

MILLS & BOON



Vintage *Cherish*

**Baby,
Oh Baby!**

TERESA SOUTHWICK

Teresa Southwick

Baby, Oh Baby!

Аннотация

I wish I had a baby...When Rachel Manning spoke her secret wish aloud, she never expected to become an instant mother. She didn't even have a boyfriend! Yet here she was, temporary parent for the sweetest month-old infant. Until the baby's take-charge uncle—a heartbreaker in Stetson and jeans—showed up at her door.As Emma's legal guardian, Jake Fletcher had every right to be here. But soon he and Rachel were sharing more than late-night feedings. The down-to-earth rancher didn't believe in happy endings, but this woman was weaving a sensual spell that—man, oh man—just might grant him his most thrilling wish....

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“You’ve got me under some kind of spell,” Jake said

“Right back at you,” Rachel told him. “I’ll see your spell and raise you an incantation or two.”

He grinned. “That’s what I like about you. You give as good as you get.”

She blinked up at him. “Did you just admit you like me?”

“I already admitted we’re friends, but it was probably part of that whole spell thing you’ve got going.”

“I see.” She slid her hands from his neck, down over the muscular contours of his chest. “Far be it for me to wear out my welcome. I’ll just take my spell and go home—”

“The hell you will,” he said, tightening his hold.

A sound came from the monitor in her pocket. A little cough and a sneeze.

“Omigosh. Emma.”

Baby, Oh Baby!

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**MILLS
BOON®**

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To Angie Ray and Marianne Donley—my gratitude for all the nitpicking. Here's to the power of three.

TERESA SOUTHWICK

lives in Southern California with her hero husband, who is more than happy to share with her the male point of view. An avid fan of romance novels, she is delighted to be living out her dream of writing for Silhouette Books.

The fortune-teller said...

The baby you ask for comes with a price.

The promise you make could cost you twice.

If the three born on February twenty-ninth rub the magic from the lamp and make a wish—on that day that comes only once every four years—each shall receive her most coveted desire.

But there is peril.

Each of the three must see beyond the evident. Look into the soul of the one her heart has chosen. Only then will she find the truth that is hers alone.

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Prologue

New Orleans—February 29, 2004

“What are the odds of being born on February 29?” Rachel Manning looked at Ashley Gallagher and Jordan Bishop, her two best friends in the world and fellow leap year birthday celebrators.

“If you’re the three of us, the chances are one hundred percent,” Ashley answered.

Jordan tapped her chin thoughtfully. “When you think about it, the odds of three women remaining friends from the newborn nursery to the present are probably astronomical. We’re legendary, like the Three Musketeers.”

“Pop quiz,” Ashley said. “What was your best birthday?”

“You’re such a college girl,” Jordan teased. “Although we’re twenty-four today, technically we’ve only had six birthdays, so the question doesn’t put a strain on the memory banks.”

“This is the best birthday,” Ashley said. “How cool is it to be here in New Orleans?”

“I second that.” Rachel glanced uneasily over her shoulder. “It’s getting late. We should probably head back. I’d like to make a toast to us at a cozy hotel bar.”

“Aw, Mom, don’t be a party pooper,” Ashley teased. “This is my last carefree night. Tomorrow it’s back to work and classes. For the next two and a half months I have to gird my loins, or

whatever you call it, to get ready for finals and graduation.”

“Hallelujah.” Jordan grinned.

“Better late than never,” Ashley defended herself. “I want to squeeze every last ounce of fun out of tonight. By my calculations, we only have about fifteen minutes left until our birthday is over. And we won’t have another official one for four more years.” Jordan linked her arms through theirs, urging them forward. “Let’s see what kind of trouble we can get into before we get that birthday drink.”

That was when Rachel heard someone yelling. Just ahead she saw a woman standing on the sidewalk outside a shop. She was agitated and pointing. “Stop him! Thief! Help!”

Rachel’s heart thumped hard against her ribs. Oh, where was that safe hotel bar when you really needed it? People on the sidewalk parted and she saw a slight figure in a black ski cap and dark clothes running straight toward them.

Jordan tugged on their arms, urging them out of the way, which was just fine with Rachel. But if he had a knife or a gun. . . .

Then the thief was directly in front of them and Rachel saw Jordan’s foot slide out. As he went down, something fell from his hand and clattered on the walkway at their feet. Jordan bent and grabbed it. Half a second later the guy was up, shooting them a furious look. Rachel braced herself for his attack. But when a siren sounded, he took off around the corner.

“Jordan,” Ashley said, her voice breathless, “When you decide to find trouble, you don’t waste any time.”

“Everyone okay?” Rachel asked. She looked at one then the other of her friends.

“Yeah,” Ashley said. “Shouldn’t we do something? Call the police? Chase him?”

“He’s long gone.” Jordan was turning the tarnished brass she’d picked up from side to side. “The only thing we can do is return this. It looks like a lamp, straight out of Aladdin.”

Rachel shook her head. “That’s your adventurous streak talking. It looks like a glorified gravy boat to me. But obviously that woman wants it back.”

Together, they walked toward the waiting woman. She looked like a Gypsy, dressed all in black with a matching bandanna tied pirate style over her dark brown hair.

Jordan held out the recovered object. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” The woman turned the thing over, examining it. “If this had fallen into the hands of someone who abused it…” She shook her head and let out a breath. “I am very grateful.”

“It was nothing,” Ashley said. “Jordan’s big feet are always getting in the way.” She grinned when the owner of the big feet in question glared at her.

The Gypsy shook her head. “You shall be rewarded for your courage. Won’t you please come inside?”

“I don’t know about this, you guys,” Rachel said, glancing down at the fog swirling around their feet. It was then she noticed the strange green light glowing inside the shop.

“It’s all smoke and mirrors. You need to loosen up and be open

to new experiences. Carpe diem. When an opportunity presents itself, seize it with both hands and go along for the ride.” Jordan linked her arms through theirs again and tugged them into the shop.

“My name is Faith,” the woman said. She turned, holding the dull, dirty brass thing as if it was spun gold. “Each of you must rub the lamp and make a wish.”

“I told you it was a lamp,” Jordan said.

“Isn’t the going rate for a good deed three wishes?” Ashley asked.

Jordan made a tsking noise. “No wonder it’s taken you so long to get through college. Do the math. One wish apiece is three wishes.”

“And one is all you need if it’s the right one,” the strange woman said.

“Okay. But as the story goes, a genie will appear. What do we do then? One guy? Three women? Do we arm wrestle for a date with him?” Ashley asked.

