spending the night..." The real estate agent sounded flustered.

"I'm watching Jenny for him," Maggie said. "Do you have something new to show me?"

"Better than that. Mr. Marshall accepted your offer on the shop! He'd like to close as soon as possible."

"That's great! I can be ready in a few days."

"Okay. I'll set it up. Do you want to look at some more ranches while you're here today?"

"No," Maggie said, "I'm going to wait on that. I'm moving in here for a while."

"With Dan?"

"He *does* have a guest room."

"I didn't mean...I'm sorry. He told me you're related. I didn't mean to imply anything."

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Maggie swallowed down her resentment at the jealous tone she thought she detected. "It's okay. We're only related by marriage, but we're friends...*just* friends."

There was a pause at the other end of the line before Gail said, "Okay, I'll call you back at this number as soon as I set up the closing."

"Thank you. And let me know if any good buys do show up on a ranch. I'll still want to buy one eventually, but I'm not in a hurry."

"I will."

Maggie hung up and stared at the phone for a moment, wondering at her hasty decision to accept Dan's offer. Would it be a mistake to move in here? Gail seemed to think there was something going on. Other people might think the same thing. And wouldn't it be hard to live with Dan and Jenny as a family? He was an attractive man; she'd always thought so. For years she'd only seen him as her childhood friend and her husband's kid brother. But now...

"Aunt Maggie?"

She hadn't realized the child was still in the room. "Yes, honey?"

"Did you say you're going to move in here?"

"Your Daddy invited me to stay for a while until I find a place of my own. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes!" Jenny ran forward and hugged her. "You can take me shopping every day!"

Maggie grinned. "Well, maybe not *every* day..."

* * *

Maggie made a quick call to Dan to fill him in on her plans, then notified her brother and his wife. A few hours later she took Jenny with her to the ranch in Orlando to get most of her clothes and personal items.

Tony took Jenny outside to see the horses while Trish helped Maggie pack.

"Didn't I tell you you'd like going back to Magnolia Cove?" her sister-in-law asked as they worked together folding clothes and putting

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them into the suitcase.

"Yes, you were right about that," Maggie answered. "I think the baby and I will be happy there."

"I still wish you would stay with us. But I understand how you feel. If anything happened to Tony, I don't think I could stay in a home we built together."

"It's not only the ranch. The whole city is a reminder. Most of my friends here were his friends, too. Without him, everywhere I go, I feel as if half of me is missing. Back in my hometown, but in a new place, I can have a life of my own again. Even though Chad and I both grew up there, we weren't really a couple until we left. Maybe someday I'll come back here. But not until I feel like a whole person again. Besides, Magnolia Cove isn't all that far. We can visit often. And I still want you to be my coach for the delivery."

"Of course! You know I won't miss that!"

Maggie opened her lingerie drawer and stared at the lacy garments inside. Knowing she certainly wouldn't need those for a while, she shut it again with a slam.

"You'll be able to wear them again someday," Trish said intuitively.

Maggie nodded. "I know. But I may as well leave them here for now. I won't have much use for them while I'm staying at Dan's."

"How do you think that's going to work?" Trish asked.

Maggie opened the last drawer and lifted out her loose cotton nightshirts. "I'm not sure. Jenny is a doll. I know I'll love taking care of her. And the ranch is great. It's similar to what I'd want for myself..."

"But...?"

She placed the stack in the suitcase and looked into her sister-in-law's eyes. "I'm not sure how I'll like being so close to Danny."

Trish cocked her head. "I thought you two always got along great."

"We did as kids. I mean...we were always teasing each other, but it was good-natured fun. He and the other boys always tried to boss me

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around and I'd pretend to resent it, although secretly I loved the attention. But when Chad came back from college and we started going out..."

"Dan didn't like it."

"No. He was merciless. He teased me constantly and followed us around, wouldn't let us be alone at all."

"Was that why you eloped?"

"Well, Chad's parents didn't approve of me dating their son any more than Danny did. They made no secret of the fact that they wanted him to finish college. They thought I might get pregnant and he'd feel obligated to marry me and drop out." She shook her head. "Irony, isn't it? The one thing they were worried about didn't happen until right before he died."

"So why *did* you get married so young?"

"It was the only way to be together. Besides, Chad didn't like college. He wanted to own a place of his own almost as much as he wanted me. So we married and both worked hard. Eventually we got our ranch."

"What about Dan and his parents?"

"They were upset. They accepted me, but I always thought they never really forgave me, even after Chad and I both went back to school. I always felt Danny resented me because he never visited if he knew I'd be there. When he married, I tried to be friends with his wife. But they never invited us over or accepted my invitations. After a while I quit trying and just bowed out so I wouldn't interfere with Chad seeing his brother. They were able to stay on good terms as long as I wasn't around."

"And now?"

Maggie bit her lip. "Now I'm not sure if he's just being nice to me because I'm carrying Chad's baby."

"Why would he do that?"

"Well, I know he loved his brother. It was me he seemed to resent."

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"But Dan used to like you. Why wouldn't he still think of you as his friend?"

"Maybe he blames me for Chad's death."

"How could he? It wasn't your fault. After all, Chad was visiting him the night of the accident. If he blames anyone, it's probably himself."

Maggie looked at Trish in surprise. "Do you think so?"

"Or maybe he thinks you blame him."

"Oh, no!" Maggie winced as she realized her sister-in-law could be right. No wonder he had seemed so withdrawn last night during the storm.

"You don't, do you?"

"Of course not! Nobody forced Chad to go out that night. And none of us knew how bad the weather was going to get. Rain and slick roads caused the accident. No one was to blame."

"You don't have to convince me. But maybe you and Dan should talk about it to clear the air."

Maggie nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. I think you're right." She heard the roar of a motor outside and asked, "Are you expecting company?"

Trish's eyes twinkled, and she nodded. "Someone for you."

"Me?"

Maggie followed her sister-in-law to the foyer. When Trish peeked out and then stepped aside and motioned for her to come forward, she frowned but opened the door. She blinked at the tall man and petite young woman who grinned at her. "David! Cassy!"

Before Maggie could move, her friend David Carlyle stepped forward and enveloped her in a bear hug. She laughed. "What a nice surprise!"

When he released Maggie, his wife Cassy hugged her too. "Trish called us," she said. "We couldn't very well let you leave town without saying goodbye."

Casting an affectionate smile at Trish, who shrugged, Maggie said,

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"I'll only be an hour away."

"I know," Cassy said. "But we've scarcely seen you since we got our own place. We've been so busy between work and fixing up the house..."

"I understand. And I'm glad you're here now." Maggie appraised them. "Married life sure seems to agree with you. Both of you."

The newlyweds exchanged a private smile, and Maggie felt a twinge of envy. She and Chad had once looked at each other that way.

Trish led them into the living room, then disappeared into the kitchen, refusing offers of help. David and Cassy filled Maggie in on their experiences buying and fixing up their new house.

When conversation lapsed, Maggie asked, "How did you both manage to get off work today?"

Cassy cast an affectionate glance at her husband. "It was my day off from the hospital anyway. But when Trish told us your plans, David insisted on rescheduling his last lessons this afternoon...just so we could see you before you left."

Maggie warmed with pleasure. "Really?"

David shrugged. "I figured I could use some time off. My new bride keeps telling me that. She's got a huge honey-do list for me to tackle when we get home."

Cassy wrinkled her nose at him, and he grinned.

Watching the playfulness between her two friends, Maggie was stricken anew by the realization that they belonged together. She'd known David most of her life and had always been fond of him. He'd grown into a ruggedly handsome man, and she wondered why she'd never seen him as anything but a friend. Of course he'd been a buddy of Chad's, which would have been reason enough for both of them to keep from pursuing anything personal between them. David had met Cassy when she enrolled in his riding clinic. Maggie had met his new student when David brought her to Pine Haven for a lesson shortly after Chad died. They'd soon become friends.

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Trish rejoined them with cold drinks and cookies. They talked about Cassy's job at the hospital, where she worked part-time as a nurse, and Trish's job as a physical therapist. After a while, conversation turned to their common interest of horses.

"How is Lady doing?" Maggie asked, hoping the emotion she felt didn't creep into her voice.

"She's fine," Cassy assured her. "I ride her a couple of times a week, and a few of David's students use her in lessons. You should come to Greenwood to see her."

"I don't know... I think it might make me want to get her back." She smiled to cover her wistful tone.

Cassy's dark brown eyes were sympathetic. "Are you sorry you sold her?"

Maggie shook her head. "No. I miss her, but it wouldn't be fair to hold on to her and not ride."

"Aren't you allowed to?" David asked.

Remembering that his ex-wife had suffered a miscarriage after falling from a horse, Maggie chose her words carefully.

"My doctor said I could if I didn't do anything dangerous, but I'd rather not take a chance." She patted her belly. "Besides, as big as I'm getting, I doubt I could climb up in the saddle."

They shared a smile, then Trish turned to David. "Why don't you go see what Tony and Jenny are doing? They're in the barn."

"Time for girl talk, huh?" David asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

"You're welcome to stay if you'd like to hear about the latest in maternity-wear and new brands of diapers," Trish teased.

David put his iced tea glass on the table and stood. "No thanks. I can tell when I'm not needed." He gave his wife a secretive grin, then glanced around at the rest of them. "See you all later."

As soon as the door shut behind him, Cassy giggled. "Isn't he fine?"

"You're really happy, aren't you?" Maggie asked. "I'm glad you

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found each other. Marriage is really terrific with the right person.”

Cassy’s smile faded. “I wish I could have met your husband. We would have all been friends.”

Maggie nodded. “I wish you could have, too.” She reached for a cookie and chewed it as she collected her thoughts. Strange how talking about Chad didn’t seem quite as hard as it used to. Was she finally starting to come to terms with his loss?

Resting her hands on her abdomen, she said, “At least I have his baby to remember him. My new life will be different, but I’m looking forward to it.”

Trish excused herself to answer the phone. When she didn’t come right back, Maggie moved to the couch next to Cassy. “I’m so glad you and David came to see me,” she said. “Most of Chad’s friends haven’t kept in touch. I guess they don’t know what to say.”

“What about his parents?” Cassy asked. “Are they excited about the baby?”

“I haven’t told them yet.”

Cassy’s eyes widened. “Why not? Aren’t you on good terms?”

“I haven’t been able to get in touch with them. They’re on a cruise. Dan’s going to break it to them when they get back.”

“Break it to them?” You mean you don’t think they’ll be happy?”

“I’m sure they’ll be glad to have another grandchild. It’ll just be a shock. It was to me.” She smiled. “Dan sure was surprised.”

Cassy cocked her head. “What’s he like?”

“Dan?”

At her friend’s nod, Maggie said, “He’s a nice man...”

When she hesitated, Cassy asked, “What’s wrong? Don’t you get along?”

“Sure. That’s not what I’m worried about.” She explained to Cassy about how they’d grown up together and been friends...until she started dating his brother.

“Things must be better now since you agreed to move into his

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house and baby-sit his daughter,” Cassy pointed out.

“Yes. Once he found out I’m carrying his brother’s child.”

“Is that the only reason?”

Remembering Trish’s suggestion about Dan’s feelings of guilt, Maggie felt a pang of sadness. She decided to table those thoughts until later. “I’m not sure,” she said. “I mean, the timing is perfect. It will work out great for both of us for me to live there until I get settled in town and find my own place. Even though Trish and Tony are great, they’re a couple, and I’ve been lonely.”

“Dan probably has been too. How long has he been divorced?”

“Several years. Long enough to be used to living without a woman.”

“Maybe long enough to know he misses having a wife.”

“I don’t know. He may not want to take a chance on making a mistake again. He had a rocky marriage and a bitter divorce.”

Cassy winked. “So did David. He just had to meet the right woman to change his opinion.”

Maggie shrugged. “I imagine Dan misses the perks of a live-in maid and cook, but that’s probably all. He’s a great father and doesn’t really need anyone else most of the time. His mother usually helps with Jenny.”

“Still, he asked you to move in. He must be fond of you.”

Maggie’s cheeks warmed. Must be the pregnant hormones, she told herself. “I guess. I’m fond of him too.” Her friend didn’t reply, but Maggie noticed the speculative gleam twinkling in her eyes. “And his daughter,” she hastened to add.

“I’ve seen Dan’s picture,” Cassy said. “He’s handsome.”

The heat in Maggie’s face radiated downward. “I guess so. I thought of him as a kid for so long, I didn’t notice when he grew up.”

Cassy gave a throaty chuckle. “Maybe it’s time you did.”

* * *

By the time Maggie and Jenny arrived back at Dan’s ranch, it was

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time to prepare supper. The girl seemed delighted to have her aunt to help her and chatted happily as they worked together on the meal and took care of the animals.

Maggie was putting the final touches on dinner when Dan arrived home. His face appeared tired, but his weary expression brightened when he looked up and met her eyes. They shared a smile over Jenny's head as he hugged his daughter.

Jenny continued to entertain them with childish prattle as the three of them ate the meal and cleaned up. After running a bath for Jenny and getting her settled in the tub, Dan joined Maggie in the living room.

She set aside the book she was reading. "Would you like some coffee?"

He shook his head. "I'll get some in a few minutes before I start working on the papers I brought home. But I wanted to talk to you first."

"Is anything wrong?"

"Not that I can see. Jenny seems happy. Are you?"

Maggie nodded. "Yes. I think I'll enjoy staying here."

"Will you let me know if it gets to be too much for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jenny gets kind of boisterous sometimes. And I really don't expect you to be housekeeper and cook."

"I'm feeling fine, just a little tired. My doctor said I can expect a lot more fatigue closer to delivery. But I'm used to running a ranch. Since Tony and Trish took over all the work at Pine Haven, I've been a little bored. Now I'm enjoying staying busy. It makes the time pass and helps me forget."

Dan nodded. He seemed about to say something else, then rose and walked out of the room. She heard soft voices as he helped Jenny finish her bath.

Maggie set up the coffee maker. As she was leaving the kitchen, Dan came back. Their gazes met and held for a moment. She felt her

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pulse quicken at the look in his eyes.

The corner of his lip turned down self-deprecatingly as he walked past her. "Jenny wants you to tuck her in."

"Does that bother you?"

He glanced at her quickly, then shook his head. "No. Just don't let her get too used to it. It will make it hard on her when you leave."

What about you? she wondered. Will you be sorry when I leave?

* * *

Dan turned abruptly and reached in the cupboard for a coffee cup. What the hell was he thinking to invite temptation like Maggie to stay in his house?

The sight of her fixing his food and sharing girl-talk with his daughter had seemed like domestic heaven when he'd walked in the door. It was easy to picture the three of them as a family. He would have loved to take her in his arms and kiss her senseless. But she wasn't his wife...would never be.

Dan could never hope to follow an act like his perfect older brother. He wouldn't want to try. Even with Chad physically gone, his memory would always be there in the way, haunting both of them. Maggie was Chad's love and he hers, so there was no point in dwelling on what might have been. It would never be.

He swore when the coffee he absently poured splashed over the side of the cup and burned his hand. As he reached for the dishcloth to wipe up the counter, Maggie's soft hand closed over his.

"Did you scald yourself?"

He looked into her eyes, a deep cobalt blue tonight as she stood in his shadow. She appeared especially beautiful with her wild curls spilling over her shoulders the way his daughter's did when she'd been playing outside.

Maggie raised her eyebrows, and he remembered she had asked him a question. He glanced down and saw the way her delicate fingers wrapped around his hand. Her wedding ring caught the light and

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sparkled at him accusingly. He clenched his teeth and pulled his hand away. "I'm okay."

A thin line appeared on her forehead. "But—"

"I'm *fine*!" He picked up the cup and strode over to the table, where he'd already left his paperwork.

An awkward silence hovered in the air. As he opened his briefcase and pretended to concentrate on getting to work, he heard the sounds of Maggie giving the counter a last wipe.

When she passed him to leave the room, he glanced up and met her eyes. "Thanks for setting up the coffee, Maggie. I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm tired, and I have a lot of taxes to do."

She nodded and continued to walk past him. "Don't stay up too late."

Dan frowned as he caught himself focusing his gaze on the natural sway of her hips. He shook his head with self-disgust. What in the world was he thinking of to ask her to stay under his roof? Wasn't that like the fox offering to guard the henhouse?

* * *

The next morning, Maggie felt a return of her morning sickness. Remaining in her robe, she went to the kitchen to fix herself some hot tea. She was sipping it and nibbling on a piece of toast when Dan entered the kitchen.

His dark eyes narrowed as he took in her appearance. "Are you okay? You look pale."

She nodded. "I'm just a little queasy. It'll pass."

He eyed her speculatively as he began to set the coffeemaker. "Jenny and I usually just have cereal for breakfast," he said. "You don't have to get up early on our account."

"I don't mind."

"I do. We can fend for ourselves in the morning. We've been doing it for years."

"But I want to help!"

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“I don’t want you taking any chances with the baby.”

His tone rankled. She got to her feet. “I’m not an invalid!”

“I didn’t mean to imply you are. But you said yourself this is your only chance to have Chad’s baby. It’s all you have left of him—all any of us do.”

Stunned at his words, Maggie sat back down. She watched in silence as he took out bowls, cereal and milk. Before she could form her jumbled thoughts into a reply, Jenny came bouncing in.

As usual, the girl was full of chatter. She told Maggie about her coming school day. When she and her father finished eating and went outside to feed the horses, Maggie left the still messy kitchen and retired to her room to finish dressing. As she fluffed her hair, a knock sounded on her door.

When she opened it, Jenny smiled at her. “Daddy’s going to take me to school now. Will you pick me up?”

“Yes. Your father gave me directions. I’ll be there,” she answered. Jenny hugged her and skipped off.

Maggie stepped into the hall and almost bumped into Dan. “Oh!” Startled, she placed her hand against her suddenly racing heart.

He steadied her with one hand on each of her shoulders. “Sorry. Are you okay?”

She nodded, staring back at him. “I guess I need to pay more attention to where I’m going.”

Looking at her closely as he continued to hold her in front of him, he asked, “Feeling better?”

“Much. I’ll be fine.”

“All right, then. Take it easy today, okay? I’ll be at the office if you need me.”

He released her and walked away, grabbing his Stetson off the stand by the door before he followed Jenny outside.

Maggie watched until the door shut behind him, wondering at the strange knot in her stomach as her heart rate gradually slowed to a

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normal rhythm. Was she already feeling so much a part of Dan's life that she wanted him to give her a wifely goodbye kiss before heading out? What was the matter with her, anyway?

* * *

The next few days passed quickly. Gail called to tell her the time and place for the closing on the tack store, and everything went smoothly. Maggie opened a bank account, had water and electricity hooked up and began to plan renovations to the building, hiring workmen Dan recommended.

She picked Jenny up at school every day and took her along on business appointments and shopping. By the end of the week, they had a comfortable routine.

Dan spent most of his time at the office, returning to the house late every night for supper before beginning more paperwork.

Maggie enjoyed taking care of Jenny and the ranch. She had always liked cooking, and since both Dan and his daughter were appreciative of her efforts, she delighted in surprising them with new recipes.

Although too busy to feel blue during the day, Maggie found herself lonely in the evenings when Jenny was asleep and Dan wrapped himself in his work. He was always pleasant to her and thankful when she showed off her domestic skills, but she found herself longing for more. His comment about her baby being their only remaining link to Chad continued to haunt her. But since they were never alone for more than a few minutes at a time, while Jenny was in another room, they had no chance to talk privately.

One stormy night, when she had been at the ranch for a week, Maggie couldn't sleep. Hard rain pelted against the rooftop and windows, disturbing her with memories of the night Chad died. After tossing and turning for a while, she decided to retrieve the book she'd been reading earlier in the living room.

Thinking the others were asleep, she padded out in her nightshirt and slippers, her path lit by Jenny's night-light in the hall. Moonlight

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streamed in the living room window, occasionally helped by a flash of lightning. She found the book, picked it up and turned back.

“Can’t sleep?” Dan’s voice came from a dark corner of the room.

Surprised, she dropped the book.

He was at her side before she could retrieve it. Placing a hand under her chin, he lifted her face and looked into her eyes. “What’s wrong, Maggie?”

CHAPTER 5

Maggie's heart raced out of control. She swallowed and tried to calm herself. "Nothing...I couldn't sleep...the storm..."

Dan dropped his hand and turned away. "I know. Me, too."

His deep sigh touched her. "Do you still think about the night he died?" she asked softly, knowing she didn't have to explain who she meant.

He whirled around to look at her, his dark eyes so full of pain she ached for him. "Of course! He went out that night because I wouldn't go to your house. If I had..." Dan's voice faded away as he made a gesture of futility and swore under his breath.

Maggie grabbed his arm, and he stiffened. She held on anyway. "No, Danny, you can't feel that way! It was an accident! No one knew what would happen!"

His voice was tinged with bitterness. "It doesn't matter if we knew. It happened, and it was my fault. If it hadn't, he'd be here to share your pregnancy and—"

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“No one blames you.”

He searched her face. “I’d give anything to take that night back, to switch places with him.”

Maggie picked up both his hands and sandwiched them between hers in front of her. She squeezed them hard as she tried to make him understand. “Don’t talk like that, Danny! No one knows why bad things happen. But they do, and we go on. If you’d died that night, what would have happened to Jenny?”

A flash of lightning lit up his face for a moment. Raw pain was still etched there, but the hard lines of his frown softened. “You and Chad would have taken care of her,” he said. “Maybe she’d be better off.”

“How can you say that? She loves you. You’re a great father! Sure, we would have adopted her if something happened to you. But we could never have replaced you. No one could.”

He took a deep breath and sighed. “But don’t you resent me? Don’t you wish it had been me instead?”

Incredulous, she stared at him. “Of course not! Why would you think so?”

He pulled his hands out of hers and shook his head. “At the funeral you were so distant. You wouldn’t look at me. I thought you hated me.”

“Oh, Danny.” Her voice broke and tears gathered in her eyes. She blinked them back. “It was so soon. I was still in shock. I didn’t know what I was going to do, how I could go on... But time heals. I’ll always love him. But I never blamed you for the accident. I never, ever, wished it was you instead.”

He searched her eyes. “I wish I could believe you.”

“Why can’t you? I’ve never lied to you.”

He was silent for a moment. A muscle twitched in his jaw as he studied her. After a few moments, he walked over to the window and stared out at the rain.

When he turned around, his expression was less haunted. He looked into her eyes and the corner of his lip turned up in a rueful smile. “You

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lied to me once, you know.”

Maggie cocked her head. “I did?”

“I believe you told me once you knew how to make hot chocolate.”

She grinned as the memory came to her. The lumpy mix of water and chocolate syrup she’d served him and Tony had been so unpalatable even his collie wouldn’t touch it. She giggled. “I *thought* I knew.”

He nodded toward the couch. “Sit down. I’ll make us some cocoa to share while we wait for the storm to pass, okay?”

Maggie smiled as she settled on the sofa, happy childhood memories flooding back. The rain and wind retreated to merely background sound effects.

* * *

Dan poured milk into the pan and carefully measured the cocoa and sugar, his gloomy mood beginning to lift. The sincere look in Maggie’s eyes when she told him she didn’t blame him for Chad’s death had lifted a huge weight from his shoulders...and his heart. All this time he had condemned himself, and a part of him had wished he’d been the one in the accident. But part of his anguish had been due to thinking Maggie also wished it had been him.

Her honest denial tonight relieved some of his guilt. She seemed to really believe there was no reason to blame him. Maybe there was hope he’d be able to forgive himself.

He absently stirred the powder into the milk as it warmed, thinking about how different things would be if his brother were still here. Chad would have been so excited to be expecting a child, something he and Maggie had wanted for a long time. Chad had been there for him shortly after Tiffany gave birth to Jenny. Though he’d had a congratulatory thump on the back for his kid brother, and they had gone out to celebrate together, Dan had felt his brother’s envy for the second time in his life.

The only other time had been when he’d graduated from college.

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Then Dan had felt a mixture of pride and regret. If Chad had stayed in school instead of insisting on getting married so young, he would have finished first.

But Chad and Maggie had both graduated eventually. Along the way they had built their small ranch into something to be proud of. It was just so damn unfair that now, when they could have had all their dreams come true, he was gone. And poor Maggie had to go on alone.

The cocoa finished, he poured two mugs and went back to the living room, where he found Maggie. She'd donned a robe and slippers and was curled up on the couch, waiting. He hesitated, wondering for a moment if he should put on a shirt. The sight of her in that flimsy gown had almost made him forget they were only friends. If it wasn't for the dimness of the light and his already gloomy mood when he spotted her, he might not have been able to push his desire aside. Did she have any of those feelings, too?

She gave him a welcoming smile and patted the couch next to her before reaching for a mug. Feeling slightly let down at her apparent indifference to his lack of dress, he handed her the cocoa and lowered himself to the offered seat.

