

PATRICIA
THAYER



THE
RANCHER'S
DOORSTEP BABY

Cherish

Patricia Thayer

The Rancher's Doorstep Baby

«HarperCollins»

Thayer P.

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Cole Parrish arrived at the Bar H ranch to work. That was all. Not to settle down, and certainly not to be tempted by the stunning redhead running the ranch all by herself. Now a little baby has arrived on the doorstep—and Rachel has gone from auntie to mother overnight. She needs all the help she can get...but Cole can't stay. He never promised anything. Yet Rachel's heart is stolen by the sight of the brooding rancher cradling the tiny infant, and she has to ask herself—if he's so set on leaving, why is Cole still here?

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The Rancher's Doorstep Baby

Patricia Thayer



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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS time to move on.

Cole Parrish spread the fresh straw around the horse stall. In truth, it was past time to make his departure. He'd never stayed anyplace this long. Four months he'd been at the Bar H Ranch. After the heart attack of the foreman, Cy Parks, Cole couldn't leave the owner to fend for herself all alone.

He braced the pitchfork against the railing and pushed his hat back. The familiar restlessness gnawed at his gut, urging him to leave. He was getting far too attached to this place but the sooner he got out of here the better. The last thing he needed was more memories to carry away with him. He had enough of those to last a lifetime.

That was why he had to go now. And he had to tell Rachel Hewitt. Today.

Determined not to put off the task any longer, Cole walked out of the stall and through the barn. Outside, he looked toward the two-story frame ranch house across the compound. At one time it had been painted white, but like the rest of the place, the structure could use a new coat of paint along with a few repairs.

It would only take him a couple weeks to do the job...He shook his head. No. This wasn't his problem. He was leaving.

Before he reached the house, a young Rachel Hewitt came out on the porch. As on every other day she wore her usual work clothes—faded jeans and a man's shirt. Her long, raven mane was tied back in a long braid, exposing her pretty oval face. She was tall and solidly built, but there was something about her expression that suggested a fragile quality. His gaze met her golden-brown eyes and he felt his chest constrict, making it difficult to draw a breath.

He definitely had to leave. Soon.

"Rachel," he called as he approached her. "If you have a minute, I need to talk with you."

"What is it, Cole?" She gripped the porch post and smiled, but it didn't hide her fatigue. He doubted she'd gotten much sleep, what with running the house and doing the work of a ranch hand. Not that anything had changed since her father's death two years ago. He'd heard stories that old Gib Hewitt had run the Bar H from his wheelchair, but Rachel had been the one who did the physical work.

Cole had stayed so long because he knew Gib had given power of attorney to a lawyer until his daughter turned thirty. Rachel couldn't afford to pay much to ranch hands and Cole couldn't allow her to struggle on alone. That was the reason why his leaving would be so hard on her. But he had to do it.

He didn't do permanence...not anymore.

He stood at the bottom of the porch steps. "I'm giving my notice. I'll be leaving in a week," he said straight out.

He watched as her eyes widened in panic, then she quickly masked it. "You said you'd stay on a while. You know Cy can't do the work by himself."

Cole caught himself fighting a smile. "You better not let him hear you saying that." Cy Parks had been at the Bar H for nearly thirty years. She was right. He wasn't capable of handling it all by himself anymore. But this ranch wasn't big by Texas standards, a three-man operation at best. "Since spring roundup is over, things should be quiet for a time. He can manage feeding the stock. That should give you time to hire someone else."

Rachel didn't want to hire someone else. For one thing, she couldn't afford to. She wasn't even sure how much longer she'd be able to pay Cole. Although he was a drifter, she trusted the man. He was a hard worker. He was the one who'd been with Cy when he had his heart attack, giving him CPR and saving his life. Cole had kept him alive until the ambulance had arrived from town.

"There's no one else to hire. Most of the available men have moved onto the bigger operations around San Angelo."

"I'm headed there, too."

“Look if it’s the money...”

He shook his head. “Just need a change of scenery. I’ll work to the end of the week and if you like, try to find a replacement.”

Cole Parrish was a handsome man, with his dark hair and piercing gray eyes. There were times when she saw such sadness in their depths, it made her want to cry. He must have his reasons for leaving, and she shouldn’t try to stop him. “Thank you, Cole. That would be a big help.”