“No genie,” Faith said. “That’s very yesterday. But I promise if you wish for your heart’s desire, you will be rewarded.”

Ashley met Rachel’s gaze. “With your track record, it wouldn’t be smart to wish for a man. On the off chance your wish comes true.”

“No man,” Rachel agreed. Every time she’d let herself care, she lost something.

“I don’t want a man, either,” Jordan commented.

“Good.” Ashley nodded emphatically.

“Let’s do a group rub,” Jordan suggested, taking it from the woman. “We’ll wish for the most outrageous things we can think of.”

Together they took the lamp and rested it on their palms.

“Feel that?” Rachel asked uneasily. Warmth seemed to emanate from metal she’d expected to be cold. “It feels like it’s vibrating.”

“You’re just shaking.” Ashley looked at the lamp. “I’ll go first. I wish for money and power.” She glanced up and searched their gazes. “What?”

“That’s two wishes,” Rachel pointed out.

“Power is sort of a subset of money.”

As Rachel rubbed her index finger along the curved side of the brass, she thought of the pregnant teenager temporarily sharing her apartment. An emptiness opened up inside her producing an almost painful ache. “I wish I had a baby.” She smiled sheepishly at her friends’ shocked expressions. “You wouldn’t let me wish for a man.”

“That’s the best outrageous you can do?” Jordan heaved an exaggerated sigh. “I can top you both. I want to be a princess and live in a palace.”

“Oo-kay.” Rachel laughed. “That’s pretty outrageous since you have a better chance of kissing an above average-looking toad than meeting a handsome prince.”

But she found herself caught up in the moment and filled with

a sense of anticipation. She watched and waited. But nothing happened. Although she hadn't expected anything, she was oddly deflated when that's what she got. So much for three wishes.

"Excellent," Faith said, as she lifted the lamp from their palms.

Rachel rubbed her forehead. "How do you figure?" The Gypsy tilted her head. "Remember, magic works in mysterious ways. Happy birthday to you all."

Stunned, they stared at her for several moments. "How did you know it was our birthday?" Rachel finally asked.

The odd woman smiled mysteriously.

Then a clock chimed midnight.

Chapter One

June 1, 2004—Sweet Spring, Texas

Through tired, aching eyes, Rachel Manning stared down at the grumpy month-old baby girl, then opened the tabs on the disposable diaper. After capturing the tiny, flailing ankles in one hand, she pulled down the diaper and wrinkled her nose. “Paydirt. No pun intended, Emma. But you’re such a sweet, delicate flower, how can you be such a party pooper?”

Whoa. Rachel hadn’t thought about that phrase since the night of her birthday celebration in New Orleans when she’d made a wish. She looked down at the infant waving her tiny arms and shook her head. Couldn’t be. And even if she believed such a thing was possible, surely her fairy godmother or wish warranty customer service representative could read between the lines.

I want a baby meant finding a man, falling in love and getting married. A baby would follow after nine months of pregnancy. She wondered if there was a wish complaint department because she had a bone to pick with someone. Several important steps had been skipped.

She shook her head. She was giving way too much credence to that surreal scene. Could a person hallucinate from sleep deprivation? “No way do I believe in magic lamps. I still say it looked like a solid brass gravy boat.”

The baby’s mewling sounds cranked up and blended into one,

single full-blown wail followed by more unhappy squeaking. “It’s okay, Em. Don’t you worry your pretty head. Didn’t I say I’d take care of you? After a certain amount of arm twisting and guilt-tripping,” she mumbled.

Rachel had met Holly Johnson at Sweet Spring Hospital where she worked. The pregnant teen went to the obstetrical clinic for her prenatal care. At eighteen, she was released from the state foster care program and Rachel had taken her in. This baby belonged to Holly and her boyfriend Dan Fletcher. Very reluctantly, Rachel had agreed to care for the child, giving the teenagers a chance to find out if the two of them could make a go of it or not. They needed time to make a very adult decision about whether or not to give up this baby.

And Rachel took full responsibility for putting the idea of taking some time away into their heads. But who knew they’d tweak it like this? She’d only agreed to care for the baby after the kids told her Dan’s older brother and guardian supported the idea.

But all the logic in the world didn’t take away Rachel’s feeling that this baby had been left on her door-step. And she wanted to believe the teens really would come back. Unlike her own parents.

A rusty, familiar pain twisted inside Rachel. Wow, she must really be tired. It was the only explanation for dredging up those old feelings. That was ancient history and she really was so over it.

And who cared anyway when this beautiful infant was staring up at her with big innocent eyes. Something she'd never before experienced squeezed tight in the region of her heart. This child needed to be cared for and Rachel intended to do just that. To the best of her ability. Which was, at the moment, slightly handicapped on account of very little sleep.

She finished diapering the tiny girl, then cradled the baby against her shoulder. "Shh, little one," she crooned. "What do you want? You're fed. You've got clean pants. What's wrong?"

She sat on her couch, but that produced another earsplitting squall that bordered on a pitch only a dog could hear. "Oo-kay."

Instantly, Rachel stood and paced from one end of her ground floor two bedroom apartment to the other, wondering which would wear out first—the rug, the baby or her. Rubbing the infant's tiny back as she walked, she tried to ignore her bone-deep weariness. Did all new mothers do this? How, after the physical rigors of giving birth, did the average woman manage this aerobic exercise?

A sudden knock on the door startled her. It was barely seven o'clock in the morning. Who could possibly— Hope expanded like a balloon inside her.

"Maybe that's your mom," she said to the baby. "She only left yesterday, but I bet she missed you like crazy and couldn't wait for a decent hour to see you. Besides, she already knows you're a baby and you don't keep decent hours."

Rachel slid off the security chain and turned the deadbolt, then

yanked open the door. But it wasn't Holly Johnson standing there. Not even close. Wrong gender.

"Morning, Rachel." The deep voice never failed to scrape along her nerve endings.

"Jake." Jake Fletcher, the man who rubbed her the wrong way. He also happened to be the baby's uncle. Could this day get any worse?

"Sorry to bother you—" He stared at her. "Good Lord. Are you all right?"

She glanced in the mirror over the small table in her midget-size entry. Yikes! Her blond hair stood up in spikes all over her head. That was bad since she wasn't going for the punk look. The only makeup she had on was what she hadn't had the energy to wash off the night before. Having an infant crying at all hours in a small apartment wasn't conducive to a regular beauty regimen. Beauty, heck. She'd barely managed basic hygiene. And the cherry on the melted sundae that was her life—she was in pajamas. Shorty pajamas. She was practically naked.