They drank in silence for a few minutes, listening to the gentle tattoo of rain on the roof.

"This is good," she said, breaking the quiet stillness. "Much better than mine."

He raised an eyebrow and looked at her. Mischief gleamed in her eyes as she gave him the opening to tease her. "That's not saying much," he drawled, a smile tugging at his mouth.

She placed a hand on her hip with mock offense. "I *have* gotten better."

He drained his cocoa and gave in to a chuckle as he placed the empty mug on the coffee table. "I'm sure you have. You're a great cook now."

"Thanks." She held her cup in front of her with both hands.

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“Remember how we used to pretend to be pioneers?” she asked, her face growing animated as she reminisced. “You and Tony would pile up wood for the fire and then you’d make me pretend to cook something on it.”

“Yeah. Palmetto roots made great buffalo meat.”

“But how come I always had to cook it?”

He shrugged. “You were the only girl.”

“And you were male chauvinists even then.”

Dan grinned, enjoying the friendly banter with Maggie. Seeing her now, chatting like this, it was easy to remember the good times they’d had before she grew up and lost interest in his friendship.

She looked young and vulnerable in the dim light. It was so easy to picture her as the cute little girl he’d loved to tease. “We had some good times, didn’t we?” he asked.

She nodded, a soft smile curving her lips. “Remember the time we built a fort out of all the old Christmas trees in the neighborhood?”

“How could I forget? You made me drag them all out to the woods with my bike.”

“I helped!”

“Only with the first one. Then your bike conveniently got a flat tire.”

She giggled. “I’d forgotten about that. I tried to fix it and ended up with pieces all over the garage. My dad was furious.”

“It just needed air in the tires! You should have let me pump it for you.”

She shook her head. “But you and Tony always teased me about being a girl and not being able to do things like that. I had to prove I could.”

He lifted a brow, and she giggled again. “Well, I *tried* to prove I could,” she amended.

Dan chuckled. “Considering how I found you the other day, it’s a good thing you’ve learned to accept my help. That car would be in

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pieces all over the road!”

They shared a comfortable laugh, imagining the picture.

Maggie began to relax. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and the thunder was now far off in the distance. The cocoa had been warm and calming. She leaned over and placed her empty cup next to Dan’s on the table.

“Would you like some more?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, thanks.” Sitting back, she settled against the cushions and turned to face him.

He had also made himself more comfortable, stretching his legs out under the table, his arms crossed. She glanced down at his naked chest and tried not to notice the dark hair and solid muscle covering his torso. Thankful for the dim light, she wondered if he could see her blush.

She swallowed and focused her gaze on his face. He watched her with a curious expression. “What?” she asked.

His lips quirked, and he shook his head. “I was just remembering. You were a cute little girl. I really had a thing for you.”

She blinked in surprise. “You did?”

He nodded. “You didn’t know?”

“How could I? You were always teasing me. I thought you didn’t like girls.”

He chuckled again. “I outgrew that.”

“But...you liked me? Like a crush?”

He took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. “Yeah. I just didn’t know how to show it.”

She shook her head. “You sure didn’t. I thought you didn’t like me at all.” She glanced back at him and found him studying her with an unexpected gleam in his eyes.

“How old were we when you started to notice me...like that?” she asked.

“How old were you when you developed a chest?”

She blinked and glanced at him in surprise. His gaze dropped to the

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opening at the top of her robe, and she felt herself turning warm. Her breasts suddenly felt full and tingly.

“Sorry,” he said, getting up abruptly. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He was gone before she had a chance to reply. She frowned as she picked up the empty cups and headed to the kitchen. The look on his face just before his quick exit had seemed much more than friendly teasing. It had seemed almost...sensual.

Glancing down, she reassured herself the exposed area at the neckline of her robe was modest. She had done nothing to lead his thoughts anywhere improper.

But what about her own reaction to him?

* * *

The next morning, Dan knocked on Maggie’s door and told her to stay in bed because he could get Jenny off to school. Although she was anxious to see him, Maggie was tired and decided to accept his suggestion.

The day went smoothly and passed before she knew it. But in the evening, when she was looking forward to Dan’s return, he called and said he would be very late, so she shouldn’t hold dinner for him.

The next two days were much the same. Finally, on Friday, Maggie made sure she answered the phone when Dan called.

“Maggie?”

“Hi, Danny. Are you going to be working late again?”

He hesitated. “Not exactly. I’m pretty well caught up. I thought...if you don’t mind staying with Jenny...that I’d have dinner with a friend.”

Maggie tried to keep her disappointment out of her voice. “Of course I don’t mind. You’ve been working hard and can probably use a night out.”

“Yeah...okay, don’t let Jenny wait up. I’ll spend some time with her tomorrow.”

Maggie frowned at the phone as she hung up. She sat down, her

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shoulders sagging with disappointment. Why should she feel so let down? She was doing Dan a favor and taking advantage of getting to spend some time with her niece while she saved money on rent.

She raised her chin and mentally shook herself. He had every right to spend an evening away from home if he wanted to. So why was she feeling a twinge of jealousy as she wondered at the gender of his friend?

* * *

Dan sighed as he absently flipped through his Rolodex. You would think that as long as he'd lived here he would have a wide choice of female companionship. But somehow, none of the single women he knew seemed as appealing as the one sitting in his house right now. Had he made a mistake by deciding not to go home?

An image of Maggie the way he'd seen her the other night kept haunting him. She had seemed so like the young girl he'd once cared for that it was easy to forget the last eight years. If the other man in her life had been anyone but his brother, he'd have fought tooth and nail to win her love. Now that he wouldn't be taking her away from Chad, was there any reason not to pursue more than friendship?

He shook his head with self-deprecation. Maggie had never seen him that way and probably never would.

Glancing outside, he noticed Gail's car on the street. She must be working late, too.

He shoved the Rolodex back to the corner of his desk and reached for his Stetson. Time to get his mind off Maggie.

* * *

Maggie heard the phone ring as she finished the last of the dinner dishes.

As usual, Jenny bounded off to answer, returning to the kitchen a moment later, wearing a smile. "That was Grandma. They just got back from their trip. I told her you're living here with us."

Uh-oh. If Dan hasn't talked to them yet, what will they think? "You

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did?" Maggie asked, trying to keep her uneasiness out of her voice. "What did she say?"

"She and Grandpa are coming right over!"

Maggie felt the prickle of uneasiness travel further up her spine. "Did you tell her anything else?"

Jenny frowned thoughtfully. "I don't think so. She sounded surprised. I guess Daddy didn't tell her about you."

"I guess not." He picked a fine night to go on a date, she thought resentfully. Now she'd have to do all the explaining by herself. Her in-laws had not been thrilled when she and Chad eloped, but over the years they'd gotten past that. They had had an amiable relationship until Chad's sudden death. She had been looking forward to sharing the news of their coming grandchild in person, but not this way. Now she'd have to announce her pregnancy while explaining why she was living with their other son—all in front of Jenny.

"Well, I guess we better straighten up a little if we're getting company," she said.

Jenny cooperated by picking up her toys, and they frosted the cake they had baked that afternoon. By the time the doorbell rang, Maggie was ready to face them.

She took a deep breath and opened the door to the familiar gray-haired couple. Ignoring their puzzled frowns, she kissed her mother-in-law and father-in-law on the cheek.

Beverly Newman stepped inside and gave Jenny a hug. Looking around the living room, her frown deepened. "Danny isn't here?"

"No, I'm sorry, but he's not home yet."

"He wasn't at the office, either. We checked there first."

"I know," Maggie said, stifling her irritation. "I think he has a date."

"Oh?" The elder Mrs. Newman cast a quick look at her husband, who shrugged. She turned back to Maggie. "So you're babysitting?"

"In a way." She watched as Jenny led her grandfather over to the

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couch and climbed onto his lap to open the packages they had brought. Maybe it would be easier to explain the situation to them one at a time...

She looked at her mother-in-law and inclined her head toward the kitchen. "I made a pot of coffee. Would you like some?"

The older woman took the hint. "Yes. I'll help you."

As soon as they were in the other room, Beverly Newman leaned against the counter, arms crossed in front of her. "All right, Margaret, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

Taking a deep breath, Maggie pulled out coffee cups and a mug. She turned to face her mother-in-law and looked into her dark eyes. "I have a *lot* to tell you. Please have a seat."

Beverly looked her over without smiling. "Yes, I'd say you have quite a bit of explaining to do."

Maggie ignored the critical tone, since apparently Dan hadn't prepared his parents for the change in her figure. She poured coffee into one of the cups and milk in another while her mother-in-law took a seat at the kitchen table, waiting expectantly.

After sitting down across from her, Maggie ran her hand absently over her mug of milk, making no attempt to drink. "I'm not sure where to begin—"

"Jenny said you're living here."

"Dan invited me."

"Why?"

"He needed someone to baby-sit Jenny for him during tax season, and I need somewhere to live temporarily. It's working out well. I love Jenny, and I'm finally getting to spend some time with her."

Mrs. Newman shook her head in disgust. "I can't believe my son would ask you to move in. You're obviously pregnant. What kind of role model is that for Jenny?"

"No! You don't understand!" Maggie leaned forward, anxious to share the news now that she realized why her mother-in-law was angry

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with her. She reached over and pressed the older woman's hand. "Mom, this baby is your grandchild!"

Mrs. Newman's mouth dropped open. "You mean you're having *Danny's* baby?" She jumped up, a look of pure outrage on her face. "George!" she yelled.

Maggie was too stunned by the woman's negative reaction to speak.

Her father-in-law ran into the kitchen. "What's wrong?" he asked, a worried expression on his face as he looked from his wife to Maggie and back.

Beverly's face was pale. "I...I think I need a drink." She walked over to the cabinet and took out a bottle of whiskey.

Maggie stared at her in shock.

George Newman frowned as he watched his wife remove two shot glasses and start to pour the amber liquor into them. "You know I shouldn't have that with my ulcer," he scolded.

She glared at him. "Maybe I need them both!"

Suddenly the whole misunderstanding began to look funny to Maggie. The long stressful day, combined with pregnancy hormones and her irritation with Dan for picking tonight to go out—on a date—escalated into hysterical laughter. She tried to swallow it down, but finally couldn't stifle it any more. It bubbled out of her, and she crossed her hands over her abdomen as she watched the scene in front of her.

Her father-in-law turned to her. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

Maggie opened her mouth to explain when she heard the rumble of a truck motor. Biting the inside of her lip, she decided to wait a few more minutes. After all, they were Danny's parents. Let *him* explain!

* * *

Dan groaned when he saw his parents' car in his driveway. Why hadn't he tried to find them earlier instead of waiting until they got back? Although sorely tempted to turn tail and drive away again, he parked next to their sedan and got out.

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He knew his parents would be thrilled to have another grandchild. And they liked Maggie, even though they probably never let her know it. He just wasn't sure how they'd react to his inviting her to live here.

Too late to break it to them gently now. They would have already seen her condition. Knowing his daughter, she'd have spilled the beans in any case. He might as well go in and find out their reaction.

He opened the door, and Jenny threw herself into his arms. "Look what Grandma and Grandpa brought me!" she cried, holding up a new doll. He muttered an approving comment and then left her to continue playing with her gifts while he followed the sound of voices to the kitchen.

When he stepped inside, his father wore a puzzled frown. His mother looked positively livid.

He threw Maggie a questioning glance, but she just started giggling. Looking back at his parents, he raised his eyebrows. "What's going on?"

His mother put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "How could you! At your age! You don't know better than that?"

"Than what?" he asked, now thoroughly confused.

She shook her head disgustedly, like she used to when he'd tracked mud on her clean floor as a kid. "Than to get Maggie pregnant!" she accused.

"What?" Gulping in shock, Dan glanced from one person to another. He finally focused on Maggie's amused face. "You told them the baby is *mine*?"

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Maggie stifled the urge to laugh. The surprised expression Dan wore was almost as comical as the ones on his parents' faces.

"No," she said, forcing a serious tone to her voice, though her shoulders shook and she could feel the quiver of the corner of her lip. "I told them the baby is their grandchild."

His eyes narrowed. "You think it's funny to mislead them like that?"

Beverly asked, "You mean it *isn't* your baby?"

Shaking his head, Dan said, "Absolutely not! But—"

"Then why inarnation is she living with you?" his father interrupted. "Chad is barely in the grave! How can you—"

Dan muttered something unintelligible under his breath as he turned around and slammed a fist on the counter.

After a moment of shocked silence, he slowly pivoted around to face his family. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the Formica and looked from one to the other, his expression gradually softening.

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"Danny, think of Jenny," his mother began again.

"I am," he said firmly. He turned his head and caught Maggie's eye. The corner of his mouth quirked. "I think you'd better explain," he told her.

She nodded. Taking a deep breath, she looked at her in-laws. "This is *Chad's* baby. I was pregnant before the accident."

Another stunned silence followed.

Dan's mother picked up one of the drinks she'd poured and drained it in what seemed like one gulp. She faced Maggie with a skeptical expression on her face. "How *can* it be Chad's?"

"It has to be. There never was anyone else."

Her mother-in-law stared at her, her expression dubious.

"I believe her," Dan spoke up. "She and Chad had a good marriage. He never doubted her fidelity. I don't think we should either."

His mother shook her head with disbelief. "But, Margaret, we thought you couldn't get pregnant! You were married for eight years!"

Tears gathered in Maggie's eyes. "I don't know why it happened now," she said, blinking them back. "We'd been trying for a long time. Our doctor said the problem was a low sperm count, but there was always hope."

"Did Chad know you were pregnant?" George asked.

"No. I didn't find out until after he died."

"Well, if you knew it was Chad's baby, why didn't you tell us?" Beverly asked, frowning.

"I would have, but I didn't even suspect I was pregnant until I was three months along. I thought all my symptoms were caused by grief. When I finally went to the doctor, I couldn't believe it! I made him do the test three times and still didn't accept it until I heard the heartbeat myself."

"But you must be twice that far along now. Didn't you think we had a right to know?" Beverly asked.

"Of course! I called a couple of times and left messages that I

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wanted to talk to you about something. You never called back.”

“Oh!” Beverly gave an anguished cry and raised a fist to her mouth. Her eyes filled with tears. “I’m so sorry. I wish we’d known. Chad’s death hit us so hard, we decided to take a trip to try to get over it.”

Maggie stood and crossed to her mother-in-law. “It’s okay,” she said, grasping the older woman’s shoulders and looking into her eyes. “His death was a shock. But this baby will help! It’s like a part of him will always stay with us through his child.”

Her mother-in-law’s eyes glistened with tears. “It’s really Chad’s baby?”

Maggie nodded, crossing her hand over her heart. “I swear it.”

“Are you going to let us be part of his life?”

“Of course! Or hers. It might be a girl. Anyway, that’s one of the reasons I decided to move back here—so we’d be close to you.”

The older woman smiled through her tears and pulled Maggie into her arms for a hug.

When they separated, her father-in-law grinned and extended his arms. After hugging him, she pulled away and turned to face Dan.

He stared at her with an unreadable expression. She cocked her head and looked a question at him. Abruptly, he turned away to head out of the kitchen. “I need a shower,” he said over his shoulder. “Mom and Dad, make yourselves at home. I’ll be back.”

Maggie frowned after him for a moment, puzzled at his behavior. Then she forced a bright smile to her lips. “Why don’t we have some cake with the coffee?”

* * *

When the cool shower didn’t improve his mood, Dan slipped out the back door and headed outside to make sure the horses were bedded down.

He was sitting on a bale of hay, absently chewing a straw, when his father entered the barn. “Thought I might find you here. What’s wrong?”

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Dan shrugged. "Nothing. Just needed a little time to think."

"About Maggie?"

He nodded, knowing his dad knew him too well to deny it. Shadow, the black barn cat, jumped down from the hayloft and nudged him. Dan scratched the animal's ear with his free hand.

His father took a seat on a nearby bale and asked, "Do you think she's lying about the baby being Chad's?"

"Of course not!"

"Why are you so defensive? Didn't it occur to you, too?"

Sighing, he admitted, "Yeah. But just for a minute, because it was such a shock. I've known Maggie a long time. She'd never cheat on Chad."

"I agree. So what's the problem? Aren't you getting along?"

Dan gave a wry smile. "We're getting along fine. And it's working out great for Jenny..."

"But...?"

He jumped up, causing Shadow to leap off the bale, and started to pace in front of Sultan's stall. "She's still Chad's wife."

"Not any more."

"But she might as well be! She still *feels* married to him. I think she always will."

"You sound like you wish that wasn't true."

Dan stopped in front of Sultan and reached through the bars to pat the stallion's neck. "A part of me does. And the rest of me hates myself for it."

"Why? Chad wouldn't want her to be alone the rest of her life. You gave her up for him once. Back then there was a reason. There isn't now."

Dan threw a surprised glance at his father. "You knew how I felt about her?"

"Sure. Chad knew it, too. That was why he never insisted on bringing her along when he visited you."

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Muttering a curse, Dan shook his head. "He never said a word."

"Would you? It wouldn't have made any difference. He wouldn't give her up for you."

"He didn't have to! She loved *him*, not me."

His father shrugged. "Give her time to grieve. She'll be ready to love again someday. Maybe you'll get a second chance."

Dan scowled as he headed toward the door. "Didn't you hear what she said? The baby will always remind her of him and keep him alive. And as long as he's still in her heart, there's no room for me."

* * *

With Jenny tucked in bed and the men watching an Orlando Magic basketball game on TV in the living room, Maggie and her mother-in-law sat at the kitchen table.

"Are you sure you want to stay here with Danny?" his mother asked. "We could make room for you in our apartment."

Maggie shook her head. "Thank you. But this is working out fine. I can help Dan by taking care of Jenny."

"But aren't you worried about what people will think?"

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Why should I?"

Beverly gave her a pointed look. "Margaret, you're a pregnant widow living with a single man. A lot of people will make the same assumption Dad and I did."

"I'm not worried about gossip."

"Maybe you should be."

Swallowing down her irritation, Maggie silently stared at the table.

Her mother-in-law got to her feet. "We have to go," she said. "Think about it, okay? It's not just *your* reputation at stake. Dan has a business here, too."

* * *

After they said goodbye to his parents, Dan shut the door and turned to face Maggie. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Did my mother say something to upset you?"

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She met his gaze with a worried frown. "Are you sure you want me to stay here? Maybe I should move into a motel until I get a place of my own."

"That would be a waste of money. Jenny and I both like having you here."

"I just don't want to cause problems for you."

If you only knew. "What did Mom say to you?"

"Only that people may get the wrong idea."

"Does that bother you?"

"No. My friends know what happened. But it might hurt business—for both of us."

He shrugged. "My clients could care less. And by the time your store opens, you may have your own place anyway."

Crossing her arms, she ran her hands up them as though chilled. "What about girlfriends? Won't it be hard on your social life?"

He stifled the urge to deny having one. "My friends know the situation. I'm not worried about rumors."

A sad expression crossed her face before she looked away.

He lifted his arm to touch her and changed his mind. "I'd like you to stay. At least until tax season is over." Without waiting for a reply, he strode down the hall to his room.

* * *

The next day Maggie awoke to a tempting aroma. She quickly dressed in her maternity jeans and blouse and went to the kitchen.

Dan, wearing jeans and a University of Central Florida T-shirt, grinned at her from his stance at the counter. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Famished. Something smells good."

"I made waffles." He speared one with a fork and put it on a plate. Setting the dish in front of her, he commanded, "Eat."

"I thought I was the cook," she said, reaching for the syrup.

"Only when I'm working. I'm taking this morning off to spend at home."

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She poured a generous amount of maple syrup on her waffle and began to eat. It tasted as delicious as it smelled. “To do what?” she asked between bites.

He poured batter into the waffle-maker and closed the lid before answering. “Nothing special. Jenny likes to watch while I train Sultan. After we finish the chores, I’ll take her riding with me.”

Her mouth full, Maggie nodded. It sounded like they could go their separate ways today. So why did that bother her?

Pushing away the strange sense of disappointment that washed over her as she realized she wasn’t to be included in his plans, she forced enthusiasm into her voice. “Great,” she said. “I need to go to Ocala to check out some wholesale tack dealers.”

“That’s a two hour drive!”

“So?”

“I don’t like the idea of you going all that way by yourself.”

Frowning at him, she asked, “Why not?”

“What if you get another flat tire?”

She shrugged. “That’s not very likely. But if I do have a problem, I’ll call for help.”

He stared at her for a moment before turning back to the waffle-maker.

Maggie finished her breakfast and the glass of juice Dan placed in front of her, but declined his offer of a second helping. Sitting back, she rested her hands on her belly. A fluttering sensation tickled her.

“What is it?” Dan asked, watching her closely as he brought his own plate to the table.

She smiled. “The baby is waking up. I think he likes your waffles.”

Dan’s eyebrows lifted. “You mean you can feel him move?”

“Uh-huh. The feeling is stronger every day.”

He looked at her hands where they rested on her blouse and smiled. “I remember when Tiffany first felt Jenny. She was so excited.”

“Yes,” Maggie agreed. “It somehow makes it all seem real. Like the

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baby is reminding me that he, or she, is really there.”

He nodded thoughtfully. When her hands lifted as the baby moved again, he chuckled.

Maggie met his gaze and a warm glow spread through her. The special moment was interrupted when Jenny burst into the room.

“Good morning!” she said, sliding onto a chair. “What are we going to do today?”

Dan listed the chores he had to finish and explained he would take her riding afterwards.

“But what about Aunt Maggie?”

He shrugged. “She has other plans.”

Jenny’s lower lip came out in a childish pout. “But I want Aunt Maggie to stay home with us!”

Dan shut the waffle iron with more force than necessary. He walked over to the table and set a plate in front of his daughter. “I thought you’d be happy I can spend some time with you,” he told her.

“I am. But I want Aunt Maggie here, too.”

He shook his head. “Your aunt has been very generous with her time already. She has a lot of work to do, to get her shop ready.”

When Jenny’s pout remained firmly planted on her mouth, he threw a pointed look at Maggie.

She nodded and leaned over to catch Jenny’s eye. “Yes, I do. You can help me by finishing the chores here, so I can get some other things done. I’ll be back late this afternoon and then the three of us can spend the evening together.”

Jenny’s expression brightened. “Can we, Daddy?”

He shook his head. “No. I have plans for this evening. After our ride, I need to do some tax work. Then I’m going out for dinner.”

“With us?” Jenny asked, her expression hopeful.

He took a deep breath and shifted position.

Maggie fought back the surge of disappointment. He had another date!

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She stood and took her plate to the sink. "I'll let you two work this out," she said. "The sooner I leave, the sooner I can finish, so I'll see you both when I get back." Avoiding Dan's eyes, she smiled at Jenny and left.

* * *

Dan frowned after Maggie. What was that teary-eyed expression all about?

"You didn't answer me, Daddy."

He returned his attention to his daughter. "Sorry. No, I can't take you to dinner tonight."

"Why not?"

"I invited Gail."

Jenny wrinkled her nose. "I don't like her."

He shrugged. "That's why I didn't offer to bring you along."

"But you just went out *last* night!" she protested.

"No. I invited her then, but she had a business dinner. So I had a burger by myself on the way home. That's why I got back so early."

"We miss you. You've been late all week."

We? He let out a frustrated sigh. "I know. But I was working all those other nights. As soon as tax season is over, things can get back to normal."

"Can Aunt Maggie stay here after that?"

A knot twisted in his gut at her hopeful tone. *I wish.* "I don't think so. She wants a place of her own."

The pout returned. "But I *like* having her here. She's nice. And she teaches me things."

"Like what?"

"How to bake. Mommy never has time for stuff like that."

Dan sighed. So that's what this was all about. "I know," he said. "Your mommy has a very important job. I'm sure she'd like to spend more time with you than she does."

"No, she wouldn't. She doesn't like the same things I do."

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“What do you mean?”

Jenny shrugged. “She doesn’t like cooking. Or doing stuff outside, like riding. And she keeps buying me dresses and ruffly stuff.”

Stifling a grin, he asked, “You don’t like that, huh?”

“No! I can’t play in those clothes! The other kids would make fun of me.”

“I see what you mean. Would you like me to let her know you’d rather have more play clothes? Like jeans and T-shirts?”

She leaned both elbows on the table, her chin resting on her linked hands. A small frown line appeared on her forehead as she considered his question. “No,” she said after a moment. “She doesn’t know what I like.”

He saw where this was going. “But Aunt Maggie does?”

Her face lit up with a broad smile. “Yes! She plays with me! I wish she would stay forever.”

Dan swallowed. *So do I*. He heard a sudden movement and looked up.

Maggie stood in the doorway. The expression on her face said she had heard his daughter’s last words.