He tipped his hat, then turned and walked back toward the barn. Rachel couldn’t help but watch his departure with appreciation. A chambray shirt covered his wide shoulders but it couldn’t hide his rock solid build. Years of rough ranch work showed in the muscle definition across his back and slim waist. He had a loose-hipped gait that showed off some attitude. All cowboys had a little cockiness about them. A gush of heat washed over her, making her insides ache. Since the day Cole Parrish had arrived at the ranch, she’d experienced this feeling many times.

Definitely Gib Hewitt would not approve. Rachel caught her breath and turned away. She’d loved her father, but he’d ruled with a strict hand when it came to his daughters. He’d lectured often to her and her younger sister, Sarah, on the evils of the world. Although he’d never said it to her face, she knew he’d been afraid they’d end up loose women like their mother.

Georgia Hewitt had left them when Rachel was ten and Sarah only five. Rachel tried not to hate her mother, but the abandonment she and her sister had felt never left them. After high school, Sarah was eager to leave and had begged Rachel to go away with her. In the end, Rachel couldn’t desert her father and Sarah ran off to follow her dream.

Now, Sarah and her father were both gone. Rachel blinked away the threatening tears and walked into the house. Soon she’d be running the ranch on her own. That frightened her.

It also excited her.

At supper time Cole forced himself to walk through the back door just as he had for the past months. It was so familiar—too familiar. After this week, no more. No more seeing Rachel’s smile and the special touches she added to everything.

Besides cooking the meals and caring for the house, she’d climb on a horse and move cattle just like any of the men. She put in twelve-hour days and never asked anyone to do a job she wasn’t willing to do.

Cole hung his hat on the rack, and stepped inside the dreary kitchen. Like the outside of the house, the walls needed paint. The linoleum was worn through to the pattern and the cabinet doors needed repair. Despite all that, the room was spotlessly clean.

At the stove, Rachel turned toward him and smiled. It sent a jolt of awareness through him. He found he’d been looking forward to seeing her. A man could get used to meeting this woman at the end of the day.

Just not him.

“Rachel.” He nodded as he made his way to the table set for three.

After they sat down Rachel spoke. “Cole, I want to thank you for helping me out these past months. It was wrong of me earlier to try to get you to stay on. You have been more than generous with your time.”

Why did she have to be so nice? “You’re welcome. If there’s anything I can help you with before I leave, let me know.”

His gaze met hers and a new stirring erupted in his gut. Desire. He could see it mirrored in her eyes, too. He glanced at her breasts, watching the rapid movement of her breathing. His common sense told him to stop, but his hunger wouldn’t let him. At that moment a noise pulled his attention away as Cy came through the back door.

The old guy ambled to the table. His thin white hair was combed straight back, his face tanned and weathered by years of being in the sun, and his broad smile, causing tiny lines to form around his hazel eyes. On his doctor's orders, he'd lost weight in the past month and changed his diet.

He hitched up his too-big jeans. "Well, it looks like I didn't miss anything."

"As if you'd be late for a meal," Cole murmured, then walked to the refrigerator and took out a pitcher of water. He filled the glasses as Rachel set roasted chicken, mashed potatoes and garden-fresh green beans on the table.

"Darlin', I've died and gone to heaven," Cy said.

"Oh, Uncle Cy, you say that no matter what I cook," Rachel said as he held out her chair.

"I won't lie and say I don't miss your fried chicken and gravy."

Rachel smiled. "I'll try to come up with a way of fixing it so it will be healthy for you."

Once everyone was seated, the foreman said the blessing. "Lord, thank you for the food on this table. And for Rachel who takes such good care of us. Amen." He raised his head and reached for the potatoes. "Now, let's eat."

After serving himself, he passed the bowl to Rachel. "Thank you, Cy, for the kind words. But we all work hard around here."

"We get paid," Cy said, pouring gravy around his plate. "You do so many extra things for everyone. You don't have to wash my clothes or repair the rips and tears, but you do."

"You've just lost so much weight. Besides, I like to sew," she protested.