"I'm fine." She clutched the baby tighter against her. "What are you doing here?"

"It's about Dan."

"Of course it is. The last time you came to my apartment was when you found out Holly was pregnant and your brother was the father."

"I remember. She'd just been cut loose from her foster home after turning eighteen. And had nowhere to go until you stepped

in,” he finished, his voice dripping sarcasm.

“I’m not sure what you’re implying, Jake. But like I told you then, I met her at the hospital’s prenatal clinic and suggested she stay with me temporarily.”

“So you could help her figure out what state programs might be of help to her,” he said dryly.

“It’s what I do. I’m a hospital discharge planner. It’s my job to know what programs are available to all patients.”

“Right.”

This guy really fried her grits and he had from the first moment she’d met him. “The last time you showed up on my doorstep you demanded that Holly marry your brother.”

“They have a baby. It’s the right thing to do,” he shot back.

“I’m not going to debate that with you at this hour. By the way, what are you doing here at this hour?” What are you doing here—period—was what she’d wanted to say. But she held back. Then she remembered. “Oh. Right. Dan. What about him?”

“Is he here?”

Uh-oh. He didn’t know where Dan was? She had the mother of all bad feelings.

“I haven’t seen him,” she said truthfully.

“He didn’t come by to see Holly and the baby?”

“Yesterday, then he left.” With Holly and not the baby. And Jake was supposed to know all about this.

“Can I talk to Holly?”

Rachel’s protective maternal mode switched into high gear.

Holly had been adamantly against leaving the baby with Jake when Rachel had suggested it. And this guy had gotten on her bad side—he'd never been on her good side—since she'd first met him. Because of his perpetual disapproving expression every time he looked at Holly. When he came near her, the teen had clutched Dan's hand. And if Jake spoke to Holly, she seemed to shrink—not easy when her belly had grown large with the baby.

Jake had accompanied Holly and Dan to childbirth classes and hovered like an enforcer, making it plain as the groove in his square jaw that he intended to call the shots in this situation. Rachel believed that one caught more flies with honey than vinegar. The teens had made a mistake. A really big mistake. But they needed direction not a dictator.

“Look, I know this probably isn't the best time,” he finally said when she didn't respond to his question.

“What was your first clue? The pajamas?”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “I mean this in the nicest possible way, but you normally look better.”

“Better than what?” She couldn't decide if he'd just paid her a compliment or not. At the moment she looked like something the cat yakked up, but usually she looked better? “What does that mean?”

“Your eyes are bloodshot and the circles underneath practically go to your—” He glanced down to her chest where the baby had relaxed against her, then raised his gaze to hers. “To your knees.”

“Obviously you don’t know what it’s like to be up all night with a newborn,” she snapped.

“No, I don’t.”

Rachel normally didn’t snap at people, even ones like him who tried to run the world. In fact, she didn’t much care for people who snapped at others. But after being up all hours of the night with a crying baby, snapping came sort of naturally.

It had felt good in fact—right up to the moment she thought she saw a flash of pain in his deep blue eyes. Now why did she have to go and notice that? She could be wrong. Nothing hurt the Jake Fletchers of the world—the strong, stoic, silent types. The hot, hunky, heartbreaker types. But when she studied him, the way he quickly shuttered the expression, she knew she wasn’t wrong. She’d seen that lost look before. More times than she could count. Jordan and Ashley had told her she should quit trying to mother the world. But old habits died hard. Case in point—Holly, her latest maternal mission.

“I’m sorry. That was rude of me to snap at you,” she said. “I guess my social skills need a good night’s sleep.”

“No harm done.”

“Okay, good. Let’s start over. Come in.” She let out a long breath, bracing for the conversation she knew they needed to have.

“Thanks,” he said, stepping over the threshold. He shut the door behind him.

“Jake, there’s something you need to know—”

“Dan’s gone.” Jake was holding his black Stetson in his hands, twirling it. “He didn’t come home last night.”

“I know.”

“You do?” Something dark and dangerous shadowed the chiseled angles of his cheeks and jaw.

“Being a teenage father must be a scary thing,” she said, which produced another look in his eyes that made her uneasy.

“Where is he? And Holly?” he demanded.

“I don’t know.” That was the truth. She wouldn’t know until they contacted her. “But they’re together.”

“I’ve taught him to accept the consequences of his actions. It’s not like him to run away from his responsibilities,” he said, raising his chin toward the baby in her arms.

“He didn’t run away—not exactly. They just needed some space to think things through.”

“They’ve got a little girl,” he said, an edge to his voice. “What else is there to think about?”

Rachel glanced down at the sleeping baby. She lowered her own voice to just above a whisper. “Look, I’m going to put Emma down and—”

“I’ll hold her.”

“What?”

“Your ears tired, too?”

Now who was snapping? She wondered what his excuse was. “I heard you just fine,” she said, studying him.

Why would he want to hold the baby? Weren’t most men

afraid to hold babies? And he was a big man—at least six feet. At her own five feet one inch, most people towered over her. But that didn't make her as cranky as Jake Fletcher towering over her. A day with a looming Jake Fletcher definitely didn't do much to sweeten her case of the tired crankies. Because he wasn't most people. He was good-looking, in a rugged, masculine way. He was a cowboy. He made her nervous.

He owned one of the biggest, most successful ranches in the Sweet Spring area. And if she was looking for signs, the black hat in his hands was a humdinger. Didn't all the bad guys wear black hats? It was almost the same color as his hair. In his dark blue eyes there was an expression of world-weary cynicism that, for reasons she didn't want to think about, chipped away at the ice surrounding her feelings about him.

Or maybe it was that darn, rather dandy dimple in his chin. Her grandmother always said dimple on chin, devil within. Time would tell about that. But she knew he had a nice mouth—when it wasn't pinched and pressed into a line clearly indicating his irritation.

“You don't have to hold her,” Rachel finally said. “I'll put her in her bassinet.”

“I want to hold her. Is there some reason you don't want me to?”

Yeah, she wanted to say. Her mother doesn't trust you. Had Holly ever let him hold the baby? This infant was his niece. So unless she wanted to look like she had a heart stored in the deep

freeze, she should let him. “Do you know how to hold a baby?”

“How hard can it be? She’s not as heavy as a sack of oats,” he said seriously.

Her eyes widened. “She’s not a sack of anything. She’s a baby. You know, delicate. You can’t toss her around like a sack of—”

The sudden, slight upturn of his lips said “gotcha.”

“Okay.” Her mouth curved up reluctantly as she tucked the information away under T for teasing in the Jake Fletcher file. “But really, you’ve got to support her head.”