CHAPTER 7

Maggie swallowed. Dan's embarrassed expression told her he knew she had heard. The grim set of his jaw proved he wasn't too happy about it. Was he angry at his daughter because of what the little girl had said?

Or is he annoyed with me for returning at an awkward moment? Oh dear...

He lifted an eyebrow. "Did you forget something?"

"Uh...yes. I need my keys." She walked in, picked them up and went out to her car without another word.

On the way to Ocala, her thoughts kept returning to Jenny's words and she wondered about her own mixed reaction. A part of her was thrilled her niece was becoming so attached to her that she wished she lived there. But she knew Dan didn't like the idea of her usurping Tiffany's place. Was he worried about his ex-wife's feelings—or Jenny's?

He had admitted earlier that Tiffany showed little interest in her

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daughter and that Jenny missed a mother's attention. Was it wrong to want to help fill that void?

As she drove along the winding country road, she considered their earlier conversation and remembered Dan's mention of dinner plans. Maybe he had a serious girlfriend, someone who might one day become Jenny's stepmother. In that case, of course he wouldn't want his daughter to become too attached to someone else.

Maggie frowned. Why did that idea bother her? She and Dan didn't have a relationship. The idea of getting involved with him had never occurred to her. And yet...

His parents had jumped to that conclusion. Was it so ridiculous?

The baby shifted position, and she felt a stab of guilt. How could she even think such thoughts when she carried Chad's baby! Tears sprang to her eyes as she forced herself to concentrate on memories of her late husband.

Before she knew it, she reached her destination. The wholesale tack store proved to be exactly what she needed. Hours ticked by as she went from one area to the next, comparing prices and value to her lists of saddles, bridles and other equipment already priced. By the time she finished, she had made considerable progress on her inventory lists for the store.

It was late afternoon when she left. Maggie had been too busy to feel tired while shopping, but she began to feel sleepy as soon as she started the drive home. The trip back seemed to take forever.

Finally arriving at Dan's ranch, her steps slowed at the thought of fixing dinner and then entertaining an active five-year-old for several hours until the girl's bedtime. Taking a deep breath, she unlocked the door and opened it.

An enticing aroma greeted her as soon as she stepped inside. Lasagna?

Dan and Jenny came out of the kitchen to greet her. "Aunt Maggie! Daddy and I made supper!"

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Maggie met Dan's gaze and lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "I thought you were planning to go out for dinner."

"My persuasive daughter talked me into postponing my plans," he answered with a shrug. "I still have a lot of paperwork to do anyway."

Jenny took Maggie's hand and led her into the kitchen. The table was set and everything appeared to be ready. "You two have been busy," she said with a relieved smile.

A few minutes later, they were all seated at the table. While they ate, Maggie told them about her successful trip, and they filled her in on their afternoon.

When she got up to take her plate to the sink, Dan stopped her, taking the dish from her hand. "Go rest," he ordered. "You look tired."

"But you did all the work," she protested.

"You've had a long day, and I won't have you overdoing it."

A warm glow spread through her at his concern, and she nodded gratefully. "All right. I'll just lie down for a little while. Then I'll help you finish."

She wandered into the living room and picked up a magazine. Fatigue engulfed her as soon as she sat down. Deciding she was too tired to read, she stretched out and allowed her eyes to close.

* * *

Dan froze in position on his way past the sofa. Maggie was lying there, sound asleep, her wild curls framing her face. Apparently he had been right in assuming she would be tired after her long day.

He found a blanket and returned to the living room. Tucking it around her, he resisted the urge to take her in his arms. She looked so peaceful with a gentle smile curving her lips as she slept. He stood for a few moments, just watching her.

Thinking back to his conversation with Jenny that morning, he remembered his daughter's enthusiastic account of the time her aunt had been spending with her. Maggie was a good role model for Jenny, and they seemed to enjoy each other's company. That was more than he

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could say about his daughter and any of the other women to whom he had introduced her. Gail didn't seem to like horses or outdoor activities any more than Tiffany did. Jenny needed a female she could relate to in her life.

At least he wasn't being totally selfish in wanting her aunt to stay.

Maggie stirred and a slight frown creased her forehead, causing him to wonder briefly if he should wake her. No, he decided. She didn't seem to be having a nightmare. And she really needed her sleep after her long day.

He mentally patted himself on the back for letting Jenny talk him into staying home tonight. Spending the day with his daughter had been fun. And taking care of the chores so Maggie wouldn't have to when she returned had been satisfying, especially when he caught her look of relief.

He'd have plenty of other nights to go out with Gail. His time with Maggie was limited. He knew that as soon as she had her own place to go to, she'd want to be on her own.

It wouldn't matter how he felt about her going.

* * *

Maggie opened her eyes to darkness. Blinking in confusion, she sat up and saw that she was still on the couch. Someone had tucked a blanket around her.

As she wandered down the hall, the house seemed quiet, and she realized Jenny must already be in bed. After finishing in the bathroom, she headed toward the lighted kitchen.

Dan was seated at the table in front of his laptop computer, tax forms spread out on every available spot. He punched a calculator, oblivious to her arrival.

She took advantage of his concentration to observe him. Fatigue lines etched his tan face and his dark brown hair was tousled, as though he'd run his hands through it more than once in frustration. He gave a barely perceptible shake of his head and jabbed the buttons again.

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Seeming satisfied with the sum this time, he nodded and wrote on the form.

Looking around at the spotless kitchen, she saw Dan hadn't left any chores for her to finish up. She hesitated. Should she just leave him alone to work?

As she turned to go, he glanced up. His frown disappeared, and he gave her a welcoming smile. "Feel better?"

She grinned. "Yes. I guess you were right. I was more tired than I realized."

"Yeah," he said with a teasing grin. "You were snoring pretty loud when I checked on you."

Wrinkling her nose at him, she objected, "I don't snore!"

He chuckled. "Are you feeling okay otherwise?"

"Yes, but the baby is moving around a lot. For some reason, he seems to be more active at night."

"Is that normal?"

"Dr. Cooper said during the day, when I'm moving around, the baby feels like he's being rocked. At night he tries to wake me up to rock him some more."

"He's spoiled already, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so." They shared a smile.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and she shivered. "Has it been raining?"

Dan frowned. "I don't know. I've been working for hours, so I really didn't notice." He leaned back and stretched with a tired sigh.

"You look tense." Instinctively she crossed to him and stood behind his chair.

He stiffened as soon as she touched his shoulders. "Maggie—"

"Relax," she told him, kneading the muscles under his denim shirt. "This won't hurt a bit."

His upper back and shoulders were firm beneath her fingers. She paused for a moment as awareness of his strength and manliness seeped

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into her. Maybe she shouldn't have started this...

"Don't stop," he said, "it feels great."

She swallowed and forced her thoughts back to the task she'd assigned herself. Gradually his tension seemed to ease away as she worked. Unfortunately, hers seemed to increase.

After a few minutes, she asked, "Feel better?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Thanks."

"Sure." She continued to massage in small circles, gradually easing the tautness. The corded muscles felt so solid and strong, she found herself wondering what it would be like to have him wrap his arms around her.

He reached up to his shoulder and grasped one of her hands, stilling her. "What's wrong, Maggie?"

When she didn't reply, he turned in the chair and looked at her. Their eyes met, and she felt another jolt of awareness. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized he felt it, too.

"C'mere," he said, his voice deep and gravelly. Still holding her hand, he gently tugged her toward him until she sat across his lap.

"No, Danny, I'm too heavy," she protested as she started to get up again.

He shook his head, restraining her. "You're fine."

"But I'm so big—"

"You're beautiful," he insisted, holding her gaze.

From her position across his thighs, his face was only inches away. She searched his eyes and a warm glow spread through her as she realized he meant the compliment.

He continued to gaze at her as he touched her chin and tilted her face toward him, giving her a quick kiss on the lips.

She blinked in surprise.

He grinned. "Do you know how long I've wanted to do that?"

Maggie shook her head, her pulse quickening.

"Since we were kids."

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She gazed at him in astonishment. “You mean you were serious when you said you had a crush on me?”

“Yeah. I was just such a fool kid, I didn’t know how to show you.”

“You could have asked me out.”

“I was afraid you’d say no.”

She looked away, embarrassed to admit she might have accepted. If he had acted less like a brother, teasing her unmercifully as Tony did, he’d have stood a better chance of getting her attention.

Glancing up, she saw he was watching her. “You know,” she said, meeting his gaze, “you did kiss me that time we all played volleyball on the beach. Remember?”

His mouth turned up in a wry grin. “Oh yeah...when we both dove for the ball and tripped over each other. I landed half on top of you. It was just too big a temptation—you in a bikini in my arms.”

“I liked it.”

Raising an eyebrow, he said, “You did? You told me off good.”

“That was for Tony and the other kids’ benefit. Secretly I hoped you’d do it again. But you never tried.”

Dan absently ran his hand over her arm, sending a quiver of excitement through her. He searched her face. “What would happen if I tried again now?”

She smiled, holding his gaze. “Why don’t you find out?”

He didn’t wait for a second invitation as his mouth covered hers. His lips were deliciously enticing. Sweet warmth flowed through her, and she responded instinctively, wrapping her arms around him as she kissed him back.

He groaned and deepened the kiss, sliding his arm around her shoulders to pull her closer. His other arm settled on her abdomen, sending tremors of awareness through her.

When the muscles under his hand responded by tightening in a contraction, he stopped abruptly and pulled his lips away.

“It’s okay,” she said, realizing he must have felt it, too. “That was

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just a practice contraction. It didn't hurt."

A muscle worked in his jaw, and he refused to meet her gaze. "What caused it?" he asked in a worried tone.

"The doctor explained that sometimes they come on for no reason at all. But in this case, it was probably the excitement of the kiss."

"That's what I was afraid of." Dan pushed her up to her feet and stood, releasing her completely. He stepped around her, strode over to the window, and stared out at the moonlit night.

Stunned at his abrupt detachment, Maggie frowned. Was he sorry he had kissed her? Was she?

Just a few minutes ago, she had been wondering what it would be like to be wrapped in his strong arms. The first kiss had been a delightful surprise.

She felt a stab of guilt. She had enjoyed the kiss—a lot. She'd liked it so much she had encouraged him to try again. The second had been even better. But she had no business kissing another man so soon after the death of her husband—especially his own brother.

"I'm sorry, Danny—"

He spun around, his eyes filled with raw pain. "*You're* sorry? I kissed *you*, remember? You don't have anything to be sorry for. I'm the one who should be apologizing."

She swallowed and took a deep breath, longing to reach out and touch him, but knowing that wouldn't help the situation. "I liked it."

His eyes narrowed. "*Why* did you like it, Maggie?" he asked in a suspicious tone. "Did you pretend I was Chad?"

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "Of course not! How could you think that?" Anger boiled up inside her, and she glared at him. Ignoring the misery in his eyes, she turned on her heel and left the room.

Dan muttered a self-deprecating curse under his breath. That had been real smart of him. First, when Maggie was just trying to be nice by giving him a massage, he'd let himself get turned on. Then, instead

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of keeping his feelings inside, he had let them overpower him.

He hadn't planned to let her friendly gesture lead anywhere at all. But he had gotten instantly hard, with her cute bottom wriggling against him. And sitting there so close, he'd had a great view of the inside of her blouse through the gaping buttonholes. Her pregnancy had enlarged her already lovely breasts, making them more seductive than ever.

The temptation to kiss her had come so quickly, he hadn't given himself an opportunity to talk himself out of it, just like that time on the beach. He had half expected her to react like she had then, with righteous indignation. Instead, she'd been swept along by hormones or something. She had actually encouraged him to kiss her again! When she'd returned his kiss so passionately, it was all he could do to restrain himself. She had tasted so deliciously sweet...

But feeling the contraction had been like a splash of ice cold water, reminding him of her condition. Even if she wasn't thinking of Chad during the kiss, she could hardly forget her husband for long with the physical evidence of his baby coming between them.

Dan walked over to the counter and poured himself a cup of coffee, knowing he couldn't sleep now. May as well try to get some more work done, he decided, going back to his position at the table. All the relaxation the massage had brought was gone.

Ten minutes later, he gave up. Thoughts of Maggie kept interfering with his concentration. He reset the coffeemaker for morning and headed to his room.

As he started down the hall, the sound of muffled crying drifted to him from Maggie's room. He hesitated half a second, then lightly knocked.

The sobbing stopped, but she didn't answer.

"May I come in?" he asked. "I know you're awake."

After a brief silence, she called, "All right."

He opened the door and switched on the light. Maggie sat in bed,

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her eyes red and swollen. When she looked up and met his gaze, the tears started anew. She futilely dabbed at them with an already soaked tissue.

Dan crossed to her and sat on the edge of the bed. Pulling a fresh tissue from the bedside table, he gently wiped her tear-stained cheeks. She looked frail and vulnerable. Tenderness for her welled up inside him, and he was tempted to gather her in his arms to kiss the tears away. Instead, he waited patiently.

The choking sobs gradually lessened. When she finally regained control, she shook her head with embarrassment. "I must look a sight."

"I've seen you cry many times, remember?"

"Not as a g-g-grown woman."

"You don't look all that different. You're still cute as a button."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "Yeah, right."

"In fact," he added, looking pointedly down her sheet-covered body, "you're starting to resemble one."

He chuckled as she picked up the spare pillow and swatted at him. When he caught her arm to stop her, his eyes met hers, and he froze.

Her lip trembled, and she dropped her gaze, nervously fingering the sheet.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes...I think so. I just seem to have so much emotion that needs to get out. Hormones from being pregnant, I guess."

"Are you still mad at me?"

She bit her lower lip, not looking at him. "A little—for suggesting that I would be thinking about someone else while kissing you. But I'm more angry at myself."

"Why?"

"Because I *wasn't* thinking about Chad."

He felt a glimmer of hope spring to life. "You didn't think about him? At all?"

"No. And I feel guilty about that."

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“Why should you?”

“I still *feel* married. I don’t think I should be kissing another man.”

So she *was* still in love with Chad. Would his ghost always be there, coming between them?

Dan struggled to keep his resentment from showing in his voice. “You’re right.”

“I am?”

The surprise in her voice almost stopped him. But he knew, for both their sakes, he needed to push his own feelings aside and quell any hope for anything other than friendship. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s too soon. You’re very vulnerable right now and I should have remembered that. I won’t let it happen again.”

“It wasn’t all your fault. I encouraged you.”

He shrugged, avoiding her eyes. “It was a mistake, but it doesn’t have to be a problem. Blame it on two tired people and late night hormones, okay?” Standing up, he added, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

* * *

Maggie stared after Dan for a long time. More tears welled up in her eyes, and she let them silently trickle down her cheeks, not wanting him to hear her cry.

What must he think of her? He was her childhood friend and her brother-in-law. He had taken her and his brother’s unborn child under his wing, inviting them to stay in his house. How could she let herself imagine there was anything more to it?

He had always loved to tease her, even if it had been with affection, and that was probably all he had meant tonight when he’d kissed her. Instead of taking the kiss lightly, she had responded like a love-starved girl.

Humiliation wafted over her as she looked down at her huge belly. How could he be attracted to her in this condition? The time he’d kissed her on the beach, she’d been a teenager in a bikini. If she went there in a bathing suit now, she could be mistaken for a beached whale.

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Her back started to ache, and she reminded herself she shouldn't lie on it for too long. She rolled to her side, putting the extra pillow between her knees in one of the few barely comfortable positions she could find these days. Eventually total exhaustion overcame her, and she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

The next morning was Sunday. Jenny and Dan were having breakfast when Maggie emerged from her room. Both greeted her as usual and Jenny chatted happily about her plans for the day. Her grandparents had promised to take her to the Sanford Zoo after lunch.

Maggie rode to church with Dan and Jenny, as she had the previous two weeks since moving back to town. This time Dan's parents met them there, and they all sat together in one pew.

The small church had not changed much in the years since she had attended as a child. Although she saw a lot of familiar faces, few seemed to recognize her. She reminded herself that she had been a teenager when she eloped with Chad and had physically changed a lot since then. Also, people were probably not expecting to see her back in town.

As they exited the church after the service, Dan took her arm to assist her down the steps. She looked up and met his gaze. Something glimmered in the dark depths of his eyes before he looked away. Was he thinking about when he had touched her last night, as she was?

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she concentrated on going down the steps without stumbling. It was getting harder now that she could no longer see her feet. When they reached the last step, she pulled away and hurried ahead, not stopping until she reached his truck.

"Where's Jenny?" Maggie asked when Dan joined her a few minutes later.

"Mom and Dad are taking her now. She has extra clothes to change into at their house." He unlocked the passenger door of the pickup and opened it.

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Before Maggie could climb in, he picked her up and lifted her, setting her gently onto the seat.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she protested. “I’m not helpless.”

His hands rested at her waist, his face so close she could see the fatigue lines around his eyes. Hadn’t he slept any better than she?

His gaze lingered on her lips, and for a moment, she thought he might kiss her again. Then his jaw tightened and he released her, pulling away and shutting the door without a word.

They rode in silence back to his ranch. Maggie tried vainly to think of something to say to ease the tension. But knowing they were alone for the afternoon without Jenny to chaperone was exciting. Could he be thinking about that, too?

When they reached the ranch, Dan parked his truck and got out, then strode to the house without a backward glance.

Feeling more than a twinge of disappointment, Maggie opened her door and carefully climbed out. Why couldn’t she learn to thank him when he helped her, instead of making him feel she resented any kind of assistance?

She didn’t see Dan on her way to her room. After changing to more casual clothes, she wandered into the kitchen where she found him, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. He nodded at her from the table as he polished off the last of a sandwich.

When he stood and picked up his plate, she asked, “Do you have plans for the afternoon?”

He wiped his mouth with a napkin and reached for his glass of tea. “I need to go to the office to work.”

She tried to keep disappointment out of her voice. “Oh.”

He drained the glass and put his dishes in the sink without looking at her. “Don’t wait dinner on me. I may go out.” Grabbing his briefcase and Stetson, he headed toward the door.

“Dan?”

He stopped and slowly turned to face her, lifting an eyebrow.

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“Yes?”

She hesitated, dropping her gaze to the table and running her finger nervously up and down her cup. “Don’t you think we should talk first?”

“About what?”

“Us.”

CHAPTER 8

Dan swallowed the lump in his throat. *If only there could be an us.* He shook his head and his voice came out gruffer than he intended. "I told you. I won't touch you again."

"I'm not afraid of that. I...I just thought maybe it's getting awkward for you... That maybe I should leave."

"You'd break Jenny's heart. She's really attached to you."

Maggie sighed, and her face looked so wistful Dan's heart went out to her.

"I know," she said. "I'm really fond of her, too. But I don't have to live here in order to see her."

He forced his voice to soften. "It's easier for all of us this way. Besides, next week is Easter, and a few days after that is the fifteenth. My work will slow down drastically after the tax deadline. At least wait until then to think about leaving." He turned on his heel and walked out, purposely ignoring the confused look on her face.

He put the horses out to graze in the pasture before getting in his

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truck. The action kept him busy enough to temporarily push thoughts of Maggie to the back of his mind. But when he pulled out of the ranch and headed down the country road, her offer to leave came back to haunt him.

Should he encourage her to move out? He'd already become accustomed to having her in his house. For the last week, even though she had retired to her room by the time he returned at night, he liked knowing she was there, safe in his home.

Maggie had always been special to him. But now that she was pregnant, he felt somehow even more protective of her. She had always been a person who could take care of herself. Yet now she seemed...vulnerable. He wanted to shield her from whatever stood in the way of her happiness, whether she wanted him to or not!

Dan felt a certain responsibility for her, not only as the mother of Chad's baby, but also as his own friend. He knew he would worry about her if he didn't know where she was or how she was doing.

Although he had resigned himself to accepting there would never be anything but friendship between them, subconsciously he probably still hoped one day there *could* be more. Was he just torturing himself by having her continue to live with him?

His discussion with Jenny the day before came back to him. His daughter really loved her aunt and would certainly miss her when she moved out. Shouldn't he try to put that day off as long as possible—for his daughter's sake?

He muttered self-deprecatingly under his breath. Who was he trying to kid? He wanted Maggie there for his *own* sake. He loved seeing her gentle smile when she and Jenny were together, hearing her sweet laugh when she played with his daughter, and catching her eye when they shared a special moment...

His grip tightened on the wheel as one more reason came to him. Feeling Maggie's soft curves on his lap had made him forget everything else. He'd wanted her kiss for a long time. He had promised

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her it wouldn't happen again, but how could he be sure it wouldn't?

He pulled the truck up in front of his office. Noticing Gail's car parked nearby, he decided to see her before starting work. When he had canceled dinner plans the night before she had understood and agreed to a rain check, but they hadn't set up an alternate date. The way his thoughts were going, it might be a good idea to see if his friend could see him tonight. After what had happened the evening before, he wanted to make sure he stayed out until Jenny got home so he'd have a chaperone when around Maggie. In spite of his good intentions, he was no saint and couldn't guarantee he'd be able to resist temptation forever.

* * *

Maggie spent a few hours going through her stack of horse magazines and searching for tack dealers. When fatigue kicked in, she took a short nap. By late afternoon she found herself bored with her own company. The stillness of the house was lonely, and she realized she missed both Dan and Jenny.

Dan and Jenny? Didn't she miss Chad? A stab of guilt nagged at her as she tried to picture her husband. Had his face already faded from her memory? A month ago she had thought she would never stop missing him. But now...

She went in her room and picked up the picture of Chad from her dresser, surprised to find that the gut-wrenching pain of loss had faded to a sad regret. She would always remember the love they had shared. But she was getting used to living without him.

Maggie reminded herself she had wanted to learn to go on without Chad and make a clean start by moving here and leaving behind the life they had shared. Soon she would be living alone except for the baby. It was time she adjusted.

It was time she stopped feeling...married.

Remembering her words of the night before, she felt another twinge of guilt. How would Chad feel about what happened? Would he be

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happy for her? Would he mind her attraction to his brother?

Tears gathered in her eyes again. How could she hope for any kind of a relationship with Dan? He might feel protective of her as the mother of his brother's baby, but that was all.

Blinking back her self-pity, she put Chad's picture back on the dresser and left the room. No point in pursuing that train of thought. She needed to get her shop and its upstairs room finished so she could move out of Dan's house. The sooner the better.

* * *

Half an hour later Maggie unlocked the door to her shop and went inside. She looked around with satisfaction. The workmen Dan had suggested were doing a good job. The repairs would be finished in another week. Then she could give the place a good cleaning and start moving in some inventory—if she could ever get it ordered.

She carefully climbed the stairs and looked around uncertainly at the extra room. Although it was too small for a regular size crib, a small bassinet would fit next to her furniture. The tiny shower the contractors had installed would suffice. She could live here if necessary, she decided, even though it would get harder and harder to maneuver the stairs as she got closer to her due date. Maybe by the time she finished the remodeling, she could find a ranch of her own—with a downstairs bedroom.

Maggie spent another hour going back and forth, up and down the stairs, making lists of final things to do. She needed to go down to City Hall and apply for an occupational license and sales tax number. After that, she could set a date for the Grand Opening and start advertising. She also needed to hire some employees who could learn quickly and whom she could trust to take over when she had the baby. The list was staggering.

A knock sounded at the shop door, startling her. Hurrying to open the door for Gail, she mentally chided herself for being disappointed it wasn't Dan who stood on the other side of the glass.

A STABLE ACCOUNT

The realtor stepped inside, smiling as she looked around. “Your store is starting to look great,” she approved. Before Maggie could respond, Gail handed her a folder. “I saw your car and thought I’d bring this over for you. I found several small ranches in your price range—if you’re still interested.”

“Yes, of course.” Maggie opened the file and gave it a quick perusal.

“Let me know if you’d like to see any of them,” Gail said, turning back to the door.

“Okay, thanks. Will you be at the office for a while?”

“No, I’m finished for today and Dan and I are going out. You can reach me at home in a few hours, though.”

“All right.” Maggie locked the door behind Gail and watched the pretty, slim woman saunter over to Dan’s office. Realizing she was staring, she turned abruptly away. Why should she be envious of another woman’s figure? She would have hers back someday.

Nevertheless, she felt a stab of jealousy when she spotted Dan and Gail coming out of his office a few minutes later. He unlocked and opened the passenger door of his truck for Gail, seated her, and went around to the other side, getting in without a glance in Maggie’s direction.

So what did I expect? That he’d invite his sister-in-law along on his date? she scolded herself. After taking a last look around, she locked up and headed for Dan’s ranch.

When she arrived, the house seemed even emptier than when she left. Even so, she was glad to be back. The trip to her store had tired her more than she realized.

Maggie fixed a sandwich and ate it in front of the TV while watching an old romantic movie. She told herself she should be relieved she had the house to herself and could do what she liked. Still, she was glad to hear a vehicle pull into the drive an hour later.