"I know," Cy said. "You make the prettiest quilts in the county. You ought to take 'em to one of the fancy shops in San Angelo." He glanced at Cole. "I've been tellin' her she'd make a lot of money."

She shook her head. "I donate them to the church."

The older man frowned. "And they turn around and sell 'em and make all the money. Money you need for yourself."

Rachel stole a glance at Cole. He didn't seem interested in the conversation. But that didn't stop Cy.

"You know I worked for your daddy for a lot of years, and he didn't always treat you fair and square."

Rachel felt heat rush to her face. "Father wasn't in good health and..."

Cy shook his head. "Stop making excuses for him. He made you and your sister pay for your mother leaving..."

"Cy...please," she pleaded.

"She was your mama, Rachel, and your father drove her away, just as he did Sarah. You got this place to hold together...and you can't do a dang thing unless you get permission from that city lawyer." He took a bite of his food. "Thank goodness that's nearly at an end."

Rachel placed her fork on her plate. She didn't want to argue with Cy. What good would it do? Her mother, father and sister were all gone. She couldn't change any of that. "I don't want to talk —" She stopped, then pushed back her chair and got up. "If you'll excuse me," she said, then turned and walked out of the kitchen.

Cole fought to keep from going after her. But what could he say to her? He'd known men like Hewitt. He'd grown up with a disapproving parent, too. Nothing he'd done could please the man, so he'd finally stopped trying.

Cy looked across the table at Cole. "Now, don't you go lookin' at me like that."

Cole played dumb. "What way is that?"

"Like I just pulled the wings off a butterfly. That girl needs to rid herself of years of guilt her father hammered into her." The old man pointed to the doorway. "Have you looked at Rachel? She's afraid to be a woman 'cause her daddy made her feel ashamed of the fact she is one. I've stood back for too long and watched it. But that bastard has been gone for nearly two years and Rachel is still afraid to live. She's a beautiful woman. Someone needs to make her realize that."

Cole didn't want to hear any more. "I think Rachel needs to worry about surviving, and she'll do just fine." He took the last bite of food, then carried his plate to the sink.

"You're just saying that so you won't feel guilty when you leave here."

The old man's words hit home, but he still had to go. "I was hired for the roundup and I've stayed on a few extra months."

"And I appreciate you taking on my load."

"It wasn't a problem, but now, I've got a job waiting for me in San Angelo."

Cy didn't argue the point. He just finished his meal, then carried his plate to the sink. He leaned against the counter and studied Cole. There was no doubt the foreman had something else to say.

Cole stared the other man down. "All right, are you going to try to get me to stay?"

"No, you have to decide that for yourself." The old man gnawed on his lower lip as if choosing his words carefully. "I'm just wondering what you're running from."

Rachel had learned a long time ago that tears didn't help anything. They hadn't stopped people she loved from leaving her. Now, she was alone. She had no husband, no family to help her through this rough time. All she had was the ranch, and her own determination to keep it.

She changed into her nightgown and robe, then went into the bathroom and washed her face. She still needed to clean up the supper dishes.

Rachel went downstairs and walked through the large living room. The hardwood floors gleamed with polish, but an old rug in front of the barren fireplace was worn, as was the furniture. This was her home. She just had to think of a way to hold on to it, despite the lawyer's dismal picture of her financial future.

She walked through the dining room, then into the kitchen. She stopped when she saw Cole standing at the sink, his sleeves rolled up and his hands buried in dishwater.

A blush quickly spread over her cheeks. She didn't want to deal with anyone tonight, especially Cole. For a second she wanted to turn around and flee, but she lost that chance when he glanced over his shoulder and saw her.

For a moment they just stared at each other. His gray eyes locked with hers and she couldn't seem to take a breath.

He cocked his head, causing his inky-black hair to fall across his forehead. "Well, don't just stand there, grab a towel."

She managed to snap out of her trance. "You shouldn't be doing those." She went to his side, surprised when he didn't step aside.

"It's not a problem," he said as he rinsed the flatware, and placed them in the dish drainer. "I discovered it's a good way to clean the dirt from under your fingernails. You can dry."

"But this isn't your job."

He stopped and glared at her. "Why not? Haven't I seen you climb on a horse and help round up cows? Let's not split hairs here, Rachel. Besides, my hands are already wet."