Rachel stepped closer to him and laid the sleeping child in the crook of his arm. The fragrance of soap mingled with something—not aftershave she decided, noting stubble on his lower cheeks and jaw. He hadn’t taken the time to shave, but he smelled good. She’d already noted he was a big man who dwarfed her miniscule entryway. But why did he look bigger holding a small baby? His broad shoulders seemed even broader, his thickly muscled arms stronger. Yet he held Emma as if she were priceless, breakable glass.

Rachel’s insides jumped like she’d just touched a live wire. Sleep deprivation could really do a number on your nerves, she decided.

“I’ll go put on some clothes.”

“Good idea,” he said.

Good idea, she thought with a sigh. Second cousin to his “Good Lord” when he’d first seen her. As in she looked like road kill. Followed by, if she couldn’t put a bag over her head, she

should at least put some clothes on. On the bright side, clothes would make her feel less vulnerable. It was clear she needed coffee. Bad. Because under normal circumstances she wouldn't give a rat's backside what the heck Jake Fletcher thought of her.

Jake watched as Rachel disappeared through the doorway. Moments later, down the hall a door closed with just a little more force than was necessary. He made himself sit down with the baby, even though he was itching to follow Rachel and demand to know what the hell was going on. Because he had a feeling she knew more than she'd said. He badly wanted to know what Rachel Manning was hiding and why she had his brother's baby.

Glancing down at the small, warm body in his arms, Jake felt the hole he always carried inside him open wider, followed by an aching sadness. This new baby reminded him of everything that had been taken from him. But he wasn't a kid now. And it wasn't going to happen again. Not to his brother. He would see to it.

Leaning back, he snuggled Emma to his chest and glanced at the doorway where Rachel had disappeared. Her guarded expression when she'd opened the door to him said a mouthful. She'd told him once that he was butting into his brother's life, throwing his weight around. Takes one to know one. And he knew her kind—a straight-up, straight arrow, by-the-book, toe-the-line, card-carrying buttinski. She wouldn't know the meaning of minding her own business if it bit her on the fanny.

Under the circumstances he wouldn't have expected it, but that thought made him smile. Little Miss Muffet wasn't his type,

thinking she knew what was best for the whole world. But she had one fine fanny. And in those pajamas that covered next to nothing, the rest of her wasn't bad, either.

The baby squirmed and squeaked and he gently settled his palm on her abdomen. It nearly covered her from chest to ankle. She was so little and the need to protect and care for her body-slammed him. This child was his niece—his family. And he was going to do right by her. This time no one would get in his way.

Almost as if Rachel had heard that thought, she came back into the room. In buttercup-yellow shorts and a matching tank top, with her golden hair mussed as if a man had run his fingers through it, she looked like a walking sunbeam. He noticed she'd washed the mascara from beneath her eyes.

She walked over to him. "I'll put Emma in her bassinet now."

She leaned over and slid her hand into the crook of his arm beneath the child's head, then nudged the other under the baby's bottom and lifted. Where Rachel's hands had touched him, a trail of warmth lingered. When her gaze locked with his, he wondered why he'd never noticed before that her eyes were so big. And brown. Normally blondes had blue eyes and the unusual coloring was nice. Almost before the thought formed, she left with the baby. Then a few moments later, she returned and closed the door that separated her living room, kitchen and dining area from what he figured were the bedrooms down the hall. She sat across from him in a green wing chair that kept the oval oak coffee table between them.

He stared at her. “Now tell me where Dan and Holly are.”

Something flickered in her gaze before she said, “Like I told you before, I don’t know.”

A cold, hard feeling settled in his gut. “Did you know they were planning to take off?”

“Look, Jake, the kids are scared. They’re trying to do the right thing—”

“Did you know?” he asked again.

“Yes, but—”

“So they ran away?”

“That implies they don’t intend to come back.” Her gaze met his as she let out a long breath. “They didn’t run away—exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“They were making plans—find an apartment, jobs, that sort of thing. I was supposed to know where they were going. But for some reason they jumped the gun and left without telling me. At least I have something in writing from Holly giving me permission to take the baby to the doctor.” The odd expression on his face made her suspicious. “Did you do something to put pressure on them? Something that made them take off?”

He shook his head. “If I’d known they were up to something— This is completely irresponsible.”

“Not completely. Look at it from their point of view. They wanted time to see if they could take care of themselves.”

“How much time?”

“The rest of the summer.” Her hands fluttered, and she kept

talking, the words tumbling out fast. “They need to think through whether or not they want to keep the baby.”

“There’s nothing to think about. She’s Dan’s responsibility.” Anger surged through him and he stood, running his hand through his hair. “It’s not like Dan to go off half-cocked like this. Sounds like some hare-brained scheme Holly would come up with.”

Her mouth compressed to a straight line. “Actually, it was sort of my idea.”

“Yours?” Jake felt as if she’d slugged him in the stomach. She was an adult who should know better. “What the hell were you thinking telling them to run off?”

“That’s not exactly what I said or how it happened.” She twisted her fingers together in her lap.

“I don’t get it. After the baby was born, I told her the two of them could stay on the ranch. As long as she wanted.”

“She wasn’t comfortable with that and asked to stay with me a little longer. I agreed. There but for the grace of God and all that. She and Dan were talking about marriage. But since Emma was born, she says they’ve been fighting a lot. He’s got a full college football scholarship.”

“That I know about.”

“Holly doesn’t want to stand in his way. She’s in a catch-22 situation. She wants to go to college, too, but she doesn’t see how that can happen with taking care of Emma. On top of that, she’s not even sure she and Dan will stay together. How can she do it

on her own?”

“I told her I would help.”

Rachel’s gaze flicked to his. “She wasn’t comfortable with that, either. Look, you have to understand where she’s coming from. Holly loves her daughter and wants the best for her. We discussed the possibility of a stable adoptive home. If she’s going to give her up—”

“Not going to happen,” he said, shaking his head. “The Fletcher family takes care of its own.”

“As I was saying, in the course of our talks, I casually mentioned that no one would blame her and Dan if they took time to make their decision. Because it’s permanent. In fact, they have an obligation to Emma to do everything possible to determine what’s best. They came up with the idea to get summer jobs and an apartment to see if they can handle it.”

“Of all the irresponsible—”

“They think they are being responsible.”

“Not them. You,” he said, looking down at her.

She stood suddenly, brown eyes blazing. “How dare you judge me? You don’t even know me. I agreed to care for the baby because I’d innocently said something to put the idea in their heads. And that was only after suggesting they leave the baby with you—”

He blinked. “You did?”