Rushing to the door, she waved to her in-laws as they pulled away.

A STABLE ACCOUNT

Jenny bounded inside. "It was great, Aunt Maggie! You should have come with us!"

"Maybe next time." Maggie smiled at the girl's enthusiasm. "Have you had dinner?"

"Grandpa took us for burgers and shakes. What did you do?"

"I got some work done."

"On *Sunday*?" Jenny grimaced as she threw herself down on the couch, knocking a newspaper to the floor. "You're as bad as Daddy."

"It has to get done sometime," Maggie said, starting to feel irritated. She picked up the paper and put it back where it belonged. "Now we need to take care of the horses," she added.

Jenny shook her head. "Daddy will do it. I'm tired."

"He might not be home until after dark. I think we should do it now."

The girl's lip came out in a childish pout. "But I want to watch TV."

Maggie was tempted to insist, but remembered she wasn't Jenny's mother and didn't really have any authority. "All right, then," she said, hoping to instill some guilt. "I'll do it myself."

Jenny picked up the remote and switched the channel on the TV, stretching out on the couch.

As she stalked outside, Maggie blinked back tears of frustration. Those pregnancy hormones her doctor had warned her about were certainly taking over. She felt so darn sensitive these days! Bringing in and feeding a couple of horses by herself wasn't such a big deal. She'd done a lot more than that on her own ranch when Chad was busy with something else. And, for a while after he died, she had done all the work alone. Why was she feeling so sorry for herself now?

One by one, she led the horses into the barn and put them in their stalls. They whinnied expectantly as they munched their hay while she measured the grain.

"I know, I know," Maggie murmured to them. "You hate having a

A STABLE ACCOUNT

late dinner, don't you? At least you guys don't have to eat alone."

Shadow hopped up on the half-wall and fixed a feline stare on her. "You're hungry, too, I suppose," she said, taking a break to pet him for a moment before pulling out the tin of cat food.

She dumped the measured horse feed into each bin and felt her irritation mount as she discovered all three water buckets were empty. Apparently Dan had forgotten to fill them when he turned the horses out. Now he was off on his date, leaving her to finish his chores.

Muttering a few choice derogatory names for inconsiderate men, she finished the rest of the barn tasks and dragged herself back to the house, more exhausted than before.

Jenny was stretched out on the couch watching cartoons as she munched potato chips from a bag, crumbs piling up around her.

Maggie felt more anger building up inside her and fought to quell it before she lashed out at the child. "Jenny, I want you to clean up all those crumbs," she said in as level a voice as she could muster. "Then I'll help with your bath."

The girl didn't show any sign of hearing her, so she repeated the order in a louder tone.

Still no response.

"Jenny!"

The child looked up, her eyes wide with surprise. "What?"

Maggie opened her mouth to scold, then clamped it shut and marched off to her room. Jenny was Dan's daughter. He could deal with her as he saw fit when he got home. If he ever *got* home, she fumed, glancing at the clock. Where had they gone for dinner anyway? Georgia?

She went back to the living room long enough to pick up the file Gail had left her. Two of the ranches looked nice, so she decided to give the realtor a call and ask to see them. The sooner she found a place of her own, the sooner she could leave here.

Since Gail had told her she could call her at home in a few hours,

A STABLE ACCOUNT

Maggie assumed that she and Dan hadn't planned a late night. Dan was surely on his way home by now, unless he made another stop after taking his date home. She dialed the number on the front of the file.

When Gail's answering machine clicked on, Maggie frowned. They *still* weren't back from dinner? She started to leave a message, "Hello, this is Maggie New—"

"Hi, Maggie!" Gail picked up.

She could hear soft music playing in the background. "I'm sorry," she said, "did I call at a bad time?"

"Not at all. Dan's still here, but he doesn't mind. What can I do for you?"

Swallowing down the jealous knot in her throat, Maggie tried to keep her voice pleasant as she asked some questions about the ranch listings. Gail said she'd arrange appointments to show them the next day.

After hanging up, Maggie got ready for bed. By the time she heard Dan come in another hour later, she had worked herself into a real temper. Not bothering to don a robe over her cotton nightshirt, she stomped out to give him a piece of her mind.

She found him next to the living room couch, bending over his sleeping daughter. He looked up with a smile, which faded as his gaze traveled down her body and back up to her face.

"What's wrong?"

"*Where* have you been?" she asked, hands on hips.

Frown lines appeared on his forehead as he stood. "I told you this afternoon I might go out for dinner."

"For eight hours?"

"No. I worked until about six. And after dinner we went back to Gail's for a drink. But you knew where I was. You called there."

She raised her chin. "I called to talk to *her*. I thought you'd be on your way home by then."

"Why are you so upset? What happened?"

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"Nothing really. I just thought that since you have so much work to do, you'd wait to socialize until after the fifteenth!"

"Why are you overreacting like this?"

"I'm not overreacting!"

"You certainly are. You're acting like my mother, telling me when I should be home."

"I am not! I just thought you'd have the courtesy to call first."

"You did, huh?" The corner of his lip quirked. "You're right; you don't sound like my mother. You sound more like my wife."

"Your *what*?" She could feel her lip tremble with fury and embarrassment. The fact he was right made it that much worse. The tears, which had been threatening, gathered in her eyes, and she did her best to blink them back.

She succeeded until he took a step toward her. "Maggie..."

His touch on her shoulder was too much. Tears spilled out, and she brushed his hand away. "Don't touch me!"

"But—"

"Put your daughter to bed and clean up that mess," she sobbed as she fled the room.

* * *

Dan stared after her. What in the world was that all about? When her door slammed a moment later, he ran his hand through his hair and looked around, trying to find a reason for her anger. Jenny was still dressed and sleeping peacefully amid a pile of crumbs. Had she given Maggie trouble about going to bed?

He gently picked his daughter up, carried her to her room, and tucked her in. After cleaning up the living room and kitchen, he grabbed a beer, then sat frowning at the wall.

Jenny could be a handful sometimes. If she had refused to obey her aunt, he could understand Maggie's frustration. But it seemed like more than that. She didn't sound as if she was mad at Jenny. She seemed to be mad at *him*.

A STABLE ACCOUNT

Could she really be angry because he stayed away so long? He had purposely made a date to avoid being alone with Maggie. Was it possible she was jealous of Gail?

He drained the can and absently crushed it in his hand as he considered the possibility Maggie was starting to feel possessive of him. Although the way she'd jumped on his case had rankled a little, he liked the idea she might have missed him.

She had sounded exactly like a jealous wife. When Tiffany used to nag at him for working late, he would get mad as anything. He would yell back defensively and then retaliate by staying out even later the next time. So why wasn't he mad at Maggie?

Maybe because the idea that she might be a little jealous kind of appealed to him. It meant he might mean more to her than just a brother-in-law. That was certainly a step in the right direction.

The memory of how cute she looked standing there in her nightshirt made him grin. Her blue eyes had sparked with defiance, just the way Jenny's did when she threw a tantrum.

He chuckled, remembering the way Maggie used to look as a little girl when she got mad at him or Tony. Her temper, and the way she showed it, hadn't changed all that much. He still enjoyed seeing her get steamed—even when she directed the force of it his way.

Dan realized it had been a long time since he had seen her show any emotion but grief. Maybe this was a good sign that she was on her way to recovering from Chad's loss. But would she ever see *him* the way she saw his brother?

He could only hope.

* * *

The next morning Maggie put off getting out of bed as long as she could. By the time she finally dragged herself up, Dan and Jenny were gone.

She finished her morning routine and then drove to her shop. The workmen were already there, finishing the shelving and the bathroom

A STABLE ACCOUNT

remodeling. After checking with the carpenter and plumber to make sure everything was progressing as planned, Maggie decided to leave them to it. The clatter of the drills and hammers gave her a headache.

Glancing out the window, she saw Dan's truck outside his office. There weren't any other cars in front, so she hoped he was alone and she could apologize for her behavior last night. She would have to face him sooner or later; she might as well do it now.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked and opened the door.

He wasn't in the outer office, and she looked around uncertainly, wondering if she should come back later. Before she could decide, he stepped out of his private office, a folder in his hand.

Catching sight of her, he raised an eyebrow. "Maggie! Is anything wrong?"

She shook her head. "No. But I'd like to talk to you—if you have time."

The corner of his lip lifted a fraction. "I think I can spare a few minutes." He nodded toward his inner office, and she preceded him inside.

Taking the seat in front of his desk, she sat nervously twisting her hands while he sat down behind it.

"So, what can I do for you?"

She looked up and met his eyes. His voice was professional, but she could see the old teasing Danny in his face. What must he think of her?

Swallowing, she dropped her gaze. "I want to apologize for my behavior last night. I don't have any right to tell you what to do."

"No, you don't."

Maggie glanced up again, surprised at his ready agreement. His eyes gleamed with amusement. "You think it was funny?" she asked.

"I think you're still cute when you get mad."

Her cheeks warmed all over again. "I didn't want to be cute! I wanted you to understand!"

"What? That you missed me?"

A STABLE ACCOUNT

“No!” she denied, afraid he understood only too well. “I worked at my shop yesterday and got really tired going up and down the stairs. Then I came home and had to take care of the horses and...” She stopped, feeling the self-pity from the day before beginning to return.

“And Jenny wouldn’t help so you felt overwhelmed.”

She blinked, wondering at his comprehension. Glancing up, she found he watched her with a smile gently curving his lip.

“I had a talk with her this morning,” he admitted. “I asked what she did when she got home. And when I fed the horses this morning, I realized how much you must have had to do by yourself last night. I’m sorry.”

She nodded, afraid if she spoke, the water-works would start again.

“I don’t imagine it helped any, knowing I wasn’t working while you were struggling with the chores.”

Her control broke. She sniffed once before the tears started rolling down her cheeks. Mortified, she grabbed her purse and rummaged through it for a tissue.

Before she realized he had gotten up, Dan was there, pulling her out of the chair and into his arms. “Maggie,” he said softly. “Were you jealous?”

CHAPTER 9

Dan's question embarrassed her even more. She accepted the handkerchief he thrust in her hand and dabbed furiously at the tears that refused to stop flowing.

"Of c-c-course not," she finally sobbed, burying her face against his shoulder so he couldn't see her reddened cheeks or read her expression.

"You don't have any reason to be jealous. Gail is a friend, but that's all. We're not serious."

Maggie's heartache eased a little, and she managed to swallow down the last of her tears. "Even if you are, I don't have a right to tell you when to see her. I don't know what keeps coming over me. I guess it's all these pregnancy hormones Dr. Cooper warned me about. He said I'll probably continue to have mood swings and cry a lot."

"Sounds like he knows what he's talking about."

She nodded, her face still resting against him. Part of her knew she should pull away now that she had control of her emotions again. But he felt so good...

A STABLE ACCOUNT

He pulled her closer and caressed the back of her head and neck with a callused hand, threading his fingers through her hair. Her belly pressed against him, and she felt the baby kick.

Dan pulled away, frowning. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. Baby is just telling me he's tired of staying still."

Dan seemed about to say something else when the phone rang. Giving a tired sigh, he answered and spoke briefly to the caller, then handed the receiver to Maggie. "It's Gail—for you."

He motioned for her to take his chair behind the desk, and he leaned against the front edge while she spoke to the realtor. "Good news?" he asked when she hung up the phone.

"I hope so. Gail says two of the ranches I'm interested in are vacant, and she can take me to see them now. If one of them works out, I should be able to get out of your way pretty soon."

"You're not in the way. You're a big help."

She shrugged, hoping to appear nonchalant. "You won't need me very much once tax season is over." She grabbed her purse and made a quick exit.

* * *

Dan shut the door behind Maggie and watched through the window as she walked next door. Even her cute pregnant waddle was sexy!

He sighed as he picked up the file to resume work. Maggie was going to be moving out soon unless he did something about it.

Although, in some ways, it might be best if she left, he knew it wasn't what any of the three of them really wanted. Jenny would be devastated when her aunt left. And, he had to admit, so would he. He liked having Maggie close by, as a friend, even if it made things a little awkward sometimes.

Dan knew she liked living at his ranch, too. It was obvious she loved Jenny as much as his daughter loved her, in spite of whatever confrontation they might have had last night. And she needed physical help right now, whether she would admit it or not. If she got tired just

A STABLE ACCOUNT

helping out at his place, how could she handle a ranch of her own?

He needed to convince her to stay, for all their sakes. But how? She knew he wouldn't need her help as much once the tax deadline passed. Actually, now that his parents were back, he could probably get by before then if he had to. If he couldn't convince her he needed her, what other reason could he give her to stay? She was too darn proud to admit *she* wanted help.

At least she would stay through Easter. Thanksgiving and Christmas had been rough on his family, but they'd had each other. Maggie had spent those holidays with her family, but still... Holidays must be the worst, remembering previous years with her husband.

Maybe he could get Maggie to help him get ready for the Easter bunny. Jenny's excitement and enjoyment of the holiday should be contagious.

The phone rang, reminding him of unfinished work. He picked it up, pushing thoughts of Maggie away for a while.

* * *

"I'm sorry," Gail said as she and Maggie walked through the second vacant ranch house. "I thought one of these might be right for you."

Maggie ran her finger over the peeling paint on the wall. "Both of them looked good in the listing. But this one is in worse shape than the other. Either would take too much work to get ready soon. I don't have the time or money for extensive home remodeling right now when I'm trying to get my business started."

"I understand." Gail tested the banister on the stairs and wrinkled her nose when it moved. "The owner told me it was in good shape. I guess I should have come out myself first to check it out. Usually when a deal sounds too good to be true, it is."

"That's okay, I don't mind looking at anything that sounds feasible. If I saw the perfect place, I'd probably be willing to get it, even if I couldn't move in for a while. I may not really know what I want until I

A STABLE ACCOUNT

see it.”

“You prefer something you can move into now, rather than fix up like you’re doing with your store?”

They stopped in front of the fireplace, and Maggie slowly lowered herself to sit on the stone hearth. She heaved a sigh of relief and pressed a hand against her back to ease the ache. “Yes,” she said thoughtfully as Gail sat down next to her. “It’s getting harder and harder to do the physical things I used to do so easily. Getting the store ready is turning out to be a lot more work than I thought it would be. I can always move into the upstairs room there if I have to, but...”

“You’d prefer not to.”

“Those stairs are looking taller and taller as I gain more weight.”

Gail cast her a speculative look. “Dan says Jenny loves having you live with them. Don’t you want to stay there?”

Maggie hesitated. Just how good a friend was Gail? “Yes,” she admitted, choosing her words carefully. “But he won’t need me to baby-sit Jenny much longer. I think I’ll feel like I’m in the way if I don’t have enough to do.”

“I see what you mean. It must be hard, too.”

“How so?”

“Living with an attractive man, taking care of his house and family. It must seem kind of like marriage—without the perks.”

Maggie looked thoughtfully at the other woman. Was the realtor fishing for clues to their real relationship? Maybe Gail was more serious about Dan than he realized.

“Well,” she acknowledged, “I guess it could feel that way, if Dan and I weren’t such good friends. But we’ve known each other since we were kids.”

Gail cocked her head. “What was he like back then?”

Maggie smiled. “A typical mischievous little boy. He was my age, and my brother was two years older, the same as Chad. They were all friends. I liked to tag along wherever they went.”

A STABLE ACCOUNT

“So you and Chad were childhood sweethearts?”

“Not exactly. I had a crush on him, but he thought of me as a little girl for a long time. When he finally showed an interest in me, I was swept off my feet.”

“What about Dan?”

“About that time, he turned into a real pest. He kept teasing me all the time, acting like a jerk. I couldn’t believe we were the same age, and that I had hoped he would become my boyfriend when we got older.”

“You liked him? He told me he thought you didn’t.”

“I was always fond of him. I mean, when we were little, he was like another brother. But as we got older and the hormones started kicking in, I started to see him as a guy.”

“Was he cute?”

“Sure. But he was only about my height back then, and kind of skinny. Of course, way back then, so was I.” She looked down at her large middle with a wry grin.

Gail chuckled. “So, if you liked them both, how did you end up marrying Chad?”

Maggie sighed. “Well, I didn’t think Dan saw me as a girl. I mean...he just kept treating me like one of the guys. Chad went off to college, and I didn’t see him for a couple years. By the time he came back, I guess I’d done enough growing up for him to finally notice me.”

“So Chad asked you out?”

“Uh-huh. We fell in love right away, within a few dates. He was just what I wanted and thought I needed, someone older and more stable. I wanted to grow up and get away from home. Chad didn’t like college—his parents had pushed him into it. When they objected to our seeing each other, it made us all the more determined to be together. When they tried to send him back to the university, we eloped—on my eighteenth birthday.”

“You don’t regret it, do you?” Gail asked intuitively.

A STABLE ACCOUNT

"No. I loved him a lot. He was a good husband."

"What about Dan?"

Maggie looked up in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"You still have feelings for him, don't you?"

"Only as a friend."

Gail gave her a skeptical glance. "Dan and I are friends, even though I used to hope it could be more. But he never looks at me the way he does at you."

"I'm sure he feels protective of me because I'm carrying his brother's baby."

Gail shook her head. "I think it's more than that. And it's mutual. Maybe you were able to push any attraction you felt aside when you fell in love with his brother. But now that your friendship is renewing, I think those sparks are threatening to re-ignite."

"What makes you say that?"

Shrugging as she stood up, Gail said, "The way you look at him and talk about him. I think you're attracted to him, whether you want to admit it or not."

Maggie gratefully accepted the hand the realtor offered as she struggled to her feet from the low seat. "Well," she said, starting toward the door. "I'm sure he only sees me as his brother's very pregnant wife."

* * *

After Gail returned to her office, Maggie decided to stop in to see Dan. She hadn't told him when she would be back, and she wanted to make sure he knew she could get Jenny from school.

He looked up from his accounting books with a welcoming smile. "That didn't take long," he said. "How did the ranches look?"

She took the seat in front of his desk, shaking her head. "I didn't like either one."

"Oh." His tone sounded neutral. Was that a look of relief that passed over his face?

A STABLE ACCOUNT

“So I guess I’ll plan to move into the upstairs room at my store, whenever you think you won’t need me to stay at the ranch anymore,” she said, watching him closely.

His expression remained hard to read. “Why? Are you tired of taking care of Jenny?”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Of course not! I love baby-sitting her.”

“All of a sudden you seem awful anxious to leave.”

She swallowed. *If he only knew the reason.* “No, I’m not in a hurry. I just feel like I’ll be in the way when your work drops off and you have more time to spend at home.”

Dan took a deep breath and drummed his pencil on the table as he appeared to search for the right words. “I’ve been deliberately staying away at night because I thought you didn’t want me there. After the night we kissed, I thought maybe you felt uncomfortable around me,” he admitted.

“No! I’ve been kind of embarrassed about my own behavior because I’m so emotional.” She sighed. “But sometimes I need an adult to talk to. I was feeling pretty lonely yesterday by myself.”

He looked up and their eyes met. “Then why don’t you plan to stay at my ranch a while longer? I like having you there.”

The sincere look in his eyes made her heart ache. If only he was saying he wanted her there because he cared about her!

“Chad would want you to stay,” he said, further dashing her hopes. “You need to take care of his baby. That should be your top priority right now.”

Disappointment washed over Maggie. Of course that was what he meant! He didn’t care about *her*! He was only concerned about how well she took care of his brother’s unborn child.

She raised her chin and forced herself to look into his eyes. “I’ll think about it. Meanwhile I’ll go pick up Jenny.”

* * *

A STABLE ACCOUNT

After Maggie left, Dan stared at the door for a moment, shaking his head. Now what had he done to upset her? He thought reminding her she was family would help make her feel more comfortable about living in his house. Hadn't she kept saying she thought she was in the way?

What other reason could she have for wanting to leave so suddenly? Unless the kiss they had shared was still making her uneasy. But he had promised her it wouldn't happen again, and he was doing his best to make sure it didn't. He thought reminding her he wasn't forgetting she carried Chad's baby would help keep things in perspective. Instead she'd seemed almost insulted...

He mulled over the rest of their conversation and remembered she had said she was lonely for some adult conversation. Why hadn't that occurred to him? He often felt the same way when all he did was go to work and play with Jenny. Going out with Gail last night had been his chance to share some adult conversation. Maggie probably needed another friend to talk to as much as he did. At least with her childbirth classes starting this week, she would be seeing Trish and spending some time with other mothers-to-be. Maybe that would help. In the meantime maybe he should try to spend more time with her, especially when Jenny was home to chaperone.

* * *

Jenny got in Maggie's car with her usual enthusiasm. After chattering about her morning at kindergarten, she asked her aunt what she had done.

Maggie kept her eyes focused on the road. "I worked at my shop for a while and then went to look at some ranches."

"Why?"

"I'm hoping to find one to buy."

"But you live with us now. I want you to stay!"

Warmth flowed through Maggie. "I know, honey. I like living with you, too. But I can't stay with you and your dad forever. My baby and I

A STABLE ACCOUNT

need to have a home of our own, so we can be our own little family.”

“But you’re part of *our* family!”

“Well, I won’t be leaving right away. I didn’t like either one of the places I saw today. I’m going to keep looking.”

Jenny crossed her arms. “I hope you don’t find one for a long time!”

Glancing at her out of the corner of her eye, Maggie fought the urge to smile at the indignant expression on the girl’s face. Apparently Dan had been right about his daughter’s feelings on the matter. But she couldn’t postpone moving out just because of her niece.

“Daddy just got home!” Jenny squealed when they turned into the drive and she spotted his truck parked in his usual spot.

Dan strode over to Maggie’s car and opened Jenny’s door, catching his daughter in a hug as she jumped out.

“What’re you doing home?” she asked, giggling as he tickled her before setting her on her feet.

“I decided to take a break and come home for lunch. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure!” She took his hand and started for the house.

Maggie climbed out of her car more slowly, watching the happy exchange with mixed feelings. If only...

Dan turned to look at her, and their eyes met. “Soup and sandwiches okay?” he asked.

“Are you volunteering to fix lunch?”

“I thought we could make it a group effort.”

Jenny looked back and forth between the two of them, a slight frown creasing her forehead. “I’ll help,” she offered.

Maggie smiled at her, and Jenny’s frown disappeared as she grabbed her aunt’s hand with her free one.

“See, Aunt Maggie? You’re part of our family!” she said, beaming as she skipped along between them, holding onto both her father and her aunt.

A STABLE ACCOUNT

Feeling a flush of embarrassment, Maggie remained silent.

"Out of the mouth of babes." Dan gave her a pointed look over the top of Jenny's head.

"What do you mean, Daddy?" his daughter asked, looking up at him curiously.

They had reached the house, so he opened the door and waited while Maggie and Jenny preceded him. "I mean," he said, shutting the door behind him, "that I was just telling your aunt the same thing. She should stay here because she's part of the family." He took off his Stetson and hung it on the peg by the door. "I'm glad you agree with me," he added, winking at Jenny.

Maggie set down her purse and turned to him, hands on hips. She tried to appear stern, but a smile tugged at her lips. "Looks like I'm outnumbered here."

Jenny giggled. "Does that mean you'll stay?"

Unable to resist the child's pleading expression, she gave in to a grin. "I guess so. For a while yet."

"Yeah!" The girl's smile spread from ear to ear.

"Jenny, why don't you go check the horses' water?" Maggie suggested.

"Do I have to? I want to help make lunch."

"Yes," Dan said sternly. "If you want Aunt Maggie to stay here, you have to do what she says. Remember our talk this morning?"

Jenny's lower lip quivered for a moment as she appeared to consider. "All right," she finally agreed and went out, leaving Dan and Maggie alone.

Casting him a suspicious look, Maggie asked, "Did you tell her I wanted to leave because she wouldn't listen to me?"

"No. But I kind of figured she gave you trouble yesterday. I told her it better not happen again if she wants you to be happy here."

"Do you think it's fair to use your daughter to convince me to stay?"

A STABLE ACCOUNT

He shrugged, giving her a mischievous grin. “It worked, didn’t it?”

CHAPTER 10

Dan grinned when Maggie narrowed her eyes at him. “You’ve got the same look you used to have when we were young and you tried to wheedle me out of the last cupcake,” she said.

“It worked then, too, didn’t it?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Yes.” Shaking her head, she agreed, “All right. Since my upstairs room at the shop isn’t quite ready yet anyway, we can table this discussion for a few more weeks. Maybe until my store opens. But then we’ll have to work something else out.”

“How is it going with the store?” Dan asked, relieved at the chance to change the topic. He set sandwich ingredients on the table. “I’ve been so busy with my own work I haven’t asked about yours.”

Maggie sighed. She picked up a jar, struggled with the lid for a moment, then handed it to him. After he easily twisted the top off, she started to spread the mayonnaise on the bread. “The building repairs are going great. The workmen will be done soon. But I’m having trouble with the business end.”

A STABLE ACCOUNT

“How so?”

“None of the wholesale distributors believe I want to buy for a tack store. They think I’m just a horse owner trying to get better prices.”

“Have you talked to other store owners?”

“A few in Ocala and Orlando. But they seem to think the same thing. Or maybe they’re worried about competition. I don’t know. But it’s really frustrating.”

“Maybe I can help.”

Maggie glanced at him, a hopeful expression on her face. “Do you think so? I hate to ask you, especially now.”

“I *am* an accountant. I put all those business courses I had to take to use when I started up my own firm here in Magnolia Cove.”

“Well, I know, but—”

“Listen, put everything you’re having trouble with on hold for a few more days. As soon as I turn in my last clients’ returns and extensions on the fifteenth, you’ll be my top priority new client. Okay?”

He stifled a grin as he watched the warring emotions cross her face while she finished assembling the sandwiches. She was having trouble and didn’t want to accept help—even his. Or maybe *especially* his. That was the Maggie he remembered.

That was the Maggie he loved.

* * *

The rest of the week passed quickly. Although Dan continued to work long hours, he came home for dinner every night. Whenever he and Maggie had a few minutes alone while Jenny was outside, he discussed his plans for surprising his daughter at Easter. Maggie offered to pick up some things for Jenny’s basket and to help her choose an outfit for church. Dan encouraged her efforts, which helped to make her feel more useful.

Although she often caught him glancing at her when he thought she wasn’t looking, he made no further attempt to touch her or discuss the situation between them. She did her best to follow his lead and

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concentrate on his daughter.

Thursday evening as Maggie tore lettuce for the evening's dinner, her heart did a little skip of gladness when she heard the now familiar rumble of Dan's pickup as he pulled into the drive. A glance at the clock confirmed he was earlier than usual. She looked out the window and noted the angry set of his shoulders when he slammed the door of the truck cab and strode toward the house. She put the salad aside and hurried to unlock the door, opening it as he reached the porch. "What's wrong?" she asked, concerned about the worry lines on his face.

He glanced around her into the kitchen. "Where's Jenny?"

"Coloring in the living room. Why?"

He walked past Maggie and set his cowboy hat on the hook by the door. "Her mother called me at the office. Tiffany has to go out of state next week so she wants Jenny to spend Easter with her in Orlando." His voice held a blend of anger and disappointment.

An unexpected sadness washed over Maggie. "Oh." She studied his face, but Dan gave no further clue to his inner feelings. "What did you tell her?" she asked.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I stalled. Said I'd have to ask Jenny."

"Do you think she'll want to go?"

"Hard to guess. I know she's been looking forward to spending the day here with you and me. She's been talking about it all week. But she also rarely gets to see her mother. So I shouldn't begrudge her the opportunity, even if it is last minute."

"You'd much rather she stay here, though."

He turned around so that Maggie couldn't see his face at all. "Of course! But what I want isn't important. The unselfish thing to do would be let her go." He braced his hands on the counter and stared down toward the Formica.

Maggie couldn't stand the strain in his voice. She crossed the kitchen and stood behind him. He stiffened when she reached around

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him and grasped his arms, but he didn't move. Hesitating only a moment, she rubbed her hands over the corded muscles beneath his denim shirt. She stopped when she realized she was noticing how good he felt instead of concentrating on helping him to find a solution or helping to ease the pain of the tough decision. "I'm sorry," she said. "It must be hard to know what's right."

"What's right," he repeated. "I seem to be wondering about that a lot lately."

He straightened and she released his arms as he turned to face her. His eyes gleamed with an unidentifiable emotion. He grabbed her hands. Tugging her toward him again, he enveloped her in a hug. She melted into his embrace and laid her head against his chest. His heartbeat thundered against her ear. He stroked her hair with his large gentle hand.

"What do you want?" he asked softly.

Her own heartbeat took off like a Derby contender. Was he still referring to his daughter and Easter? She swallowed hard. "Do you mean about Jenny going to her mother's?"

He paused so long she knew his thoughts had momentarily made the same detour hers had. "Yeah," he said. "On Easter. You've been helping me get ready all week. You even talked her into a new dress for church. Aren't you counting on her being here with us?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I have been looking forward to spending the day with all of you, too, so of course I'd be disappointed. But like you said, it might not be fair to deprive Jenny of the chance to see her mother."

"Yeah." He sighed.

Maggie forced herself to think about the situation they were discussing instead of how good it felt to be cuddled in the warmth of his strong embrace. "Have you asked your parents? What do they think?"

He paused in the act of stroking her hair. "Damn!" he said. "You're

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right. I hadn't even thought of that. You and I aren't the only ones who'll be disappointed if Jenny spends the day somewhere else. Mom and Dad timed their trip so they'd be able to spend the holiday with their only granddaughter. With Chad gone, we're all they have. They're probably looking forward to spending the day here with us almost as much as Jenny is."

Maggie nodded, but remained where she was. Unable to read his voice, she wondered if he'd considered that without Jenny there'd be no one home to chaperone them. Did that idea scare him half as much as it did her? After a moment, she said, "Don't worry about me. I can still accept the invitation to Tony's. If you don't want to be alone, you could still have your parents come here for dinner. They'd probably feel more comfortable without me in the way."

His shoulders moved as Dan shook his head. "I want you here. Regardless."

"I don't know..."

"Daddy?"

Jenny's voice behind her startled Maggie, and she jerked away from Dan. She took a step backwards before turning around. The girl stood in the kitchen doorway staring at them with wide eyes.

Dan hurried over and scooped his daughter into his arms. "How's my punkin?" he asked before giving her a noisy smooch on the neck.

Jenny squealed as he tickled her tummy. "Daddeeeee!"

Still warm with embarrassment at being caught in Dan's embrace, Maggie turned away to regain her composure. "Why don't you two feed the horses?" she suggested, as she grabbed a dishrag and pretended interest in a stain on the counter. "We'll have dinner after you finish."

"Good idea," Dan said. "C'mon, Jenny. I need to talk to you about something." The door opened and shut a moment later.

With mixed emotions, Maggie sagged against the counter. Where would her innocent attempt at comfort have led if Jenny hadn't come in

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when she did?

* * *

As soon as they were outside, Jenny tugged on Dan's hand. "Daddy?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why were you hugging Aunt Maggie?"

Busted. He chose his words carefully. "I like her," he said. "Don't you?"

"Uh huh." She spotted Shadow on the path ahead and dropped Dan's hand to race over to the cat. Luckily the feline was hungry and didn't do his usual disappearing act. He seemed un-customarily happy to let Jenny approach and pet him, giving Dan a temporary reprieve from further explanation. She picked up the cat and carried him along the rest of the way to the barn.

Knowing his daughter, this wouldn't be the end of the topic. Still, he could do his best to distract her. Getting her opinion on the possible change of Easter plans was as good an excuse as he'd get. When he'd thought his reasons for wanting her not to go were purely selfish, he'd been mad at the whole situation. But as Maggie had made him realize, he wasn't the only one who'd be affected by altering their plans for the holiday.

Damn, that woman was good for him, in lots of ways. If only his feelings were mutual.

"Aunt Maggie and I were talking about Sunday," he told Jenny as he opened the feed bin. "Your mother would like you to visit her."

"Can I go?" She set the cat down.

"Sure. If that's what you want. We do have other plans for Easter, though." He eyed her surreptitiously as he measured the grain.

Her face wrinkled with a puzzled frown. "On *Easter*?" Her excited tone turned to dismay. "All day?"

Dan nodded as he filled a feed bucket. "I think that's what your mother wants. She's going on a trip and would like to spend some time

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with you first.”

“What about the Easter Bunny? And dinner?”

“I’m sure the Easter Bunny would find you anyway. But you’d have to miss church with us and the ham dinner we planned with Aunt Maggie and your grandparents.”

Jenny absently stroked the cat as Shadow rubbed against her leg, purring. After a moment she looked over at Dan.

“Do I have to go on *Sunday*?” she whined, her voice almost breaking. “I want to be home on Easter.”

Relief flooded him, and he smiled. “Not if you don’t want to. I told your mother I’d ask you before we changed any plans.”

“Will she be mad if I don’t go?”

Dan gave a wry grin. Tiffany’s temper when she didn’t get her own way was one of the few things in life he could count on. “Let me worry about that,” he said. “Maybe you could go visit her on Saturday instead. Would you like that?”

“Can we color eggs when I get back?”

“Absolutely.” He reached out his hand and Jenny placed hers on his palm with a wide smile. “I’ll call your mother back and see what we can work out,” he said.

* * *

After Jenny helped him feed the horses and cat, Dan sent Jenny back to the house to wash up while he pulled out his cell phone. Although Tiffany put up a brief protest, he managed to hold onto his temper and explain the situation. When he told her that his parents were counting on having their granddaughter with them for their first Easter without Chad, Tiffany backed off. With uncustomary grace she agreed to cooperate. His ex-wife even offered to pick up Jenny early Saturday morning from his office and return her home in time for supper that evening. He breathed a sigh of relief when she declined the invitation to join them, which he’d felt obligated to suggest.

Maggie threw him a questioning look as he came back into the

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house. He gave her a thumbs up, and he warmed when her face relaxed with a smile. During dinner he explained the new plan. Luckily Jenny was too excited about the coming holiday to ask any more questions about what he and Maggie had been doing in the kitchen when she'd discovered their embrace.

However, he wondered if he should bring up the subject to Maggie when they were alone later. Although he hated to have to talk about his attraction for her, he knew his daughter was bound to ask more questions eventually. They needed to have an answer ready.

After putting Jenny to bed, he decided he might as well get the conversation with Maggie over with before starting his evening of paperwork. Besides, he'd been longing to hold her again ever since she'd jumped out of his arms at his daughter's interruption earlier. Although he figured Maggie had probably regretted her impulsive action by now, he couldn't help hoping she'd enjoyed the result half as much as he had. He certainly wouldn't mind a repeat performance if she initiated it.

Just in case, he took a shower and changed into some clean clothes before going to find Maggie. By the time he emerged from his room some time later, she was sound asleep on the couch. Resisting the temptation to kiss her, he covered her with a blanket, then forced his thoughts to the paperwork waiting for him in the kitchen.

* * *

Maggie awoke to a silent house. Realizing Dan must have once again found her asleep and covered her, she felt a moment of embarrassment. Still, it was nice to have him be so thoughtful.

On her way to the bathroom, she saw the light in the kitchen and peeked into the room. Dan sat at the table, his briefcase and laptop in the midst of a pile of paperwork. Deep in concentration, he scribbled on a form in front of him. Although she longed to approach him, she knew it wouldn't be fair to distract him. Since he'd come home early from the office, he probably had to finish up all the work at home.

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Besides, the last time she'd done that, they'd ended up kissing. There was no way she could let things get out of control like that again. No matter how much she enjoyed it. He didn't want her that way. Did he?

Her body warmed once again at the memory of the way he'd taken her hands and pulled her into his arms earlier tonight. She'd fit there so perfectly, as if she was meant to be there.

Sudden guilt stabbed her. Although her initial touch had been meant to comfort Dan at a time of high emotion, his ready acceptance had brought her a swift change of heart. Instead of sisterly comfort, she'd felt an attraction she had no business feeling. Had he been able to tell how her body reacted? Did she want him to?

With a sigh, she left him to his work and silently went to bed. An hour later, while she still lay awake filled with guilt and longing, she heard Dan's tired footsteps as he went down the hall and entered his own room.

* * *

The Saturday before Easter, Dan took Jenny with him when he left for the office since her mother had offered to pick her up there.

Although he instructed Maggie to rest, she soon found herself restless and lonely. She decided to attend the monthly horse show at Greenwood Stables. After scribbling a brief note to Dan, she headed for Orlando.

The drive was familiar and uneventful. Maggie parked under a tree and opened her car door. She took a deep breath of the heady scents of horse, packed dirt, and newly mowed grass.

Mr. Dobranski's instructions to competitors in the ring blared through the loudspeaker, competing to be heard over encouraging calls from spectators on the bleachers. Clangs from equipment intermingled with the purr of vehicle engines, equine snorts and nickers.

Although she arrived before noon, spring sunshine already beat down. Maggie glanced past the two dozen or so parked horse trailers,

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barely noticing the people who milled around preparing their horses and themselves for upcoming events. How many times had she been part of this chaos? Would she ever be again?

Her baby kicked, and she smiled as she rested a hand against her belly. "You like the excitement, too, huh? Must be in your blood."

"Maggie?"

She turned at the familiar friendly voice. "Mrs. Dobranski!"

The older woman hugged her, then held her away and inspected her with eyes that sparkled with affection. "I'm so glad you came! We've missed you around here."

"I've missed everyone here, too. Are David and Cassy around?"

"Of course! They never miss a show. David's students always do well. Some of Cassy's beginning students are starting to enter now too. And Cassy taught Lady to jump! She shows her in the novice hunter classes. We'll be running those this afternoon. If you can stay for a while, you should see her."

"I'll try."

"I'm on my way to the office to check phone messages. Would you like to come?"

"Sure."

They chatted about Maggie's plans for her tack shop as they walked the short distance to the office inside the barn. Many of the stalls were empty since their usual occupants were involved in the show. The barn seemed eerily quiet compared to the aura of excitement outside.

As her elderly friend checked the answer machine, Maggie glanced over the bulletin board on the wall in the aisle. Pictures of David Carlyle on his black stallion dominated the center display. Flyers about horse shows bordered newspaper clippings about equine events and people from the stable.

A lump formed in Maggie's throat when she spotted the photo of her with Chad standing in front of the sign at their own ranch. That had been taken the day of the grand opening at Pine Haven...

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"All done!" Mrs. Dobranski bustled back out of the office. "One of the pre-entries left a message that she had to cancel. I suspected as much when she didn't show for her class..." Her voice faded away as she narrowed her eyes at Maggie. "Are you okay, dear? Maybe you should stay out of the sun. Can I get you a cool drink or—"

Maggie took her hand. "No, thank you. I'm fine. I was just looking at the pictures and remembering when they were taken. I got a little sentimental." She grinned sheepishly.

"Oh dear. I'm sorry. I never thought about taking down those old ones."

Maggie shook her head and squeezed her friend's palm. "I'm glad you kept them up. It's nice to know people remember us."

The older woman's eyes misted. "Are you sure, dear? I know that was a happy day for you. A proud one. But if it upsets you to look at it..."

"Oh no. I'm fine." Maggie took a deep breath and forced a cheerful tone into her voice. "It looks like David is doing well."

Mrs. Dobranski beamed. "Oh my, yes! I'm so glad he came back here after recovering from his riding accident. He's a wonderful teacher."

Maggie smiled. "Cassy seems to be good for him."

"Isn't she? We're fond of her, too, you know. She's like one of the family. Just like you are. We were delighted when they found each other. We felt so bad for him after his break-up with Rhonda."

Maggie nodded. The older woman had never made a secret of the fact that she didn't care for David's first wife.

Mrs. Dobranski harrumphed. "All she wanted was a career. She's still riding the show circuit, you know."

"I heard she might make the Olympics."

"Probably." The older woman shrugged. "I never doubted her riding ability. And I suppose she did love David in her own way. Just not enough to put him first. I tried to accept her for his sake, but I wasn't

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surprised when that marriage didn't last."

The approach of footsteps ended further conjecture. Several students led their horses into stalls and began untacking them as they chatted excitedly about their events.

Leading a sorrel mare, Cassy entered the barn. She greeted Maggie and explained that she had to help with a tack change for one of her students. They promised to meet up later and have lunch together.

Maggie followed Mrs. Dobranski outside. On the way to the ring she glanced around for someone she knew, and she spotted a couple of familiar faces. Several of them smiled and returned her wave. She recognized a few of the students and boarders from Pine Haven as well as some she had seen at other shows.

Mrs. Dobranski assured Maggie that her husband would want to see her as soon as he took a break following the morning events. After Maggie promised to hang around but not to overdo it, the older woman left her by the show ring and hurried off to handle more details.

Maggie took a seat near the end of the lowest row of bleachers. The English Walk-Trot class was in progress. The competitors were all young students in the required show attire of velvet-covered helmet, show coat, dress shirt, breeches, and knee-high boots. All the horses were perfectly groomed, most with braided manes and tails.

One of the geldings seemed to have a mind of his own. A tiny blonde girl on the back of the black horse struggled to keep him under control as he tried to run up behind the mare ahead.

A woman on the bleachers above Maggie screeched instructions. "Circle him around, Becky, don't let him get away from you! Show that horse who's boss!"

Apparently trying to obey, the girl turned the gelding in a small circle and fell back into line with the rest, this time at a safe distance. Maggie noted that in her confusion the girl began to lift herself up out of the saddle as the wrong front hoof of the horse moved forward.

"Noooo," the loud-mouthed woman groaned. "Now you're posting

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on the wrong diagonal! No blue for you today.” Maggie shook her head, wondering if the girl would be more upset at the loss of a top ribbon or the absence of her mother’s approval.

Thank goodness her own mother had been supportive whether she’d won ribbons or not. Maggie knew how much time it took to prepare for a show like this. She’d spent many, many painstaking hours doing the same thing both as a child and as an adult. Maybe someday she’d be out here doing it again. Perhaps she could bring Jenny next time, and eventually she could even bring her own child. She smiled, liking the idea.

Mr. Dobranski instructed the competitors to line up for final inspection. Luckily even the difficult horse cooperated and stood quietly as the judge walked down the line. Maggie noted with approval that he spoke to each child individually, pointing out things they could do to improve. She remembered from her own experience that a show official like that could have a much more positive impact on a child than one who simply pointed out things that were wrong.

Even so, the woman behind her continued to grumble about the way her daughter had presented. Maggie set her jaw. It wasn’t her place to intervene. Maybe she could find the girl later and say something encouraging to her.

The class which followed was a more advanced one that included showing the horses at all three gaits of walk, trot, and canter. Maggie was pleased to see a few of her former students compete. Having noticed a few mistakes, she made a mental guess of the final rankings as the judge completed his inspection of the horses that stood in line.

The courier raced to the elevated announcer’s booth, handed up the judge’s sheet, and took the ring of six colorful ribbons to be handed out. A few moments later, Mr. Dobranski read the final placements and the horses trotted one by one past the officials, their riders accepting their prizes on the way out of the ring. Maggie was pleased to discover she’d guessed most of the correct rankings.

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After the blue ribbon winner exited, lunch break was announced. Most of the spectators left the bleachers in search of refreshments or competitors to congratulate.

Maggie stood but remained near her seat, knowing she could count on Mrs. Dobranski to alert her husband of her presence. As soon as the crowd cleared away, a familiar white-haired man emerged from the booth. A wide smile creased his weathered face as he descended the steps toward ground level. "Maggie Newman! Are you checking up on me, young lady?"

She warmed with delight at his fond tone. "I had to make sure you're still running the show right, didn't I?" She hurried into his arms as he reached the bottom step.

"I've missed you, Maggie girl," he said, hugging her tight.

Laughing, she pulled away and met his twinkling eyes. "I'm hardly a girl any more."

"Hogwash. You'll always be a girl around here."

"It's nice to know he treats someone else like that," Cassy said, joining them.

Mr. Dobranski winked at Maggie, then turned to her petite freckled friend. "But *you* still pass for sixteen," he told Cassy.

She laughed. "I guess I should be flattered."

"Someday you'll be glad you look so young," Mrs. Dobranski pointed out.

Feeling at home, Maggie chatted comfortably with her friends on the way to the concession stand. After stocking up on hot dogs and sodas, they settled at the picnic table Mrs. Dobranski had reserved under a tree. David joined them for a while, then excused himself to help some of his students get ready for a class. Cassy left a short while later to prepare for her own next event.

Mr. and Mrs. Dobranski filled Maggie in on the accomplishments of other mutual friends as well as their own grown children and grandchildren. Although several of them would be home for Easter,

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none would arrive until that evening.

"We'd love to have you come back tomorrow to have dinner with us," Mrs. Dobranski said as she stood and began collecting the empty containers. "There's always room and plenty of food."

"Thank you," Maggie said. "That's very kind of you. But I have plans already."

Mr. Dobranski grinned. "You know you're always welcome if you change your mind, Maggie girl."

"Thanks. But I'll be having dinner with Chad's family."

"Oh?" Mrs. Dobranski sounded more amused than surprised. A look passed between the older couple, but they didn't comment.

Before Maggie could elaborate, one of the show officials came over to ask Mr. Dobranski a question. The older couple headed back to the announcer's booth a few moments later.

A sudden wave of loneliness descended on Maggie. Not knowing any of the contestants entering the ring, she decided to skip the next event and wandered among the horse trailers instead.

Although a few people nodded hello or smiled as she passed, most were busy and paid little attention to her as she sauntered among them. When she spotted Cassy in the warm-up ring, she hurried over to watch.

As she approached, Maggie saw that her friend rode Lady. Cassy had taken good care of the horse Maggie had sold her. The mare's glossy coat shone, and the tight braids in her mane attested to the careful grooming she'd had that morning. They sailed over several jumps on the practice course, moving well together.

Maggie watched a few more riders attempt the same hurdles. Most accomplished the feat without errors.

David appeared at Maggie's side and nodded a greeting before turning his gaze on his wife.

"Cassy looks good," Maggie told him.

He watched her attempt the next obstacle. "She'll have some stiff

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competition, though.”

“She’s done a wonderful job training Lady. I never showed her in the English classes, since I only rode Western.”

“You did some game shows, too, didn’t you?” he asked, without taking his eyes off his wife.

“Yes. Lady seemed to like the barrels and poles as much as I did. I guess racing around those are more fun than the restrictions of equitation classes. I never knew she could jump, too.”

“You never know what someone can accomplish until she tries.” He winked at Maggie. “I’m going to go give Cassy a few pointers.”

“Okay. Tell her ‘break a leg.’”

Although he nodded and turned away quickly, Maggie immediately regretted her choice of words. David’s promising career as a champion equestrian had ended suddenly when his horse had fallen while going over a jump during a national show. The horse had been killed and his own leg so badly injured that David hadn’t been able to ride again until after months of physical therapy. He’d never recovered enough to return to competition. Instead he had turned to teaching others.

Maggie wondered if he regretted the choice. Was it hard to teach someone else to do what he had once enjoyed, without resenting their talent or ability to do it?

Watching him with Cassy as they discussed strategy for attempting the hunt course, Maggie doubted he had many regrets. Mutual love and admiration shone from their eyes. No matter how his wife placed in the show, he’d be proud of her.

Although his life had certainly changed in the last few years, if anything, it was better than ever. He may not go back to show jumping, but he had a wonderful future ahead of him.

Maggie had a future to look forward to as well. The realization made her smile. Like David, her life was vastly different from a year ago. But with a new home and business—and best of all, a new baby—she had a lot to anticipate.

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Cassy began to ride the course under David's watchful eye. Not wanting to distract them or Lady, Maggie discreetly slipped away. She resumed her seat on the bleachers to watch the jumping events going on in the ring.

As soon as the previous competitors received their ribbons and exited through the gate, the next hunter class got underway. Maggie soon became engrossed in watching a large Thoroughbred and his rider as they traveled through the circuit of jumps.

The horse cleared the last hurdle without faults, and Maggie joined in the burst of applause. She felt someone watching her and turned to see who had slipped unobtrusively onto the seat next to her.

"Dan!" Her smile of greeting faded at the grave expression on his face.

* * *

"Having fun?" Dan asked, hoping he didn't sound sarcastic.

Maggie nodded, her eyes wide as they searched his. "Yes, I was... What's wrong? Wh-what you are doing here?"

He took her elbow and led her away from the bleachers to a quiet spot in the shadow of a tree behind the seats.

"What is it, Danny? Has something happened? You look so..."

He gritted his teeth and looked away. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to spoil your good time. Nothing is wrong."

"Then why...?"

"I saw your car, so I knew you were still here. I checked the bleachers first and didn't see you. When I couldn't find you in the barn or on the grounds, I got worried."

Dan glanced at her when she didn't reply. She pursed her lips and shook her head, spilling wild curls over her shoulders. "There's no reason for concern. I'm perfectly capable of finding my way around a horse show!"

She stalked off toward the barn. Although she hurried, his longer stride quickly brought him next to her. She glared over at him, but kept

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going. "Now who is acting like a jealous spouse?" she asked. "You had no reason to check up on me."

Her reference to their last quarrel made him smile. "I'm not checking up on you."

"No? Then why are you here? It's almost an hour drive from Magnolia Cove!"

She was right. He was jealous as hell, knowing she was there enjoying herself without him. He wasn't about to tell her that, though.

"I thought the memories might bother you. I can almost feel Chad's presence around here. The two of you did so many of these shows together."