“Yes. But Holly adamantly refused.”

“For crying out loud,” he snapped. “I’m family—”

She held up her hand. “I’m just telling you what she said. Don’t bite off the messenger’s head. They were upset and threatened to take off. I didn’t think that was a good alternative for anyone, especially the baby. And Dan said you knew and approved of the idea.”

“I didn’t.”

“I’m only telling you what he told me.”

“And you didn’t think to run it by me first?” he demanded.

“He’s adult enough to be a father, I figured he could make this decision on his own.” She folded her arms over her chest.

“You should have figured it was a dumb thing to do and mentioned it to someone,” he said.

“You mean ratted them out to you.”

Jake let out a long breath as he ran his fingers through his hair again. When he got his hands on that kid—

His brother had screwed up big time. Déjà vu all over again. Was the trait wired into their DNA? He’d raised Dan after their parents died and he’d done his level best to see Dan didn’t make the same mistakes Jake had. For all the good it had done. But that was a completely different issue. Jake intended to see that lightning didn’t strike the Fletcher men twice.

“You might want to cut him some slack, Jake. He’s got a lot to think about. So does Holly.” Rachel walked to the door and opened it.

Was she throwing him out? The idea of it almost made him laugh as he looked at her five-foot-nothing, one-hundred-pounds-

soaking-wet frame. What made her think he was okay with any of this and would leave? Why should he believe she didn't know where his brother was? What if she was lying? Jake had been burned in the past. He got the feeling Rachel was turning up the heat.

"I'll say one thing for you."

"What's that?" she asked.

What could it hurt to bait a hook and go on a small fishing expedition? "You're a lousy liar."

"I'm sorry you feel that way."

"So you'd rather be a good liar?" he asked, one eyebrow quirking up.

"That's not what I meant." She blew out a long breath and shook her head. "I really and truly have no idea where those kids have gone."

"Have it your way." He picked up his hat from the couch and put it on. "Makes no difference to me."

"Good."

"It doesn't change the fact that I'm taking Emma back to the ranch with me."

Chapter Two

He was taking Emma to the ranch? Over her dead body, Rachel thought. She'd wondered if this day could get any worse. Now she had her answer. Apparently the gods eagerly pounced on her negative challenge and made it so. She wanted to rephrase—could this day get any better?

Jake Fletcher better leave and take his sweeping pronouncements with him. She had given Holly a solemn promise to keep the child until she returned. Rachel knew how deeply a betrayal could cut. No way was this man taking Emma back to his ranch—or anywhere else for that matter.

Rachel closed her front door, then moved to block the hallway that led to the room where Emma was napping. Looking up at him, way up, she knew there was no way she could stop him if he decided to do this. But she was prepared to bluff him as best she could.

She folded her arms over her chest. "I'm not going to let you take Emma out of this apartment, Jake."

"Oh?"

"Like I told you, Holly gave her to me for safekeeping."

"I'm not going to hurt her."

"That's your interpretation."

He shook his head. "You accused me of making judgments about you without information. Well, right back at you, Rachel."

What kind of man do you think I am? I would never hurt a child, especially my own niece.”

“There are lots of ways you could hurt her. Like keeping her from her mother,” Rachel said.

She couldn't see his eyes because the brim of his black hat shadowed them. But Jake's mouth thinned.

“What makes you think I would do that?”

“What I think doesn't matter. It's what Holly believes. She made me promise not to give Emma to you. She thinks you're planning to take the baby away from her.”

He put his hands on his hips and shook his head. “That's the last thing I'd do.”

“Unfortunately I am not the person you have to convince,” Rachel pointed out. “But here's the deal. I gave Holly my word that I would take care of Emma until she comes back. She made me specifically swear that I wouldn't hand the baby over to you for any reason.”

“Why would she think I was planning to take Emma?” he asked.

“Because taking over is what you do, Jake.”

“And how do you know this?”

“I saw it for myself. You insisted on being at the childbirth classes. What was that about? And when Holly wouldn't follow your command to get married, you tried to talk her into going to the ranch after she left the hospital with the baby, even though she made it clear she didn't want to go anywhere with you. You

questioned everything she did from the way she held the baby to how Emma was dressed. It's plain as day you don't trust her. Next you'll probably check into the electronic surveillance ankle bracelets they make prisoners wear."

"After this stunt they've pulled, it's not a bad idea," he said.

"The point is, you're always there, not giving them a chance to breathe."

"I'm supporting my brother," he said, an edge to his voice.

"That's commendable. But his actions speak volumes. He left with Holly. I think the two of them have had about all the support from you they can stand."

"His actions leave a lot to be desired. He put his child in the care of an outsider," he said.

"An outsider maybe. But it was his decision to make, not yours," she pointed out. "That means I have permission from him as well as Holly to care for their baby until we have some word from them. And that's what I intend to do."

The muscle in his lean cheek contracted. "You're interfering in a family situation."

She chose to ignore the interfering remark. "You and Dan are family, but Holly hasn't got anyone except me."

Rachel promised herself she would never take in another person in need. Ever. But now that she was up to her eyes in alligators on Holly's behalf, she would go to the mat on the issue of protecting Holly's rights to her baby. Mother and child went together like home and hearth.

“What if she doesn’t come back?” he asked.

“Of course she’ll be back,” Rachel said automatically.

But she knew from firsthand experience that sometimes things happened. Sometimes mothers didn’t come back. Or fathers, either. Yearning for what could never be spasmed inside her, like a hunger that could never be satisfied.

“Come on, Rachel. Be realistic. There’s a story on the news almost every night about a baby abandoned, sometimes in a Dumpster.”

“Holly didn’t do that. She arranged for me to care for her baby until she comes back.”

“If she comes back.”

She would, Rachel thought. She was almost sure of it. “Holly didn’t just run off without a word. She was breastfeeding and waited to do this as long as she could—until the baby had received the benefits of breast milk.”

“If she’d stayed, Emma would still be receiving the benefits,” he said.

“I’m not saying it’s an ideal situation. But a lot of working mothers wean their infants because they have to return to work.”

Jake folded his arms over his chest. “Sugarcoat it all you want, Rachel. She’s irresponsible.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“And I’ve got another one. It’s weird for an attractive, single woman to turn her life upside down for a teenager’s baby.”

“So if I was an unattractive woman it would be okay?” She put

her hands on her hips. “It’s not like I’m going to adopt Emma. This is just for a few weeks. So unless I hear differently, I intend to keep my promise. When Holly comes back, her baby will be here waiting for her.”

Something told Rachel that Jake would be waiting, too. He was Emma’s biological uncle and frustration seemed to be rolling off him in tangible waves. On the one hand, she understood Holly’s concerns about Jake’s tendency to take control. On the other, Rachel had to give him credit for getting involved. How many men would so aggressively seek out the burden of a newborn? She couldn’t decide if he was concerned, caring or just plain crazy.

But in this regard Jake was certainly different from the men she normally met. Rachel knew her fatal flaw was her inability to turn away from someone in need. She had no illusions. No good deed went unpunished.

“So we’re at an impasse,” he said.

“Unless you decide to muscle your way past me and forcibly take Emma.”

“I’m not in the habit of manhandling women.”

A discreet look at his broad chest made her wonder what he was in the habit of doing with women. That thought sent an unwilling shiver over her arms.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said.

“Well you won’t be glad to hear that I intend to stop your interference.”

“Why can’t you just relax and let Holly and Dan do this their way?”

“If you would give me the baby, I’d be happy to relax. But since you refuse, I’ll go to plan B.”

“That’s the one where you bulldoze everyone to get what you want.” She nodded. “I’ll consider myself warned. And you know the way out.”

He touched the brim of his hat in what was probably an automatic, ingrained polite gesture. Then he walked out of her apartment. After turning the deadbolt and fitting the chain lock securely across the door, Rachel breathed a sigh of relief.

Jake had voiced her worst fear—what if Holly didn’t come back? Rachel decided to be an optimist. No one knew better than she that the road to hell was paved with good intentions. But unless she had evidence to the contrary, she planned to keep the baby healthy and happy until she could put her back into her mother’s arms.

In a perfect world, Holly and Dan would decide to get married, make a home for their baby and live happily ever after. But life wasn’t a fairy tale. She shivered as the thought reminded her yet again of February 29 in New Orleans. They had joked about the scenario calling for three wishes, and they’d each had one.

If the situation she found herself in truly was a result of her birthday wish, she could only be grateful she hadn’t had two more of her very own. She could be in three times as much trouble.

She tiptoed down the hall to check on the sleeping baby.

Rachel smiled tenderly as she looked in the crib. Somehow, even on her back Emma had scooched her way straight up into the corner, her head butted up against the bumper pad. Touching the downy head and tiny fist with one finger, Rachel's heart contracted. Feelings as big as the wide open spaces of Texas expanded inside her.

"You're not trouble, little one," she whispered. "You're nothing but a blessing. It's your uncle who's a pain in the posterior."

And not only because he was going to throw his weight around.

Three days later, Jake walked into The Fast Lane, Sweet Spring's bowling alley coffee shop, with the newspaper under his arm. He sat down in his usual booth, then stared at the tufted red Naugahyde seat across from him. It hit him suddenly that he'd never noticed the color or the tufting before. Because usually Dan sat across from him. They came here for dinner often.

Sally Jean Simmons sidled up to him, order pad and pencil in hand. "Hey, Jake. How's it goin'?"

He looked up at the tall, pretty brunette. "Okay. How about you? How's that boy of yours? He's what now? Five? Six?"

"Seven," she said smiling. "He's doin' great, thanks." She glanced at the empty seat across from him. "Where's Dan tonight?"

Jake felt the knot in his gut pull tighter. "He made other plans."

And didn't see fit to share them with me, he silently added. Every time he thought about his brother taking off without saying

a word to him, he got mad all over again.

“Look on the bright side,” Sally said, studying him. “Table for one will ease the strain on your wallet. The way that boy can pack away food is scary. I’m not looking forward to footin’ the bills when my little guy takes a growth spurt like Dan has. What can I get you tonight?”

“Coffee for starters,” he said. “And a menu.”

“Since when do you need a menu?” she asked. “It hasn’t changed in the five years I’ve been working here and you know that sucker by heart.”

He shrugged. “Just thought looking at it might help me make up my mind.”

“Comin’ right up.” Her hips swayed as she walked away.

Jake noted her curvy figure covered in tight worn denim and an equally snug T-shirt with The Fast Lane printed on the back. A vision of spiky blond hair, big brown eyes and a body dressed in sunbeam yellow flashed into his mind. It had been several days since he’d seen Rachel Manning, but she was never far from his thoughts. Partly because she was a damned attractive woman. And partly because today Little Miss Muffet was probably sorry she’d gotten between him and his family.

Behind him, the bell over the door rang as it was opened, then dinged again when it shut. He moved his napkin-wrapped eating utensils aside, then unfolded his newspaper and spread it on the Formica table in front of him. A moment later he smelled perfume and sensed someone standing beside him.

“Jake, we need to talk.”

Rachel. He braced himself, but not enough. When he looked up, his gut pulled tight again, but not from anger, annoyance or regret. It was plain old-fashioned appreciation for a beautiful woman.

“Rachel,” he said.

She was wearing shorts that flared a bit at her thighs and a tank top made out of T-shirt material with skinny straps that curved over her tanned shoulders. Her hair was combed this time in a deliberately mussed style that looked like a man had just run his fingers through it. The circles beneath her eyes were deeper and darker than they'd been a few days before. That awareness stirred the annoying protective streak he'd first noticed that morning in her apartment. Hardening himself against the feeling, he turned his attention to the baby carrier she held. Emma was supposed to be the primary focus of this newly discovered protective streak.

“Have a seat,” he said, indicating the place across from him.

“This isn't a social call.”

“Didn't think it was, but you can still sit.”

She shifted the carrier to her other hand, then flexed her fingers as if the combined weight of Emma and the contraption had taken a toll. He reached over and took the infant seat from her, then set it on the table.

His heart contracted at the sight of the sleeping baby. Her little mouth was puckered up and moving as if she sucked an imaginary bottle in her sleep. Long, dark lashes curved above

cheeks just beginning to show signs of getting chubby. Jake didn't know the first thing about babies, but this one was a stunner in his book.

"How's she doin'?"

"Great."

It was just one word, but there was a softness in Rachel's voice that made him look up. Her expression as she stared at the baby held a tenderness he wouldn't have expected from a woman so tenacious and hard-headed.

"Everything all right?" he asked, glancing at the little girl sleeping in the seat.

"She's perfect," Rachel answered, placing a hand on the carrier.

Just then Sally Jean returned. "Here you go, Jake. Coffee and a menu." She glanced at Rachel. "Need another one?"

"No," Rachel said.

"Yes," he answered at the same time.

"I'm not staying for dinner."