They reached the front of the empty barn and stopped at the wide doorway. Maggie's eyes misted, and she raised her chin. "I've got to learn to deal with it."

"No reason I can't help."

Before she could reply, a young girl rode up on a black horse. Maggie smiled and caught her eye. "I saw you ride earlier," she called to the youngster. "You did well."

She grimaced. "Mom didn't think so. I didn't win."

"Did you do your best?"

The girl nodded, her lower lip trembling.

"That's what matters, isn't it?"

"My horse was a brat." She took a step forward, but the gelding shied sideways, nearly unseating his rider.

Dan leapt forward, but Maggie was closer. She grabbed the reins and yanked the horse back. "Stand."

The gelding obeyed and stood still with nostrils flaring. Maggie looked at the girl. "He's a handful, isn't he?"

"He's not always like this. I don't know why he's so spooky today."

"He's usually well behaved?"

Dan tried to step between the horse and Maggie. "I don't think you should—"

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"I can handle him." She tossed a glare his way and then ignored him as she asked the girl, "Are you using any different tack? Is this his regular bridle?"

"Yeah."

"What about his saddle and pad?"

"They're the same too. My brother used the pad first, though."

Maggie gave her a sharp glance. "Did you make sure it was clean before you transferred it to your horse?"

The girl shrugged. "I shook it out."

Dan stayed close but stepped aside as Maggie ran her hand under the pad. A moment later she tugged on something and then held up a sandspur. "I'd be racing around too if I had that under my clothes."

The girl reddened. "Thanks." She dismounted and led her horse away.

Maggie remained silent as she watched them leave.

"That was a dangerous thing to do," Dan said quietly.

She stiffened. "I know horses. I knew how to handle him."

"I don't doubt that. But even experienced horse people get hurt all the time. Look what happened to David Carlyle. And his ex-wife lost their baby!"

"They both had riding accidents while jumping in competitions. This is hardly the same thing."

"I know. I just worry about you."

"You mean you worry about the baby, don't you?"

Her wounded tone surprised him. "No! I'm concerned about both of you."

She walked into the barn and stopped in front of the bulletin board. He followed her and glanced at the pictures. Was she staring at anything in particular?

Finally she asked, "How did you get away? I thought you had to work."

"I do. But I came home to have lunch with you. Instead I found

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your note.”

“Oh.” She ran her hand idly over the frame on the bulletin board. “If you had let me know you were coming, I could have waited.”

“Would you? Or are you still avoiding being alone with me?”

“Of...of c-course not.”

He touched her shoulder, and she flinched.

“Maggie, look at me.”

When she shook her head, he knew she was fighting tears again. No way was he going to let her beat herself up for feeling emotional. But he didn’t want to embarrass her further either. Or himself.

“I guess I better get back,” he said, gritting his teeth. “See you at home.” He took a step toward the parking lot.

“Wait!”

Her cry was so soft he almost wasn’t sure he’d heard right. He spun around.

“I’d like you to stay with me.” Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and her lip trembled. “It was sweet of you to come check on me.”

Her sheepish expression reminded him of the young girl he’d once been so fond of teasing. But the Maggie who stood in front of him now was all woman. He fought the urge to take her in his arms.

She ran her tongue over her lips. Did she have to do that? She had the most delectable mouth. Telling himself he needed to forget how terrific she had tasted when they’d kissed, he dropped his gaze.

Her chest heaved, and he couldn’t help noticing the rise and fall of her breasts. Aw, hell... He forced himself to focus on her face again.

Now what? He’d told her he wouldn’t make another pass, and yet she was making it damn hard to remember that. He searched her eyes. The promise there tore down his reservations. He touched her cheek and leaned toward her.

“Maggie, I—”

CHAPTER 11

“Dan!” a familiar voice called.

Just in time! Relieved at the interruption, Dan pushed his amorous thoughts of Maggie aside and turned toward his brother’s old friend.

David Carlyle hurried toward them. “Glad you could make it! I haven’t seen you in a while.”

They shook hands warmly. “Still wearing those sissy clothes, huh?” Dan teased.

David made a show of straightening the collar of his dress shirt. “Hey, I’m not getting any complaints from the women.” He winked at Maggie.

They shared a laugh. The English/Western feud had always been a source for friendly bantering between them. Although they’d all learned to ride on Western saddles, wearing jeans and cowboy hats and boots, show jumping required English breeches, hunt caps and knee-high boots.

“Speaking of your female fans, “ Dan said, “I’d like to meet your

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wife.”

“Right after she wins the next class, “ David said with a grin. “Come on.”

Dan cast an inquiring glance at Maggie.

She blushed a beautiful pink. “I’ll be along in a minute.” She hurried off toward the bathroom.

Dan glanced at David. “Do we have time to wait for her?”

“Sure.”

Dan nodded in the direction Maggie had gone. “I hope she’s not overdoing it. Do you think she’s okay?”

David leaned against the wall and idly tapped his palm with the riding crop he held in the other hand. “Why?”

“Mrs. Dobranski said she seems a little pale.”

David shrugged. “You know what a mother hen Mrs. D can be. I think coming here alone might have been a little hard on Maggie at first. But she’s a trooper. She was watching Cassy ride Lady earlier. I think she’s accepted selling her horse. She knows if she changes her mind, Cassy would be willing to work something out.”

“I’m more concerned about her wearing herself out.”

David raised an eyebrow. “She’s not sick, is she?”

“No... I just want to make sure she doesn’t take any chances with the baby.”

“Uh huh.”

David’s amused tone made Dan uncomfortable. He shoved his hands in his pockets and glanced down the aisle where Maggie had disappeared.

“Sure that’s all you’re concerned about?” David asked.

Dan bit back a curse. Had everybody in the world guessed his feelings for Maggie? “She’s my brother’s wife,” he hedged.

“She *was* your brother’s wife. Now she’s alone,” David pointed out. “If you care about her as much as I think you do, you’ll do what’s right.”

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Two teenagers entered the barn, leading horses. They stopped to talk to David for a few moments about which events to enter next.

* * *

Maggie took her time returning. As she approached the two tall, handsome men, she couldn't help noticing the contrast in their appearances. David's black curly hair was windblown and slightly matted from the hunt cap he'd removed and now held by its strap in one hand. He gripped a riding crop in the other, completing his totally English show attire of tan riding breeches, white dress shirt and knee-high boots.

Dan wore his customary cowboy hat, a denim short-sleeved shirt open at the neck, jeans and cowboy boots. While both were muscular and tan, she'd have a hard time deciding which look she preferred.

Except that Dan was the one who made her heart race like a Thoroughbred out of the starting gate.

He glanced at her, and she heated again all over, remembering how she'd wanted to throw herself into his arms just a few short minutes ago. Nature's call had only been part of the reason she'd felt a need to escape from his presence. The concern in his eyes and the way he'd said he was worried about her had melted the barrier she'd been trying so hard to build around her heart. And seeing the way his eyes darkened when he glanced down had made her breasts tingle with sensations she hadn't felt in a long time. Was it possible he felt the attraction too? Or were her pregnant hormones playing tricks on her again?

Maggie pushed all thoughts of personal attraction aside as she rejoined the men and walked over to the arena to watch the next events. They chatted about horses and mutual friends. The time passed quickly.

Although Cassy didn't win her hunt class, she placed a close second and David seemed pleased. He introduced her to Dan when he and Maggie went over to congratulate her. Soon after, Maggie admitted fatigue. They headed to their cars and made their way back to his ranch.

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Maggie was so tired, she offered no resistance when Dan insisted she take a nap as soon as they arrived home. By the time she emerged from her room, Jenny had returned from her day with Tiffany and dinner was ready. The girl happily chatted about the shopping she and her mother had done at the malls in Orlando. Although she felt a mild twinge of envy for Tiffany's place in Jenny's heart, Maggie was glad to know that the relationship between the girl and her mother seemed to be improving.

As soon as they finished eating, Maggie set out a bowl of hard-boiled eggs and cups of colored water.

Jenny's face lit up with delight. "This will be so much fun!" she squealed. "I'm so glad you're here, Aunt Maggie!"

Maggie met Dan's eyes, and a warm satisfaction flooded through her. Celebrating this holiday might be worth whatever painful memories it evoked.

She and Chad had never bothered coloring eggs when they were married. Since they had no children, they never felt there was a reason. But as Dan, Jenny, and she worked together on two dozen eggs, Maggie couldn't help recalling a few other Easter eves, when she and Tony and Dan and Chad were young.

"Do you remember when we decided to color eggs at your house?" Dan asked as he dipped an already bright blue egg into the green coloring.

She nodded as she positioned a yellow one halfway down in the cup and held it there. "Nobody told me I had to boil the eggs first," she said. "We colored them all and didn't think anything about it until Chad criticized your coloring technique. You got mad and threw it at him." She laughed, shaking her head. "What a mess! My mom wasn't too happy when she came home and found me trying to scrub raw egg off the carpet."

Dan chuckled. "Chad was pretty ticked, too. It took all night to get that slimy mess out of his hair. He got me back, though. As I recall, I

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found a frog in my shoe the next day.”

Feeling a sudden urge to giggle, Maggie bit her lip as she took her half-colored egg out and moved it to the blue cup. Once the egg was safely transferred, she looked up and caught his eye. “You thought Chad put it there?”

Dan narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “He didn’t?”

The laugh she was trying to stifle bubbled out as she shook her head.

He raised a surprised eyebrow, the corner of his lip quirking with amusement. “Really? And here all this time I blamed him. Guess I owe him an apology.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he seemed to realize his mistake. His gaze flew to Jenny who, luckily, seemed to be deeply engrossed in transcribing her name in crayon on a white egg.

Flushing with embarrassment, he met Maggie’s eyes. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she assured him. “I forget, too. But it helps to talk about him, to remember the good times.”

He sighed. “Yeah. I guess.”

They went back to coloring eggs. After a short strained silence, Jenny finished the egg that had been taking all her concentration. She began to chatter, filling the void. Her excitement about the holiday was so contagious that soon Maggie and Dan were once again laughing and joking with her and enjoying themselves.

By the time they tucked Jenny in bed, Maggie was looking forward to the next morning instead of dreading the holiday as she had thought she might.

While she and Dan filled Jenny’s basket with candy and small toys, they talked amiably, sharing more memories. “I’m glad you’re here to help,” he said as she held a sheet of cellophane around the basket so he could wrap a ribbon around the top. “This is a lot more fun to do together.”

She smiled. “I never realized before how having a child would

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mean seeing the other side of holidays. I guess it can be just as much fun preparing the surprises as it was being the child who discovered them.”

Nodding, Dan agreed. “You get to enjoy things from your childhood all over again, seeing it through their eyes.”

After they hid the basket and the eggs for his daughter to discover in the morning, Dan surveyed their work with a satisfied nod. “Jenny will be thrilled.”

“I think so, too.”

They shared a smile before heading to their own rooms.

* * *

The next evening, after Dan’s parents went home and Jenny and Dan went out to the barn to finish the chores, Maggie fixed herself a glass of lemonade and sat on the porch reflecting on her day.

Last year at this time she and Chad were saying goodbye to their guests after Easter dinner at their ranch, which now belonged to Tony and Trish. Her brother and his wife had invited her to spend today with them, but she had declined. All of her brief visits back to her former home had been painful, and holidays were worst of all. Although she’d been prepared to go there if Jenny hadn’t ended up staying home for the day, Maggie was glad things had worked out the way they had.

She had thought spending the day with Dan and his parents might be almost as bad, since they had spent several Easters together while she and Chad were married. But having the meal at Dan’s ranch had made it different in a positive way. Jenny’s enthusiasm and enjoyment of all the traditions had helped block off any painful memories.

Maggie and Dan and Jenny had worked well as a team, preparing most of the meal together. When his parents arrived with the rest of the food, they’d had a pleasant dinner. They had made her feel like part of the family. And she hadn’t thought about Chad all day.

She smiled, remembering the egg hunt on the front lawn. Dan and his father had sneaked out to hide the plastic candy-filled eggs while

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Maggie and her mother-in-law kept Jenny busy inside. She wasn't sure who had more fun—Jenny or the adults watching her delighted surprise at each new discovery.

“Are you okay?” Dan asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“Yes, just a little tired.” She warmed with pleasure as she met his eyes.

He climbed the two porch steps to stand next to her. “How’s the baby?”

She glanced down and realized her hands were resting protectively on her belly. “Still spoiled,” she said, smiling. “She wants me to get up and move to rock her some more.”

He chuckled. “*She* does, huh?”

The baby moved again, lifting Maggie’s hands. Seeing the look of astonishment on his face as he watched, she reached for Dan. “Would you like to feel her—or him?”

He hesitated until she tugged him closer. Hunkering down, he allowed her to place his large hand on her abdomen.

Their eyes met as the baby moved again, lifting his hands as well as hers. He shook his head, speechless with wonder.

She squeezed his fingers, knowing no words could convey the emotion of the special moment. After a while, he stood and leaned against the brick pillar next to her chair. “It was a nice day, wasn’t it?” he asked, looking out at the front yard.

Maggie tore her gaze away from his lean physique and studied her hands, still resting above her belly. “Yes. It was. I was able to forget... Almost.”

“Chad wouldn’t have wanted you to grieve forever,” he said softly, returning his gaze to hers.

Glancing up quickly, she saw the understanding in his eyes and felt a sudden urge to cry again. How did he always know when she was fighting guilt?

She blinked back the tears, swallowed, and raised her chin. “I

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know.”

But how will I know when it is time to stop?

* * *

When Dan saw the shimmer of tears in Maggie’s eyes, he fisted his hands in self-rebuke. Things had been going so well, why had he blown it once again by mentioning his brother? It didn’t matter that he’d been trying to ease the guilt he could tell she’d already been feeling for enjoying herself without her husband. Bringing up Chad’s name into their conversation only reopened the wound. Would he ever learn to just back off and give her time to finish mourning and get on with her life?

Gritting his teeth, Dan pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow as he tried to come up with something else to talk about. Maybe the weather would be safe...

Before he could change the subject, Maggie spoke again.

“It *was* a nice day,” she repeated, her voice trembling just a tad too much to fool Dan. “I’m glad I could be here with all of you. Thank you for insisting that I stay. I think Jenny had fun too.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. When Maggie kept her gaze lowered, he turned away. “Speaking of Jenny, I better go see what’s keeping her,” he mumbled, shoving his hat down on his head and heading back down the porch steps without a backward glance.

When he reached the barn, he threw the wooden door open and stalked inside.

“What’s wrong, Daddy?” Jenny asked from her perch on a bale of hay.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you.” He forced a smile and deliberately softened his voice as he walked over to his daughter. “What are you doing?”

She lifted a shoulder. “Just talking to Smokey Jean.”

“Did she talk back?” he asked, grinning. He reached over and scratched the mare’s ear. Smokey Jean whickered softly and rubbed her

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head against his arm.

Jenny giggled. "Horses can't talk."

"Sure they can. She's talking to me now, telling me how much she likes to be scratched like this. Animals talk to each other all the time. And they sure let us know when they're hungry, don't they?"

Jenny looked thoughtful. "I guess so."

Dan glanced at the horse and back at his daughter. "They're better listeners than talkers, though, aren't they?"

Grinning, Jenny nodded her head. "Yeah."

After a moment, Dan asked, "So what were you telling Smokey Jean, or is it a secret?"

Jenny shrugged. "Just stuff."

Tenderness for his daughter washed over Dan. "I'm a pretty good listener, too," he said. "If something is bothering you, maybe I can help."

Jenny picked up a few strands of hay and began to twist them together in a crude braid. Dan waited, knowing if something were on his daughter's mind, she'd bring it up without further prying. After a moment, she looked up at him. "Do you think Mommy was lonely today?"

Ah...guilt for enjoying the holiday without missing family members. There seemed to be a lot of that going around. "No," he said, choosing his words carefully. "I knew you wouldn't want her to be alone, so when she agreed to let you stay here with us, I invited her to come, too. But she had other plans. You don't need to worry about her. I'm sure she had a nice day with her friend."

"With Robert?"

Uh oh. How much had Tiffany told their daughter about her new boyfriend? "I think so," he hedged. "Is that what she told you she'd be doing?"

Jenny bobbed her head. "He's nice. I had fun with them yesterday."

Surprised, since this was the first he'd heard of the other man's

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involvement, Dan asked, “Did he go shopping with you?”

Shaking her head, Jenny laughed. “No. I don’t think he likes shopping for clothes and stuff. He took us to lunch. It was cool.”

“Cool, huh? Where’d you go?”

“I don’t know the name of it. Someplace with a fountain. They let me have lemonade with an umbrella in it!”

Figured. Sounded like that expensive place Tiffany always wanted to go for special occasions. The Chateau something or other. His ex never had enjoyed the simple places Jenny preferred. Luckily Dan actually liked burgers almost as much as steaks. Come to think of it, so did Maggie. He’d have to take them all out somewhere as soon as he got those damn taxes done...

He forced his thoughts back to his daughter. “What did you have to eat? Pizza?” He grinned, knowing the answer.

“No.” She scrunched up her nose. “They didn’t have the stuff I usually like. I had shrimp.”

“That sounds good. Wasn’t it?” He threw her a questioning look.

She shrugged. “Yeah. I guess it wasn’t too bad. I was already kind of full from the lemonade, though.”

“I see.” Dan stifled a grin, wondering how Tiffany’s boyfriend had reacted to Jenny’s picky eating of The Chateau Whatever’s pricey cuisine. If the couple were headed for marriage as Tiffany had hinted, he’d better get used to it.

“So you think Robert is pretty cool, huh?” he prompted.

She nodded. “He’s okay. I’m glad Mommy has a new friend so she won’t be lonely.”

“Me, too,” Dan said, realizing he meant it. Strange how the fact that Jenny might have a step-dad in the future bothered him a heck of a lot more than that his ex had a new man in her life. Of course he did have Maggie...sort of.

“Were you worried about your mom being alone today?” he asked. “I think she probably was just fine. But you can call her tonight if you

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like. She's not leaving town until tomorrow."

"Okay." Jenny continued braiding the strands of hay for a moment, then tossed her handiwork away and held out her arms to Dan. "Can I go play with the toy bunnies Grandma and Grandpa brought?" she asked, apparently ready to change the subject.

Grateful for the child's short attention span, he scooped her up and hugged her. "Sure," he said. "All the animals are set for the night."

A few moments later they headed for the house hand-in-hand. When Jenny hesitated halfway to the house, he stopped and looked down at her.

"Is Aunt Maggie sick?" Jenny asked, gazing up at him with worried eyes.

Dan's heart twisted once again when he glanced ahead at the lone figure on the porch. "I don't think so. She's just tired. We wore her out today."

Jenny frowned. "Didn't she have fun?"

Dan hastened to reassure his daughter. "She's fine. I think she would have missed her husband a lot more if she hadn't had you here. She said she enjoyed watching you play." He ruffled her hair. "So it was good for all of us that you stayed home."

Maggie lifted a hand in greeting. "Hey, you two!" she called. "Is anyone going to help me eat some more of that chocolate the Easter Bunny brought?"

Jenny laughed and dropped Dan's hand to skip ahead. When she reached her aunt, she offered her hands and tugged until the pregnant woman slowly got to her feet.

The heaviness in Dan's heart lifted as Maggie hugged his daughter and her eyes met his over the child's head. She smiled, no sign of tears or sadness remaining.

Maybe everything would be okay after all.

* * *

"I'm done!" Dan announced as he burst into the house on the

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afternoon of April fifteenth. "I finished the last returns and extensions and dropped them at the post office. Let's go celebrate!"

Jenny quickly announced her preference—pizza. Maggie had no objections, so the three of them went out together.

When they were all seated in a booth at the Pizza Palace, Maggie realized how comfortable it now felt to be with Dan and his daughter on what could be considered a family outing. To anyone who didn't know them, they must look like a typical family. She and Jenny were often still mistaken for mother and daughter whenever the two of them went somewhere new.

After they placed their orders, Jenny begged to play the arcade games, and Dan obliged by giving her a handful of quarters. He watched with an indulgent grin as his daughter went skipping across the room.

"She's really something," Maggie said. "I'm kind of hoping for a little girl just like her."

"Not a boy like Chad?"

She glanced at him, wondering at the tone in his voice. Was he hoping she had a boy like his brother?

"A son would be wonderful, too," she said. "As long as the baby is healthy, I'll be happy either way."

He nodded. Glancing away from Jenny for a moment, he looked into Maggie's eyes. She felt a thrill of awareness and lowered her gaze.

"Your natural childbirth classes start this week, don't they?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm excited about it."

"Not scared?"

"No, not really. I've done a lot of reading about Lamaze. It sounds like something I want to do."

He glanced back at Jenny, still across the room, then said, "Tiffany didn't want any part of it. The whole idea frightened her so much she wouldn't attend classes, even though I would have been happy to go

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with her. As a result, she wasn't prepared and fell apart at the first contraction."

"Were you able to stay with her?"

He shook his head. "I could have, but she didn't want me there. Our marriage was in trouble long before that. She didn't want kids."

"The pregnancy wasn't planned?"

"No. Her gynecologist had her on the pill, but when she got an infection she went to a different doctor, and he gave her an antibiotic. He never asked if she was taking anything else."

Maggie nodded. "I've heard of that happening." She cocked her head and asked, "But even if it was a surprise, weren't you both happy after you got used to the idea?"

"I was. But Tiffany was afraid she'd have to take too much time off work and lose her spot on the corporate ladder."

Maggie sat back in shock. "She didn't want to have a baby?"

He shook his head grimly, his jaw tight as he kept his gaze fastened on Jenny. "No. And she blamed me every time she felt sick. She didn't have any medical problems, but she hated being pregnant. She made sure I knew about every ache and pain."

Maggie instinctively reached for his hand. "Oh, Dan, I'm so sorry."

He glanced at her with a raised eyebrow. "Why?"

"I had no idea you and Tiffany were having trouble. I was envious of her because she was pregnant. Chad and I had already been married for years and couldn't seem to conceive."

He shrugged. His gaze dropped to her hand resting on his, but he made no sign of objection. "It wasn't that bad. The delivery went fine, even with me stuck in the waiting room until it was over."

The waitress returned with their drinks, and Maggie self-consciously pulled her hand away from Dan's to make room on the table.

After putting Dan's beer in front of him, the waitress set a glass of milk on the table and looked at Maggie. "Would you like me to leave

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the drink for your daughter now, or bring it with the pizza?"

"With the meal," Dan said before she could react. The waitress nodded and retreated.

Maggie looked up at him and found him grinning at her. "Why did her mistake embarrass you?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. It's happened before. I'm flattered whenever people think I'm her mother. But I guess I'm never sure if I should correct them."

"Why bother?"

She smiled at him. "It could cramp your social life if people see you with a pregnant woman and think I'm your wife."

He faked a worried expression. "Hey, I hadn't thought of that. Maybe you should sit at a different table..."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I'm serious, Dan. What if a woman you might be interested in sees us tonight? She'd never go out with you if she thought you were married."

He looked around, pretending to be checking for prospects. "Did you have someone in mind for me?"

She shook her head. "I give up!"

"Good. Why don't we talk about *your* social life."

"What social life?"

"Exactly."

She glanced at him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"You don't get out at all except for work and taking care of Jenny. You need to have some fun."

"I'm having fun tonight."

"But even now, you're worrying about me. You should be thinking about yourself for a change."

She stared at her milk, running her hand absently up and down the cold glass. "I guess I was half of a couple for so long I kind of forgot how to have a life of my own."

"When the baby comes, you'll be really tied down for a while. You

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should try to have some excitement while you can.”

“Like what?”

“What kinds of things did you enjoy before, besides horseback riding?”

She thought for a moment. “The same things you and I did as kids. Going to horse events, movies, the beach.”

“So why don’t you? You enjoyed yourself when you went to the Greenwood show, didn’t you?”

“I felt kind of funny going by myself.”

“Who says you have to go by yourself? When Jenny and I are busy, take a friend.”

“My girlfriends are either married or involved with someone.” She looked down at her enlarged middle. “And men are not exactly going to flock to my door in my present state.”

“The wedding ring on your finger would stop them even if you weren’t pregnant.”

She stole a glance at him. Was that a bitter tone in his voice?

Before she could think of a suitable reply, the waitress brought the pizza. Dan beckoned to Jenny and she returned to the table, ending their chance for private conversation.

The rest of the meal passed uneventfully. Maggie found Dan catching her eye often when Jenny said something cute, and they shared a private smile.

Later that night, after getting ready for bed, Maggie opened the shade and sat on the bed, staring out at the blackness outside her window. Happy memories flooded over her as she remembered childhood days when Chad, Dan, Tony and she had all played together. She had always been in awe of the older boys, while Dan had been her partner in crime. When Tony and Chad would get tired of having their younger siblings tag along, she and Dan would find something else to do. They had shared a lot of good times as children.