"Have you already eaten?" he asked.

"No, but that's not why I'm—"

"On second thought," he told Sally Jean. "We'll have two orders of meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy."

"I'm not hungry," Rachel said.

"It comes with a salad or soup," Sally Jean said.

Jake studied Rachel and figured she was a greens kind of gal. "We'll have salad with thousand island dressing."

“Biscuits, French rolls, or garlic toast?”

“Garlic toast,” he answered, deciding there was no way the two of them would be kissing.

“Comin’ right up,” the waitress said, then moved away.

“I came to talk to you, not to eat dinner,” Rachel informed him.

“You can kill two birds.” And in that vein, he figured buying her dinner could feather his own nest. If he was nice to her, maybe he could soften her up and talk her into bowing out gracefully.

Rachel stared at him and before she could respond, two old ladies, one with gray hair, the other bright red, slid out of the booth behind her. Jake spent a lot of time on the ranch and didn’t recognize the two women. When they started past, Gray Hair stopped by Emma’s car seat and peeked in.

“Congratulations,” she said, looking from Rachel to him. “What a beautiful baby.”

“Isn’t she?” Rachel said to them. “Cora Edens, Janie Compton, I’d like you to meet Jake Fletcher.”

“Hello,” gray-haired Cora said.

“Nice to meet you.” Flame-haired Janie stuck out her hand and Jake shook it.

“Rachel, dear,” Cora said. “I didn’t know you were married.”

“Oh, it’s not what—”

“Or pregnant,” Janie said, looking at the baby. “What’s her name?”

“Emma,” Rachel answered.

“She’s a beauty.” Cora glanced at Jake. “She’s got the same indentation in her chin as her father. I think she’ll have your coloring, too. Can’t tell much from that fuzz all over her head, but my guess is her hair will be dark.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he answered, unsure what response to make, but knowing one was required. He could have said they weren’t married and Emma wasn’t theirs, but that was a can of worms he didn’t particularly want to open.

“Cora, Janie,” Rachel said, “Jake and I aren’t married. This isn’t what you think—”

Apparently Rachel didn’t feel the same way about worms.

Janie put a finger to her lips. “Don’t you fret. Far be it from me to judge you and your young man for doing the wild thing.”

“No, it’s not that—”

“If I was a few years younger, I’d be suckered by those blue eyes, too, honey. I just know you and your fella will do right by this baby and get married. It’s plain as day.” Cora patted her arm, then took another look into the carrier. “She’s somethin’.”

Janie curved her fingers around the other woman’s arm. “C’mon, sister. We have to go before you embarrass this nice young couple any more. Good to see you, Rachel. Jake, nice to meet you.”

“Wait—” Rachel held her hand up as the bell above the door double-dinged their departure. She met his gaze and there was a hint of a grin in her brown eyes. “Why didn’t you set them

straight?”

“Because I saw how you were wasting your breath,” he said. “Besides, I was too busy trying to wrap my mind around that ‘wild thing’ remark.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her cheeks pink. “I had no idea talking to you here would be a problem.”

“No harm done.”

“That may not be entirely true.”

“How do you know those two? Doesn’t seem like you’d travel in the same circles.”

“Cora was in the hospital when she broke her hip and had surgery. As soon as a patient is admitted, it’s my job to juggle their course of treatment with their insurance reimbursement. I also check into nursing homes and rehabilitation facilities. In Cora’s case, she needed heavy-duty physical therapy to get her back on her feet. It’s nice to see her up and around. On the other hand, she’s up and around and moving so well the whole town will think we’ve had a baby together.”

“Are you saying that sweet little old lady has a big mouth?”

“Mouths. Plural. Those two sweet little old ladies spread stories like a farmer spreads manure,” she said, sitting down across from him.

Jake laughed. He couldn’t help himself. Then Sally Jean set two salads in front of them. With her hands on her hips, she looked from Rachel to Jake. “You two look like you’re havin’ fun.”

Jake wouldn't go that far. But if anyone had told him he would be laughing over dinner with the woman who was messing with his family, he'd have called the person crazy.

"Entrées will be out in a few," she said, and walked away without waiting for an answer.

"Eat. You need to keep your strength up." But when the smile disappeared from Rachel's face, part of him wanted to call the words back.

"My strength? Because of the baby," she guessed, her gaze narrowed on him. "If you have your way, that won't be an issue much longer."

"You got the papers?" he asked.

"Regarding Emma's custody hearing? Yes," she said, picking up her fork.

Jake studied her, wondering if she was planning to stab him with it. Just a moment before, when she'd laughed with him, her brown eyes had been sweet and warm as cocoa. Now her expression was pinched and uncomfortable, as if her panties had shrunk two sizes.

"How could you, Jake?"

"You left me no choice."

"There's always a choice. I'm here to try to talk you into dropping your custody petition."

"Now why would I do that after that high-priced attorney spent so much time on it?"

"Because you want what's best for Emma."

He didn't see it that way. But the least he could do was hear her out. "Tell me how ignoring the fact that my niece isn't with her family is in her best interest."

"You don't have to ignore anything—especially her. In fact I would encourage you to spend as much time with Emma as you'd like. Keeping this situation out of the court system is what would be best for everyone. It's not too late to rescind the paperwork."

"I can't do that."

"Jake, listen to me," she pleaded. "You must see that ideally Emma should be with Holly and Dan. They're her parents."

"Okay. I'll grant you that." He met her gaze. "But they're not here at the moment. They took off and left their child with you. I don't see that as ideal."

"Me, neither. But where's the harm in leaving things status quo?"

"I'm just making sure my brother's rights are protected."

"I'm not going to trample his rights. I'd like nothing more than to put this child in his arms and Holly's. That's what I plan to do as soon as possible. But if the court gets involved, it will only complicate issues when Holly and Dan come back."

"How can you be so sure about Holly?" he asked.

For an instant doubt shadowed her eyes, making them dark and distant. A moment later the look disappeared. Determination hardened her expression, compressing her full lips.

"I told you before, Jake, this is her baby. She'll be back." Rachel sat up straighter and met his gaze. "For that matter, what

about your brother?”

“What about him?”

“You keep doubting Holly, but what about Dan?”

“Say it straight out, Rachel.”

“He lied to me,” she reminded him. “How do you know he won’t keep on running?”

If he knew what was good for him he would, Jake thought, trying to decide what sort of punishment would fit this crime. But sooner or later the Fletcher instincts would kick in. Dan would do the right thing.

“He belongs here. The land is in his blood. He’ll be back,” Jake said, absolutely convinced he spoke the truth.