Her gaze dropped to her hands, and she remembered the day Chad

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had asked her to marry him. She recalled her excitement and joy as they had shopped for the rings together the day before they ran off to get married. She thought about the quick wedding ceremony and even quicker honeymoon. They were so young and optimistic about what a wonderful life they would have.

She twirled the wedding band on her finger as tears rolled down her cheeks, cleansing her of memories. Her father had died suddenly during her teens and her mother had remarried not long after. Maggie had never liked the way her stepfather looked at her and couldn't wait for a chance to move out. When Chad had offered marriage, she had jumped at the chance.

She'd never regretted the hasty marriage. He had been good to her and they'd had a happy life together. He had been her rock, the stabilizing influence she had needed at a bewildering time in her life. She had grown to love him a lot.

Maggie stared at the ring long after her tears had dried. Somehow putting all the memories together had made everything fall into place, like pieces of a puzzle. She realized her marriage to Chad was now ready to be placed in that part of the total picture of her life that was her past. A part of him would always be there in the future because of the child she carried. But she was ready to say goodbye to the marriage.

She tugged at the ring. It was snug due to her pregnancy, and she almost changed her mind. She twisted and joggled some more. Just when she was ready to give up, she gave a final yank and the symbol of her marriage came free. With a smile of relief, she placed it in a box in her drawer.

* * *

The next morning Maggie went to her shop as usual. The workmen were finally finished, and all that remained to be done to the building was cleanup and decorations.

Minutes after she unlocked the door and went inside, Dan arrived. "I'm yours for the morning," he said, taking off his Stetson and holding

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it in front of him as he looked around approvingly.

Maggie's heart did an involuntary skip. She forced her tone to remain light. "I hope you won't change your mind once you see my list." Her hand brushed his as she reached for his hat. He didn't release the Stetson, and she glanced at him in surprise.

His gaze was fastened on her left hand. He must have noticed she no longer wore her wedding ring! The corner of his mouth turned down, but he let go of the hat, and she placed it on a table. "I...I guess I should invest in a rack for customers' hats, maybe somewhere by the door," she said, hoping she didn't sound like she was babbling.

"Yes," he said, in a level, impersonal tone.

Was he angry? Did he disapprove of her removal of the ring? Last night he had sounded like he thought she should, but now...

Her list of things to be done lay on the table. She picked it up and turned back to him.

Dan took the paper from her and glanced over it, nodding approval. "I can help with this. First off, let's get you legal. I'll go with you to the courthouse."

An hour later, all the necessary forms were either already filed or in her hand to be completed and returned later.

"Thank you," Maggie said when they were outside the courthouse. "That clerk looked at me like I was crazy the first time I tried to explain what I needed."

"I don't think he knows much about horses," Dan said, grinning. "He seemed to think a tack store was like a hardware store."

Maggie laughed. "Yeah. Sometimes I forget that not everyone grew up on a ranch." She glanced at him and added, "But it really helped to have someone who understood what I needed to go with me. Someone who's already been through it."

He shrugged. "I was glad to help."

They reached her car, and he opened the driver side door for her. "So, what's next? We should have time to tackle something else before

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picking up Jenny.”

“Back to the shop,” she said, climbing in. “I need to finish filling out these forms and then get on the phone again. Maybe now some of the vendors will take my orders.”

“If not, I’ll talk to them,” Dan said agreeably as he got in the passenger side. “Sometimes you just have to know the right lingo.”

“I thought I did. I mean...Chad and I both took business courses before we started our ranch.”

“But that was years ago. Laws change. I’m up-to-date on the current stuff because of my business.”

Maggie sighed. “I guess so. But I wish I could do all this myself. I hate to bother you—”

“I told you I don’t mind. That’s what friends are for.”

“Still, you shouldn’t have to take care of me just because I was married to your brother. Chad wouldn’t have expected that.”

“You never could admit when you need help!”

She blinked in surprise. Why had his tone suddenly turned angry? Glancing at him, she saw the tense clench of his jaw as he fastened his seatbelt, keeping his eyes off her.

Maggie started the car and pulled out, puzzled. What had she done now?

Her gaze fell to her hands as she gripped the steering wheel. The bare spot where her ring had been reminded her of her decision to remove it and of Dan’s reaction earlier this morning. Could his sudden ill temper be related to that?

As if reading her thoughts, he asked, “Why did you take off Chad’s ring?”

So that *was* it! She swallowed, keeping her eyes focused on the road. “I thought it was time.”

“You’re ready to forget him?”

The note of censure in his voice made her pick her words carefully. As Chad’s brother, he must feel that she was being somehow unfaithful

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to her husband's memory. "No. Of course not. I don't need the ring to remember him. And didn't you tell me you thought I should start getting out more?"

"I didn't mean *dating*."

"Who said I'm going to start dating? No man would want me now!" Her voice cracked, and her eyes filled with tears. She pulled up in front of her shop and turned off the ignition, getting out and marching toward the door without a backward glance.

She heard his door slam seconds after hers, and he caught up to her by the time she reached her front door.

Trying desperately to hold back yet another bout of tears, she hoped he would go back to his office instead of following her. No such luck, she realized as his hand closed around hers where she held the key in the keyhole. "I can manage," she ground out, refusing to look at him.

He ignored her and pushed the door open. She stalked inside and stood facing away from him, hugging her arms across her chest.

She quivered as she heard his footsteps behind her. His warm hands grasped her shoulders and turned her. Keeping her gaze fastened on the floor, she fought back the urge to cry. She couldn't let him see her like that *again*!

"Do you really think a man wouldn't want you because you're pregnant?"

She swallowed and sniffed. "I'm not exactly attractive these days, in case you haven't noticed!"

"I've noticed you," he said softly. "And I find you *very* attractive."

She looked up and met his eyes. "You do?"

A grin quirked at his lip. "Very."

"But I'm so fat...and clumsy...and—"

"Still the sexiest woman I've ever met."

Once again Maggie searched his face and saw sincerity in his eyes. Could he really mean it? "You think I'm beautiful?"

He placed a finger across her mouth. "Maggie," he said, grinning,

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“you ask too many questions.” Before she could deny it, he moved his hand and his lips covered hers.

CHAPTER 12

Maggie's gasp of surprise was swallowed as Dan deepened the kiss.
Oh my!

She relaxed against him, and he pulled her closer. Winding her arms around him, she threaded her fingers through his curly hair.

Gently he explored her mouth with his, sending sweet warmth all the way to her toes. He felt so good, so strong and so male. She forgot everything but the joy of being in his arms. Her heart beat so hard and fast she thought it might burst out of her chest. Kissing him back enthusiastically, she wished the moment could go on forever.

After a while his lips moved on to caress her throat and neck. Tossing her head back, she gave him freer access. "Mmmm..."

He moaned, and awareness flooded through her as his hands traveled down from her shoulders and back to cup her bottom, pulling her even closer. Her abdomen rubbed him, and she could feel his desire.

His lips found hers again. Her fingers were pressed against his firm,

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muscular chest. She pushed him away just far enough to free her hands. Continuing to kiss him back, she tugged at his shirt until it came loose from his jeans, and she ran her hands over his taut stomach muscles and up to the furry mat of his chest, twining her fingers in the hair.

A knock on the door took them both by surprise. Quickly pulling apart, they turned to face the sound.

Dan's parents were coming into the shop!

Maggie could feel an embarrassed flush replace the heated one of a moment earlier as she made an effort to smooth her clothes.

Dan muttered something unintelligible under his breath. He quickly ran a hand through his hair and tucked his shirt back in his jeans before striding toward them. "Hi, Mom and Dad. What can I do for you?"

"Actually we were looking for Maggie. We didn't know you would be here," his mother said, glancing speculatively from one to the other. "I hope we're not interrupting anything."

Maggie hastened forward. "Of course not. We just finished taking care of some of my legal paperwork."

"I see," his mother said, and her smile indicated she saw all too well.

Spreading her hands to include the whole inside, Maggie asked, "What do you think of the shop so far?"

Dan's father spoke up. "It looks great. I think you'll be real successful here. This town needs a decent place to get horse equipment."

Maggie sighed. "I hope so. It's taking longer than I thought it would to get everything ready." She pointed out the different areas for English and Western riding equipment and clothing, display cases for jewelry, shelves for books and videos, and an area in the back for feed and barn tools.

When she showed them the pictures and signs she planned to hang, explaining her plans to decorate, Dan's father repeated his earlier prediction of success. "We'll be happy to help," he offered in a sincere

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tone.

"Thank you. I might just take you up on that." She smiled at him.

"What about the upstairs?" her mother-in-law asked. "Have you decided if you'll move in there or get a place of your own?"

Maggie glanced at Dan. They hadn't discussed her moving out since last week when he and Jenny had talked her into staying a while longer. His expression was unreadable. "I'm not sure..." she stalled.

"We were just wondering because we still have some baby furniture at my sister's. George checked and the crib and high chair are in good shape," Dan's mother explained.

"They meet the new safety rules, too," her father-in-law piped up. "If you'd like to have them, Dan and I can move them in for you—whenever you decide where you want them."

Maggie was touched. "Thank you! I'd love to use them."

Beverly smiled and asked, "Can we see the upstairs?"

"Of course! Follow me!" Maggie headed to the stairway, and they trailed behind her. By the time they reached the top, everyone but Dan was slightly out of breath.

"These stairs are getting higher every day," Maggie joked.

"You shouldn't have to be going up and down such steep steps at this stage of your pregnancy," her mother-in-law said.

Maggie shrugged. "Actually, my doctor said stairs are good exercise."

"But it will be too much for you! Besides, how will you carry a baby up and down here safely?" She looked around, shaking her head. "And it's so small! I don't think you should live here at all. You could use it for extra storage or maybe an office."

"Well, I will later, but for now—"

"Dan, talk to her!" his mother said, turning to him.

He had been silent until now, following his parents on their tour. Now he quirked an eyebrow. "Since when has she ever listened to *me*?"

Maggie made a face at him, and he grinned. Turning back to his

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mother, he said, "Jenny and I have been trying to talk her into staying with us for a while."

His mother's eyes widened. "Oh, I don't know if *that's* a good idea..."

"Why not?" George asked. "It seems to be working out so far."

"It *is* working out." Dan turned his back on his parents and winked at Maggie. She could feel herself blush at the memory of his kiss.

"But it just doesn't look right!" his mother insisted.

Her husband took her arm and steered her toward the stairs. "C'mon, Bev, nowadays nobody cares what it looks like."

Dan frowned. "Don't Maggie and I have a say in this?"

His parents turned to him, eyebrows raised.

"Of course. You can have whomever you want at your house," his mother said. "I just don't think it's right for a man and woman to live together unless they're *married*."

There was more of a broad hint in her tone than censure, and Dan's father cast them an apologetic look before following her down the stairs.

Dan took Maggie's elbow to assist her when she reached for the rail with her other hand. "Thanks," she whispered. "It's hard to tell where the steps are when I can't see my feet."

He chuckled and moved his arm to her waist. A warm flush of happiness flooded through her.

When they all reached the downstairs, Dan announced he had to pick up Jenny. His parents mentioned errands in town, so they walked out with him.

Maggie watched through the window as Dan walked his parents to their car. The three of them seemed deep in conversation. Were they still discussing her living arrangements?

Part of her was touched they were worried about the upstairs room being too inconvenient for her to stay in. But she wondered about Beverly's reasons for bringing up the subject. What did she want her to

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do—find another place to live, or get married?

She caught herself smiling at the memory of what she and Dan were doing when his parents walked in. Maybe his mother had reason to worry after all.

* * *

"It looks like you and Maggie are getting pretty close," Dan's mother said to him as soon as they were outside.

"I've always been fond of her," he hedged, keeping his gaze focused ahead at their car.

"You were kissing her."

Dan took a deep breath. He was hoping they hadn't seen that. "So?" he asked for lack of a better response.

"I guess you're becoming more than friends."

"We might be." He lifted his Stetson and ran a hand through his hair. Shoving the hat more firmly back down on his head, he added, "I hope we will be."

His mother touched his arm, and he looked at her. She was smiling. "I hope so, too."

He stared at her in surprise. "Then why are you so opposed to her living with Jenny and me?"

"For the same reason I told you and Maggie before. It just doesn't look right. And I don't want to see either of you, or Jenny, get hurt."

Dan glanced at his father, but received only a noncommittal shrug. "So what's she supposed to do?" he asked his mother. "You know as well as I do the upstairs room at the shop isn't going to work out. She plans to buy a place of her own, but she sure doesn't need to rush into that now when she's trying to start a business *and* getting ready to have a baby!"

"I know, Danny," she said, patting his arm like she did when he was little. "And I did tell her we could make room in our apartment."

"Why should you have to do that when I have plenty of room at my ranch?"

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“But if you are just living together with no commitment, sooner or later one of you will get tired of the arrangement and want out. What then?”

He gave what he hoped looked like a nonchalant shrug. “Then she leaves.”

They reached his parents’ car, and he opened the door for his mother. His father waited by the driver’s side until the passenger door was shut, then gave Dan a pointed look over the top of the sedan. “Have you thought about asking her to marry you?”

Dan swallowed and stared at him. “*Marry me?*”

His dad grinned. “Could be one way to make everybody happy.” With a chuckle he opened his door and climbed in.

They waved and pulled away, leaving a stunned Dan standing on the curb.

* * *

Dan had no more private time with Maggie that day—not that he was anxious for it. His father’s last words had shaken him to the bone. Although he had often thought about what it would be like to have Maggie as his wife, he’d never seriously considered it a possibility. But now, as close as they were becoming, he wondered if he had a chance. The idea scared the hell out of him.

He picked Jenny up from school and bought some fast food for lunch before they returned to the tack shop. There he helped Maggie with her paperwork and phone calls while Jenny did small straightening and cleaning projects, which she proudly tackled with enthusiasm.

After finishing at the store for the day, the three of them went back to the ranch and did all the chores there together. By the time Jenny was tucked in bed, Maggie looked exhausted. When she announced she was heading to bed, Dan didn’t try to stop her. A serious discussion could wait. He had a lot of thinking to do first anyway.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of activity. Dan went to work in his own office every day after driving Jenny to school. After making

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sure everything urgent was taken care of, he helped Maggie in her shop. Since workmen and a cleaning crew came and went at various times, Dan kept his distance, not wanting to get caught in a compromising situation again. They talked about the store and what needed to be done, working well together as a team and staying away from personal topics. But he knew, if the looks they passed back and forth throughout the day were any indication, she thought about the kiss they shared as often as he did.

Trish drove over on Wednesday. Armed with pillows and a blanket, she escorted Maggie off to childbirth preparation class.

They returned two hours later. "Make sure she does her exercises," Trish told Dan as she laid the blanket on the couch.

"What kind of exercises do you have to do?" he asked curiously.

"Mostly relaxation—for during the contractions."

Sensing she was leaving something out, he asked, "What else?"

Maggie blushed a delicious shade of pink. "And a few to prepare my muscles for the birth."

He studied her, wondering at her sudden shyness. "Can I help?"

Her blush deepened, and Trish laughed. "Not with those. You can just remind her to do them."

"All right. Is there anything else I can do to help?"

"She'll need to pre-register at the hospital, to make her check-in go quicker," Trish said.

"I can do that myself," Maggie argued. "He shouldn't have to bother with it."

Her sister-in-law raised her eyebrows questioningly at Dan. "I really wouldn't mind," he told her.

She turned back to Maggie. "It might be a good idea to let him help. It will take me a while to get here from Orlando when you go into labor. We should have a back-up plan."

"You're not thinking of chickening out, are you?" Maggie sounded worried.

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"Of course I plan to be here, but just in case you're lucky enough to have a short labor, Dan may need to take you to the hospital."

"I plan on doing that anyway," he said.

Maggie looked as if she wanted to argue further, but Trish announced she was leaving.

As soon as she was gone, Dan picked up the book the women had brought back from class and started to leaf through it.

"What are you doing?" Maggie asked him.

"Since you won't ask for help, I'm checking to see what the experts say you need."

"Trish will assist me."

"She can't be here all the time. And what if you go into labor suddenly?"

Maggie raised her chin, but her lips quivered. "I can manage."

He stood and walked over to her. "Why are you so determined to shut me out? I want to be part of this birth, too."

She searched his face. "Why?"

Because I love you and want to be part of your life. He sighed with frustration. Would he ever be able to tell her that?

"It is my brother's baby," he told her instead.

Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned away. He didn't try to stop her when she headed for her room.

* * *

Maggie spent a restless night. Dan's last words had confirmed her fear that he really only saw her as the human incubator for his brother's baby. No wonder he had been so thoughtful and considerate of her health. He wanted to make sure his niece or nephew wasn't born too soon.

The next day she threw herself into work with a new vengeance. After interviewing several prospective employees who answered her ads, she hired two.

Over the next few weeks, she finished taking care of insurance,

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arranging credit card payment, and working out a delivery schedule. By the time the store was ready, stock items were arriving daily. She allowed Dan to help with heavy lifting, hanging decorations and setting up displays, but did everything she could herself, in spite of his insistence she worked much too hard.

They did reach a compromise of sorts on living arrangements. Dan and his father transferred the crib and baby furniture into the guestroom at his house, promising they would move it again whenever she wanted to relocate.

Before she knew it, the grand opening day arrived. She had run advertisements and passed out flyers weeks ahead so everyone in town was aware of her store. By the number of customers who came through, she was sure half of the town had been there—and bought merchandise.

Dan worked side by side with her, even though both her employees were there as well. When they finally locked the door at closing time and sent her staff home, she sank onto a stool, exhausted.

“Are you okay?” Dan asked, hovering over her with a worried expression.

She smiled and nodded. “Oh yes! Wasn’t it great? I can’t believe how much fun I had.”

“Me, too,” he admitted. “I never thought about working in a store as fun. But waiting on horse people, talking the business, really didn’t seem like work. I’ll be glad to help out whenever you need me.”

“Thanks. But I intend to pay you for your time.”

He shrugged. “You can just buy me dinner and we’ll call it even.”

“Now?”

“Are you up to it?”

She laughed. “Absolutely. I’m much too excited to go home and rest!”

He picked up the phone. “All right then. I’m sure Mom and Dad won’t mind watching Jenny a while longer.”

* * *

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After finishing all the paperwork and a quick trip to the ranch to change and freshen up, Dan and Maggie enjoyed a special celebration dinner at the best restaurant in town. Conversation was animated and fun. They discussed everything from their experiences with customers that day to her coming labor.

She told him about how her classes with Trish were going and funny experiences some of the couples at her class had talked about.

"I still wish you would let me help more," he said. "I learned to give a pretty mean back rub when Tiffany was pregnant."

Maggie warmed at the idea of letting Dan massage her, even if it was only her back. "Thanks for the offer," she said, hoping he couldn't tell how her pulse was quickening. "I'll let you know."

The restaurant had a small dance floor in the corner. While they were eating, she had thrown several envious glances at the couples dancing to some fast numbers. Now a slow romantic song played, and Maggie again looked longingly at the couples already headed to the floor.

"Did your doctor place any restrictions on dancing?" Dan asked, reading her thoughts.

She smiled and shook her head, suddenly shy.

"All right then, let's go." He took her hand.

When they reached the floor, he swept her in his arms. "Relax. I won't hurt you."

She allowed him to pull her closer. At first it felt awkward to be held against him. She felt especially clumsy since she had never danced with such a large abdomen between herself and her partner before. But within his strong embrace, she quickly forgot her uneasiness.

His muscular arms and solid shoulders pressed against her. She took a deep breath and inhaled the musky scent of his aftershave. It felt so good to have him hold her. It seemed so...right.

Maggie glanced at him in surprise, wondering if he experienced it, too. The feelings she had for him were much more than mere

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friendship. She was in love with him!

The realization hit her with a jolt of awareness. When had her emotions changed?

She had always liked Danny, even as kids. When they had reached their teens she had even hoped for more than friendship, but he had still treated her as a surrogate sister. Later, as his sister-in-law, she'd had little contact with him and she had thought he'd lost all interest in her.

As a result of living together, their friendship had strengthened more than ever. Somehow over the last few weeks or months she had grown to love him as a man. Now what was she going to do about it?

She saw his eyes were focused over her shoulder, and she sighed, laying her head against his chest. If only he could see her as a woman. Maybe when she got her figure back...

The baby kicked—hard.

“Whoa,” Dan said, chuckling. “I guess the little guy wants to be a football player, just like his dad.”

Just like his dad. Just like Chad. Maggie pushed away from Dan as she realized he obviously wasn't thinking of her as a desirable woman in his arms. He still saw her as the mother of his brother's child!

Avoiding his eyes as once again tears threatened, she swallowed and blinked. “I'm sorry... I need to go—”

“What's wrong? Dan's voice sounded alarmed. “Is something wrong with the baby?”

“No, I just want to go home now.”

He placed a hand under her chin and forced her to look at him.

“Please,” she whispered, noticing the song had ended and most of the dancers were leaving the floor.

He stared at her for a long moment, searching her eyes. A fast number started, and the couples around them began to dance. “Don't ask me to explain,” she pleaded. “Just take me home.”

With a sigh, he led her off the floor. When they reached their table, she picked up the bill and said, “I'll meet you in the car after I take care

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of this.”

His eyes narrowed, and his lips thinned with disapproval. “I’ll be just outside the door. I’m not letting you go out in the dark alone.” When she nodded, he picked up his hat and headed out.

* * *

Once outside, Dan uttered a string of expletives. What in the world was the matter now?

He thought back over the day, how great everything had seemed to be going. He and Maggie had made a great team—as if they’d been together for years. He had almost been able to forget she was once his brother’s wife. He had hoped their own relationship was becoming strong enough to help her memories of Chad to dim enough to make room for a new love.

This evening the dinner out and dancing had been one of the best times they had ever spent together. Holding her in his arms, he had finally known it was right.

The way she had relaxed against him and the glazed look in her eyes had made him think she felt it, too. Then suddenly the spell was broken, and she wanted to leave.

What had happened?

He paced across the restaurant porch as he tried to think of possibilities. They were dancing and he had held her close. Then the baby had kicked. He’d made a crack about a football player. He froze as he remembered the look on her face when he had spoken. Was that what upset her?

Of course it was! He had compared the baby to his father—Chad.

No wonder she’d suddenly gotten upset! There she was wrapped in his arms, probably feeling some of the same attraction he was. And then he had to go and say something that reminded her of her husband. She probably got all teary because she missed Chad. Maybe she and his brother had even danced to that same song.

Dan shook his head with self-deprecation. Why did he have to keep

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reminding her?

He stuck his hand in his pocket and fingered the box holding the engagement ring he had bought two days before. Thank God he had decided to wait until they got back to the ranch. At least he would be spared the embarrassment of her refusal.

Apparently he had jumped the gun, thinking he had a chance with her. They still couldn't have any kind of relationship of their own. His brother was still keeping them apart—even from the grave.

CHAPTER 13

Maggie paid the bill and exited the restaurant. Dan waited at the door and fell in step with her as they walked to his truck. After helping her into her seat, he gave her a quick assessing glance, shut the door, and went around to the driver's side.

Along the way home, she kept her gaze focused out the window, thankful he didn't ask her to explain. How could she tell him how she felt?

A few tears trickled down her cheeks, and she rubbed them with the palm of her hand, refusing to once again give in to the urge to sob.

Her memories of Chad had been growing dimmer and dimmer with each passing day, she realized. Lately she had become more and more wrapped up in her new life, loving the excitement of opening her own store. Dan had been a big help, but he had never made her feel dependent on him. He always let her know he was there when she needed him, but he seemed to understand she wanted to do some things for herself.

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Living and working together, she and Dan had become closer with each new day. She hadn't thought of him as her brother-in-law for some time now.

Apparently, though, he still saw her only as his brother's wife. When he mentioned the baby would be like his dad, it had made her realize with a jolt that she hadn't thought about Chad all day. In a way, she felt as if she had been unfaithful to his memory.

But even more unsettling was the realization that Dan *never* seemed to forget. He thought of the baby as his niece or nephew. Would he ever see her as a woman and not just the baby's mother?

When they reached Dan's ranch, he jumped out and came around to her door before she could struggle out. Avoiding his eyes, she accepted his helping hand. "Thanks."

"You might want to calm down before we get inside," he pointed out. "Jenny will be asleep, but Mom and Dad won't."

She swallowed and took a deep breath, leaning against the hood of his truck for support. He pulled out his handkerchief and gently wiped her cheeks.

"You're getting pretty good at drying my tears," she said, forcing a smile.

"I've been getting quite a bit of experience," he said dryly.

She breathed deeply of the night air. He moved to her side and leaned against the truck next to her, crossing his arms.

"It's nice out here," she said, looking around at the moonlit ranch. Tilting her head up, she gazed at the stars. "I'd forgotten how beautiful a night sky can be."

"Yeah. Sometimes it's good for the soul to just commune with nature. Chad and I used to spend a lot of time outside as kids. When we got older, we rarely did."

"You miss him, too, don't you?" she asked softly.

He took a deep breath. "Sure. He was my only brother. We had our disagreements, but nothing serious. I'd still give anything to have him

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back.”

Maggie shivered as a spring breeze stirred the trees.

Dan stepped closer and slipped an arm around her shoulders. “Cold?”

She shook her head and forced a smile she didn’t feel. “Not any more.”

They remained silent for a few moments, enjoying the peace. Somewhere a whippoorwill called in the distance. The crickets and frogs, which had gone silent when the truck first pulled in, struck up a new chorus of night sounds.

“Thanks for dinner. It was fun—while it lasted,” he said, breaking the stillness.

“I’m sorry about wanting to leave so suddenly. It’s just—”

He pushed away from the truck and took her arm. “Forget it. We’ll talk some other time. Now we better get inside before Mom and Dad wonder what’s happening.”

* * *

The next day was Sunday and her tack store was closed. Dan, Jenny and Maggie went to church together as usual.

After the service, Dan slid an arm around her waist and assisted her as she descended the church steps. When they reached the bottom, an attractive blond man with a mustache came up to them. He looked about their own age, but Maggie didn’t realize why he seemed familiar until he spoke to Dan.

“Dan Newman!” he said, clapping Dan on the back. “I haven’t seen you in a good ten years!”

Dan stared at the other man a moment before he appeared to recognize him, and a wide smile replaced his puzzled look. “How are you, Greg?”

“Good. I’m here visiting my parents. Do you still live in town?”

“Not still. Again. I moved away for a while, but came back to start an accounting business.”

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Greg's gaze slid to Maggie. She smiled and offered her hand. "Hi, Greg. I went to school with you, too. Maggie—"

He took her hand and spoke before she could give her maiden name. "Of course! I thought you looked familiar! Dan, you sly dog! I heard you'd gotten married, but I didn't know it was to one of our classmates! When is the baby due?"

They were momentarily spared the embarrassment of explanation by the arrival of Dan's parents and Jenny. They greeted Greg and exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes.

Another middle-aged couple came up to them. Maggie had never met them but she quickly realized they must be Greg's parents, who lived in town.

After the initial greetings were accomplished, Dan's mother introduced her granddaughter. Then, noticing Maggie, she placed an arm around her shoulder, including her in the conversation. "And this is my daughter-in-law, Margaret. She was married to Ch..."

"How nice to meet you," Greg's mother said with a warm smile before the introduction was complete. "You certainly have a lovely daughter. Are you and Dan hoping for a boy this time?"

"Oh! No." Maggie could feel herself blush again at the misunderstanding.

Her mother-in-law hastened to explain. "Maggie was Chad's wife."

The other woman turned beet red. "Oh...I'm so sorry! I heard about his accident. I just assumed..."

Dan's mother quickly reassured her it was an honest mistake and the group dispersed, promising to get together while Greg was in town.

* * *

As they walked together back to his truck, Dan tried to forget the embarrassing moment. But he couldn't help wondering if other people around them made the same assumption. Over the last few months, he and Maggie and Jenny had become more and more like a small family. He often put his arm around his sister-in-law to assist her on stairs or

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uneven ground. Did other people assume they were involved?

He thought back to his conversation with his parents when Maggie had shown them her shop. The upstairs room definitely wouldn't work for long. He remembered his ex-wife's last few months of pregnancy and how difficult it had been for her to get around. Couldn't Maggie see how much more convenient his place was?

Recalling how Tiffany had enjoyed fixing up the nursery, he wondered if Maggie wished she had a place of her own to get ready. Maybe preparing her shop was her way of coping with some of the nesting instincts he'd heard about. But still, she must feel a little of the domestic need for a place for the baby. Maybe if he helped her decorate the guestroom with some baby things, it would help coax her to stay.

Since Jenny remained with them, he kept conversation impersonal on the way back to the ranch and throughout the rest of the afternoon.

The next day Dan worked in his office for a few hours, but when he noticed business begin to boom at the tack shop, he closed up his own place and went over to help. Although not as busy as the grand opening, the store had a lot of customers. Dan wandered around, making himself available for questions and in case anyone bought a saddle or other large item they needed help carrying out.

His mother brought Jenny in after picking her up from school. Seated on the counter in front of him, his daughter chatted about her day while Maggie finished ringing up an order.

When the customer left, Maggie turned her full attention to Jenny. Catching Dan's eye, his mother nodded toward his daughter and her aunt, dressed in similar blue blouses and jeans. "Looks like you need to buy denim wholesale," she said, smiling. "I wonder if they make jeans in infant sizes?"

"They do," Maggie said. "In fact..." she reached under the counter and pulled out a couple of denim items. "Look at these!"

Dan shook his head as Jenny and his mother oohed and aahed at two tiny blue bibs with fringe trim. "What's that?" he asked when

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Maggie pulled out a third denim item. She grinned. "Diaper pants. I guess I'll be needing a few more of these—and the diapers to go under them."

"You sure will," his mother agreed, taking Jenny's hand. "Jenny and I will take you shopping Sunday."

After saying goodbye, his mother and daughter left. Maggie got back to work at the register while Dan continued to circle around the store.

Most of the customers were friendly people he knew from the horsemen's club or other business organizations he belonged to in town. But a few were women who appeared to have wandered in out of curiosity to see a new store.

While straightening a shelf of brushes and currycombs, he overheard a catty conversation in the next aisle. He looked over to see an older woman wearing a purple pantsuit and an abundance of gaudy gold jewelry, speaking in a low tone to a slightly younger woman in a colorful print dress. She nodded toward Maggie at the cash register.

"I heard she's a widow."

"Then where are her rings? I think she just wants everyone to believe her baby is legitimate. That's what most girls in her situation do."

Dan gritted his teeth and stepped around the shelf to face them. "Can I help you ladies?" he asked, trying to keep his tone civil.

"Thank you, but we're just looking." They moved on, still talking in low tones. He watched them with growing irritation until they exited the store. Several times their glances strayed to Maggie's obvious pregnancy, and the look on their faces showed their disapproval.

Later that afternoon, he overheard a similar comment from a customer he knew by name. Glancing quickly at Maggie, he could tell by the embarrassed pink on her cheeks that she had heard it, too.

Surreptitiously studying her face, he noticed her fatigue. But he realized, from previous tries, that it wouldn't do any good to suggest

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she take a break. She was determined to train her employees to take over when she had the baby, and luckily they seemed to be fast learners. He wondered how much time she would be able to take off.

He remembered, from when Jenny was born, that a new baby took an awful lot of time and energy. Tiffany had gone back to work as soon as possible, and he knew Maggie wouldn't want to leave her newly opened shop for long. Of course she also had a lot more motherly instinct than his ex-wife had ever shown. She wouldn't want to leave her baby, either. How would she handle both jobs on her own?

She probably didn't know what she was in for. But knowing Maggie, it wouldn't do any good to warn her; she would only be more stubborn about refusing help.

Living with him, however, had already worked out great for both of them. And though she didn't love him, their kisses had been something, leading him to hope for more somewhere down the line.

Marriage. It would solve all her problems. He had to try.

He waited until they locked up for the night and had sent the employees home, then took her arm and tugged her to a seat.

"You heard what Mrs. Trenton said, didn't you?" he asked, watching her face closely.

She shrugged, staring at the floor. "I suppose a lot of people will think that. But it can't be helped. Once people get to know me, they won't care anymore."

"I don't want you to have to deal with it."

She gave a nervous-sounding laugh. "Well, there isn't much I can do about it. I don't have a husband, and my pregnancy is pretty obvious. What should I do, wear a sign that says 'I was married when I got pregnant'?"

"You could marry *me*."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

He picked up her hands and held them between his. "Is that idea so ridiculous?"

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“Well, no. But it’s so sudden. Why?”

He searched her face for a sign that said she wanted to marry him. Seeing only surprise, he sighed. Apparently she wouldn’t do it for herself. He had to make her think of the future of the baby. “I don’t want my niece or nephew to be illegitimate.”

“He won’t be!”

“Maybe not legally. But some people will think so.”

Her voice rose with obvious irritation. “You’ve been talking to your mother, haven’t you? You’re letting her convince you people will gossip.”

“She was right about that. I’ve heard it. You heard some of it, too.”

Maggie stood, her chin high. “I don’t care. I refuse to get married just to avoid scandal. I married for love once and if I ever marry again, it will be for the same reason!”

She pulled her keys out of her purse and started for the door.

“Maggie, wait. Think about it, okay?”

She paused, staring at the floor. When she looked up at him, tears glistened in her eyes. “I appreciate the offer, Dan. But it wouldn’t work. And...and I think I’ll move into the upstairs room here this weekend. At least that will stop the gossip about my living with you.” She turned on her heel and walked out.

* * *

Maggie managed to avoid Dan the rest of the evening. But by the time Trish picked her up for childbirth class, she was an emotional wreck.

Somehow she got through the session without talking about it. On the way home, Trish threw her a worried look. “Okay, what gives? You weren’t yourself at all tonight. Are you all right?”

Maggie took a deep cleansing breath, like she’d learned in class, before explaining. “After work today, Dan suggested we get married.”

Trish glanced away from the road just long enough to reveal her raised eyebrows. “You don’t sound very happy about it.”

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"I'm not. I told him no."

"You love him, don't you?"

Maggie could feel the tears well up again. She blinked them back. "He doesn't love me."

"How do you know? Did he say that?"

"No. But the reason he wants to get married is to give my baby a father."

"A lot of people get married for that reason."

"And most of them end up in divorce court."

Trish shook her head. "Not all of them. When true love is involved, it can work."

Maggie's heart felt as though someone squeezed it. "But that's just it. He doesn't want to get married for love. He wants a wife in name only. I had a good marriage once. I won't settle for less."

"I think you're selling yourself short. I can tell he cares about you."

"Cares, maybe. As his friend. His brother's wife. Not as a lover. We've barely even kissed."

"So? You don't have to go to bed with someone to fall in love."

They pulled into the driveway, and Trish stopped the car.

"How could he love me?" Maggie argued. "I'm as big as a house!"

"All the more reason to believe he does. He's known you a long time, and he knows what you're really like inside." Trish gave her a last pointed look before she exited the car.

* * *

After making sure Jenny was sound asleep and the house secure, Dan headed out to the barn. Now that the tax deadline was past, he had time to finish all urgent accounting work during the day, even with helping in the tack store. It was nice to have his evenings to himself again. Maggie was still off at class, and he found himself missing her presence. Late night rides had always helped clear his head before. It was worth a try now.

Dan checked on the mares, then curried and brushed Sultan, the

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familiar tasks helping him keep his thoughts focused away from his problems. He shook out the saddle pad and put it on the stallion, followed by his saddle and bridle.

While still in the well-lit barn, Dan gave a last check of the tack to make sure it was all sound. He confirmed his beeper was working in case Jenny needed him. After tightening the girth, he led his mount out to the pasture. Between the moon and the floodlights on the house, there was just enough light. He climbed onto the saddle and let Sultan pick his way across the familiar ground.

It was a beautiful night for a ride. He should do this more often, he decided. Soon the weather would be too hot during the daytime. Maybe after the baby came, Maggie could join him when the children were both asleep. Jenny could beep them if the baby woke up.

He shook his head and snorted. As if Maggie was going to stay here after she had her baby! She had already told him she planned to move out in a few days. As much as he would like to convince her to stay, it didn't look like that was going to happen.

Listening to the sounds of crickets and nocturnal animals, he remembered the night he and Maggie had stood by his truck talking before going inside. That had been the day her store opened, and they had gone out to celebrate. Things had been going so well between them that he had been ready to propose.

He had already known he loved her for a long time. And after his father made the suggestion, it somehow had seemed the right time. He knew his parents believed it a good idea. He hadn't told Jenny, but he imagined she would be delighted, too.

The only one he had to convince was Maggie. He had put off proposing until he had realized what problems she faced as a pregnant widow. But stubborn Maggie had refused anyway, and his proposal had somehow forced her to decide to move out. How would he stand it when she left?

He coaxed Sultan to a trot, the bouncing gait requiring a little more

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concentration. After a few moments they moved into a lope, staying in a small well-lighted circle. Sultan was well trained and sure-footed and Dan could relax as he rode, relieving the kinks in his mind as well as his body.

But when he pulled the horse back to a walk to cool down, Dan once again found himself thinking about Maggie. Although she had refused his proposal, there had been a flicker of something in her eyes before she spoke.

Could she have liked the idea, just a little?

During the past three months they had grown closer and closer, reestablishing a long-time friendship that he had once thought could never be rekindled. He knew she liked him, at least as a friend.

He thought about the passion they'd shared that day in her shop. That had been more than friendly kisses. If his parents hadn't come in when they did...where would it have led?

Although they hadn't been alone long enough since to kiss like that again, he could tell by looking in her eyes that she remembered as well as he did. If the attraction were mutual, why in the world wouldn't she marry him?

Dan spotted a car coming in the distance and decided it was time to go in. Maybe he could talk to Maggie again tonight.

He was putting the saddle on the rack when he heard footsteps and looked up.

"Hi," Trish said, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

He felt a stab of fear. "Is anything wrong?"

She shook her head. "Our last class went fine. I'm glad we were able to finish. You know her due date is in two weeks, which means it could be any day."

He sighed. "Yeah... I've been studying the stuff you gave me, just in case."

"Good." Trish paused, looking uneasy.

He leaned against the wall. "So, what can I do for you?"

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Trish chewed her lip, as though not sure what to say. Finally she flipped her long hair back and looked at him. "Maggie was upset tonight. When I asked her why, she said you proposed."

Dan muttered a curse under his breath and stared at the floor. "Yeah. I thought it was a *solution* to her problems, not an addition to them."

"Did she tell you why she refused?"

"She didn't have to. I know why. I can't compete with my perfect older brother."

Trish gasped. "Is that what you think?"

He pushed himself off the stall wall and started to pace. "He's a hard act to follow."

Trish walked over and confronted him, hands on hips. "Is that all you're trying to do? Take his place?"

He frowned and sighed. Unable to move with her blocking his path, he leaned on the wall again, crossing his arms. "No. I've loved her for a long time, even before Chad noticed her."

"Have you told *her* that?"

He looked at Trish in surprise, then shook his head. "No. I guess not," he admitted.

"She thinks you don't love her, Dan. She believes you only asked her for the baby's sake."

"How could she not know?"

"If you never talked about it, what else is she supposed to think?"

After Trish left, Dan narrowed his eyes at the stall in front of him. "Could she be right?" he asked Sultan. "Doesn't Maggie know how I feel about her?"

CHAPTER 14

When Dan returned to the house, Maggie had already gone to bed. She didn't appear by the time he and Jenny left for work and school the next morning, so he decided to wait until lunchtime to talk to her again.

He was finishing some paperwork in his office when the phone rang.

"Hi, Dan, it's Trish."

Something about the excitement in her voice clued him that this was not a social call. "What's wrong?" he asked, his heart in his throat.

"Don't get alarmed, but I think Maggie is going into labor."

He was standing before the last words were out of her mouth. "What?"

"She just called me from the shop and said her water broke. I told her I can't get there for a while. Her contractions are still pretty far apart, and she said she'd wait for me, but I thought maybe you'd like to go instead."

"You bet."

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“Do you think you’re ready?”

I hope so. “I read all the books, and I’ve talked to Dr. Cooper. I can handle it.”

Trish laughed. “I knew I could count on you. I’ll pick Jenny up for you. You just take care of Maggie.”

Dan was out the door within seconds after hanging up.

Heart racing, he rushed into the shop. “Where’s Maggie?” he shouted at Emily, the closest employee. She pointed, but he was already heading for the back of the store.

Maggie sat on a chair, her feet propped up on another one. She looked at him in surprise. “Dan! What’re you doing here already?”

“Taking you to the hospital! Where’s your bag?”

“In my car, but—”

He started to scoop her up, but she pushed him away. “What in the world are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to carry you to your car.”

“I’m perfectly capable of walking!”

Her indignant attitude would have made him smile if he wasn’t so damn scared. “Then why aren’t you there already?”

“I’m waiting for Trish.”

“She’ll come later. I’m taking you now.”

She stared at him for a moment. Then, seeming to realize that if she didn’t move, he did intend to carry her, she slowly got to her feet. “All right. Emily, call Trish back and tell her to meet us at Regency General.”

The other woman nodded. “Is there anything else I can do?”

“Put a closed sign in the window, lock up and take the day off.”

A few minutes later, Maggie was safely ensconced on the back seat of her car. Dan drove quickly, but carefully, to the hospital. Since he had already helped her pre-admit, the paperwork process went rapidly. He was finished and waiting for her by the time the admitting nurses finished her prep.

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"You don't have to wait here," she told him when he appeared at her bedside. "I'm sure Trish will be here soon."

Her face suddenly contorted with pain, and she took a deep breath, letting it out in short spurts.

His heart twisted with sympathy—and admiration. He forced himself to think about what he'd learned about the process of labor. "That's it, honey, relax," he said, breathing with her.

When the contraction was over, she frowned at him. "How come you know how to breathe like that?"

He grinned, calmer now that they were close to help and he knew things would be okay. "I've been studying up."

"Why?"

"Just in case."

"In case what?"

"You accepted my marriage proposal." He reached behind her and fluffed up the pillow.

"But that was just yesterday! When did you decide to ask me?"

"I'm not sure. I bought the ring a few weeks ago."

"You actually bought a ring?"

He nodded. "Uh-huh." He pulled the box out of his pocket and opened it. "Will this make a difference in your answer?"

Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the diamond. "Nnno. Of course not. A ring doesn't change things."

He got down on one knee at her bedside. Taking her hand, he looked into her eyes. "Then how about if I tell you how much I love you?" he asked softly.

Her face registered astonishment. "*Do* you?"

"I think I always have. That was the reason I gave you and Chad such a hard time. I cared about you, too. But when I realized you loved him, I didn't want to stand in your way."

Tears glistened in her eyes. "Oh, Danny. I never knew."

He shrugged. "All that's in the past. I know you'll never love me

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like you loved him, but...do you think we could give it a try anyway?"

She squeezed his hand, holding his gaze. She took a deep breath and spoke. "You're right. I don't love you like I loved Chad."

Hearing her voice his fear aloud was like a punch in the gut. He gritted his teeth and nodded, grimly accepting her refusal as he mentally prepared another rebuttal.

"Marry me anyway," he said. "It can be one of convenience. I don't want to lose—"

"Danny," she interrupted, laughing. "Will you let me finish?"

He stared at her. How could she find humor in turning him down again?

"I love you, too," she said. "Not the same as Chad—you're different, and I love you in a different way. But I love you every bit as much."

As soon as her words sunk in, he felt for the chair behind him and sat down abruptly in shock. "You do?"

Her face glowed with happiness. "Yes. I've known for weeks now. That's why I wanted to move out. I knew I couldn't stand living with you any longer as just a friend. But I thought you only saw me as Chad's wife."

He shook his head. "I used to. That was the reason I wanted to help you in the beginning. But as soon as you moved in with Jenny and me, I remembered why I loved you. I don't think I ever really stopped."

"While Chad was alive I stayed away from you because I didn't want either of you to know. After he died I felt guilty for wanting you because I had *always* wanted you."

"But you never did anything wrong!" Maggie exclaimed. "Wanting something and going after it are two different things."

"I realize that now. You helped a lot that night you told me to stop feeling guilty that he was the one to die instead of me."

Maggie nodded her understanding. "I think I started to heal that night, too. You reminded me that Chad and I had agreed to take care of

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Jenny if something ever happened to you. It made me realize you felt the same way about Chad's unborn child. After that I was more willing to accept your help. I didn't plan to fall in love with you."

He grinned. "But you did?"

"I fell hard." She returned his smile, still holding his hand. After a moment she spoke again. "Dan, Chad was a wonderful husband, but he's part of my past now. I want my future, and that of my baby, to be with you."

She looked at him, still smiling. Opening her mouth again as though about to say something else, she suddenly began labor breathing again.

He squeezed her hand and helped her through the pain. "The contractions are getting closer," he said, checking his watch. "You better give me an answer quick."

She gave him a weak grin. "All right. I'll marry you as soon as I get out of here."

"Why not now?"

"Now? When I'm in labor?" She gave a slightly hysterical laugh.

"I'd really like this baby to be *ours*—officially."

She looked into his eyes and smiled. "I'd like that, too."

He started to get up when a new worry occurred to him. "Or do you want the whole church wedding thing? That'll take a while."

"No. That doesn't matter. I just want to be your wife."

He took her hand and squeezed it. "Then tell our child to wait a little longer. I've got a few calls to make."

* * *

An hour later, in between contractions, their priest pronounced them Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Joseph Newman. As soon as Dan leaned over to kiss his bride, everyone else made a hasty retreat.

"Mmmm, that was some kiss," Maggie said when he pulled away. "I'm looking forward to a lot more of those."

He grinned. "That's only a sample." Before he could add any further tempting remarks about things to come, her face once again

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contorted in pain. "Oh!"

Dan took her hand. "Don't worry, Maggie, I'm here for you. You can count on me."

She nodded as she began breathing. "I...think...I always...knew that."

They had little time for talking over the next two hours. Her contractions came hard and fast, but Dan seemed instinctively to know how to help her through them, even though he hadn't had the benefit of classes.

By the time the doctor announced her full dilation and readiness to deliver, she and Dan were both exhausted.

Dan donned a paper gown and mask while the nurses converted her labor bed into a delivery table. "It won't be long now, honey," he told her, wiping her face as soon as he rejoined her.

She swallowed and nodded, keeping her eyes focused on his face.

"As soon as the next contraction begins, I want you to push," Doctor Cooper announced, taking delivery position at her feet. "Dad, would you like to watch from down here?"

"No!" Maggie cried. "I want him at my side."

Dr. Cooper nodded agreeably. "Fine. Keep her focused."

Before he could give any more instructions, the next contraction began. She gave in to the overwhelming need to push, working harder than she ever had in her life.

Several contractions later, their child was born. "It's a boy!" the doctor said, just as the baby began a lusty cry that assured her he was okay.

"We have a son," Maggie said, tears of joy spilling out of her eyes as she met Dan's happy gaze over the top of his mask.

He swallowed, and she could have sworn his eyes misted a little. He held her hand once again as the doctor finished up and his assistant wrapped the baby. A few moments later, a smiling nurse brought the newborn to Maggie's side.

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“Dan, why don’t you hold him first?” Maggie suggested.

Without giving him a chance to refuse, the nurse passed the tiny bundle to Dan. He wordlessly took the baby and gazed at him in wonder.

“Have you picked out a name?” the nurse asked.

“Chad Daniel?” Maggie asked, looking at Dan.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I like that.”

“He looks just like you,” the nurse said, smiling at Dan.

Her new husband appeared momentarily taken aback, but Maggie squeezed his hand reassuringly as she gazed into his eyes. “Yes,” she said, “he does look like you. But after all, you’re his daddy now.”

Dan swallowed as he stared at his new son. “I hope I can be a good father to him,” he said, his voice raw with emotion.

Watching her new husband and baby bond, Maggie’s heart swelled with happiness. “You’ll be a terrific father,” she said. “To Jenny and little Chad—and all our other children. This is only the beginning.”

SANDI HADDAD

Native Floridian Sandi Haddad has always been a romantic. As a child, she made up pretend games that always included a romance with a happy ending. Thinking she could never actually make a living as a fiction writer, she followed her second choice of careers. Along the way to becoming a registered nurse, she took English and creative writing courses as college electives. After working a few years as a maternity and pediatric nurse, she met and married her own hero, Fred, an engineer. She was happy to stay home to raise their four children. When the youngest started kindergarten, she decided it was time to either go back to nursing or see if she could succeed at writing.

Sandi knew she was on her way when her first full-length hardcover romance, *A Stable Relationship*, won the Virginia Romance Writers' Holt medallion. A second sweet hardcover romance featuring a nurse heroine, *Vital Signs*, was published by Avalon Books in 2000.

Sandi also has five novels contracted to Amber Quill Press. The first, Aspen Gold finalist *Ticket To Romance*, *Physical Evidence*, a romantic mystery, and the traditional contemporary romance *Rawhide And Lace*. A new edition of *A Stable Relationship* and the sequel *A Stable Account* are also scheduled for release in 2003.

Her husband of more than 25 years is now in management of a large utility company, and their oldest daughter is married with a family of her own. Fred and Sandi live on a mini-ranch on the space coast of Florida with their three youngest children, two horses, and an ever-growing menagerie of pets.

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