“Then there’s no reason to go to court. Emma will be fine with me until her parents come home.”

It wasn’t that simple. He’d had a child taken from him; he knew how it felt. He wouldn’t stand by and do nothing while the same thing happened to his brother. This time he wasn’t a boy. No one was going to take advantage of him.

“It’s nothing personal, Rachel.”

“Then why does it feel that way?”

“I couldn’t say. I’ve learned not to take chances. Do unto others before they do it to me.”

“That’s awfully cynical.”

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“Of course.” She put her fork down, leaving the salad untouched. “But I’m wondering if I should be insulted.”

“That wasn’t my intention. I’m just trying to protect Dan.”

“I assure you that I have no intention of hurting him. I’m just trying to keep you from inadvertently hurting Holly.”

“I have nothing against Holly.”

“Then I propose we try to find the kids and talk the whole thing over.”

“I’ve got a private investigator looking for them. In the meantime, we’ll talk it over in court and let a judge make the decision.”

Rachel shook her head. “If this gets into the judicial system, it’s out of our hands. Don’t you see, Jake?”

“Yeah, I see fine.”

“But you won’t change your mind?”

“Not a chance. Not when I’m holding all the cards.”

She slid out of the booth and picked up the infant carrier. “I guess I’ll see you in court.”

Then she was gone and the bell over the door double-dinged. He stared again at the tufted red Naugahyde across from him. The Fast Lane felt suddenly empty. What was that all about? An evening that had stretched out before him pretty dreary and depressing had picked up considerably when Rachel had arrived. Now she was gone and he was alone. Again.

Jake found he was looking forward to seeing her in court—for all the wrong reasons.

Chapter Three

After parking in the designated area at the courthouse, Rachel got out, opened the rear door of her compact car and released the restraints on Emma's carrier. The baby was sleeping soundly, lulled by the car's motion on the short ride from the apartment to the square in the center of downtown Sweet Spring.

Sighing, Rachel thought how beautiful this child was with her full cheeks, soft skin and cupid's bow mouth. Sometimes her feelings were so big she was overwhelmed and reminded herself to keep her emotions in check. But how did one censor such a thing? It was there every time she looked at Emma, got bigger when she picked the baby up and held her, fed, bathed and rocked her to sleep.

She'd wondered whether or not to bring the baby to the legal proceeding. In the event the ruling went against her and it was necessary to surrender the baby, she'd decided to bring Emma along. Rachel's legal counsel was the hospital's attorney who assessed risk management at the medical facility and had volunteered her time as a favor. Although child custody wasn't her sphere of expertise, the lawyer had done some research. She'd cautioned that in these cases, nothing was cut-and-dried and there were no guarantees.

Rachel had mixed feelings. Part of her wished Jake would win and it would be over. She stared at the baby as she lifted the

carrier out of the car and her heart gave a funny little lurch, as if the earth tilted. Then she thought of Holly whose maternal feelings must be ten times as strong. Rachel knew she had to do everything possible to protect the teenager's rights. Who else did Holly have in her corner?

But every time Rachel championed someone in need, she got ripped off—either her money or her heart. She brushed a finger across Emma's cheek and realized this time she could lose both.

Crossing the blacktop parking area, she noticed a truck pull into the lot and recognized Jake behind the wheel. She hadn't seen him for almost a week. Before things had turned adversarial between them that night in The Fast Lane, she'd enjoyed talking and laughing with him. She'd thought about that often in the days since. He had a nice smile and the crinkle lines around his blue eyes indicated he did it often. Just not with her.

But the tender way he'd looked at Emma... Well, Rachel's heart had come dangerously close to a melt-down. It was the way she'd always imagined a parent looking at a child—the way her father and mother would have looked at her. If they'd lived.

Wow, what was it about this situation that was stirring up all her most painful memories?

Jake started toward the courthouse, then hesitated when he saw her. He was wearing a navy suit and red tie. His thick dark hair was conservatively cut and neatly combed and she couldn't help thinking he cleaned up pretty nice. But there was something about the bad boy black cowboy hat and the way he filled out

his jeans—it was silly, maybe even stupid, but she missed that impossibly male look.

He walked over to her. “Hello, Rachel.”

“Jake.”

His gaze slid to the baby carrier. “How’s Emma?”

“Sleeping like a baby.” She had the satisfaction of seeing his mouth quirk up.

“Is it my imagination, or is she bigger than the last time I saw her?”

“No, you’re not imagining it.” Rachel shifted the carrier to her other hand. “It’s almost as if I can see her growing.”

“Can I take her for you?” He reached out, his big hand strong and steady.

She hesitated for just a moment. Would it violate the promise she’d made to Holly? Heck, she’d already let him hold the baby. But they were on opposite sides of this issue and she probably shouldn’t even be talking to him. Still, Emma was his niece. It would be more wrong to be inflexible.

She handed the baby over. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He automatically took her elbow as they crossed the blacktop then climbed the steps to the imposing stone courthouse. It was the legal hub of the city and a busy place. People milled around talking or hurried in and out of the building. Many of them glanced in the infant carrier and smiled at the sleeping baby, then nodded at her and Jake. After Cora and Janie made their

assumption that night at The Fast Lane, Rachel figured anyone who looked would also assume they were a couple and Emma belonged to the two of them. Soon the baby would be with one of them legally, if only temporarily. Unless... Rachel decided to try one more time to talk him into dropping his petition.

She put a restraining hand on his arm when he reached out to open the glass door to the building. "Can I talk to you for a minute—before we go in?"

"Okay. What?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "This is way too civilized for two people who are going to do battle shortly."

"I heard you hired an attorney."

"I have legal counsel. Whatever happens, I figured I'd give it my best shot for Holly's sake." If she'd been with her own mother while she'd been growing up, Rachel wondered if she would be going to the mat on this. Between that tragedy and her unfortunate, yet inherent nature to champion the underdog, she decided she had no choice.

She looked up at him and put her hand up to shield her eyes from the sun's glare. "I've been thinking about what you said the other night."

"What did I say?" he asked, frowning.

"Do unto others before they can do it to you. I just wanted to make sure you understand that I'm not trying to do anything to you. I'm just keeping a promise to a young girl who has to live for the rest of her life with the decision she makes. In that spirit,

won't you consider skipping the legal stuff? Can't we take care of Emma together until the kids come back?"

He let out a long breath. "Look, Rachel, Holly might be okay with you running things, but I'm not. Emma is Dan's child, too—and my family. No one goes through life without baggage, including me. But you're interfering in a family matter."

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