Reluctantly she picked up the towel on the counter.

Cole had hoped to be finished before she came back downstairs. He hadn't wanted to end up in this situation with the house quiet and Rachel Hewitt dressed in a nightgown and robe, her long silky hair flowing down her back. He felt the heat move over his skin just because she was near. She made him remember what he tried so hard to forget. What he'd lost so long ago.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Rachel began, her voice husky. "Cy means well..."

Cole put a plate into the water, recalling how he'd almost gone upstairs and checked on her, but realized he'd be playing with fire.

Eighteen months ago, he'd made a couple of rules for himself. Not to get involved, especially with a woman like Rachel, and not to hang around any one place for long. He'd already broken one rule, and had no intention of breaking another.

He shrugged. "It's none of my business." The less he knew about her, the easier it would be to walk away.

"You still had to be uncomfortable. For that, I'm sorry."

"You and Cy are like family. I know he cares about you. He's just worried about you running this ranch by yourself. It's a big job."

She raised her pretty chin. "I've managed so far."

He rinsed another glass. "Is there any other family member that might be willing to help out?"

She shook her head as she stacked a plate on the counter. "My father didn't have any family."

Cole knew what it felt like to love someone and have them walk out of your life...for good. The tightness in his chest told him he was getting too close to memories, and the past that he desperately fought to keep buried. He pushed away the threatening emotions.

"Then we'll have to find someone you can trust to help run this place."

"I can't pay that much," she offered. "My father didn't save a lot. There's not enough to pay a decent salary. At least we did well with the sale of the spring calves, so the mortgage is paid ahead."

Cole knew that a lawyer, Lloyd Montgomery, controlled the money. But dammit, you couldn't run a ranch from a desk in town. Not even when you owned the neighboring property.

Don't get involved in this, Cole told himself. You're leaving at the end of the week. "There are other ways to make the ranch pay off." Finished with the dishes, he wiped his hands on the towel. "There are thousands of dollars to be made by allowing hunters on your property. You should think about it."

She nodded. "Father never shared much of the ranch business with me, and as you already know, I don't have control...yet. That will change soon. So lately, I've been going over things, trying to learn my way. Lloyd Montgomery thinks I should sell it all."

Cole frowned. "Why is that?"

"He doesn't think I can deal with everything myself."

Cole snickered. "What does he think you've been doing the last few years, having a picnic?"

That brought a smile to her face and his breath caught in his chest. She was strikingly beautiful and she had no idea.

"I'll need to do something to supplement my income, or I could lose it all." She was silent for a few seconds, then she said, "I was going over things in my father's office and found a letter from a windmill company that asked about leasing some land." Her large eyes locked with his. "When you have some time, would you look at the letter?"

"I guess it wouldn't hurt." He glanced at his watch. "How about now?"

Rachel set down her towel and together they walked through the house into a small office off the living room. A large desk took up most of the area, and like the rest of the place it was clean and orderly.

Rachel went to the file cabinet and took out a manila folder. She removed a letter and handed it to Cole.

He glanced at the letterhead. It was from 21st Century Windmill Company, located in San Angelo, Texas. The letter stated that the company had already done a survey of the Bar H's land and found that the rocky ridge mesa was ideal for windmills. Cole knew the area. It wasn't much good for anything else, not even cattle. The company had requested an agreement to use the land.

"Has your lawyer made any contact with them?" He glanced through the folder and found nothing else.

She shook her head. "No. I found this in the wastepaper basket. I don't think Monty thought the idea was a good one. What do you think?"

He didn't want to sway her, but he didn't understand why good old Monty had ignored what seemed to be a decent money-making idea. "It wouldn't hurt to listen to what they have to say. In a few weeks you'll take over the ranch, so why not just wait until then?"

“So, this is legitimate?” she asked.

He nodded. “It sounds similar to an oil lease. That’s where the landowner is given money upfront from the company—in this case it’s a windmill company. They come in, construct windmills and give the owners a percentage of the profits.” He smiled. “Rachel. You could not only get money for the leased land, but for the electricity they produce and sell to the surrounding areas.”

“So it’s a good thing?”

“It could be very good. But you need to contact this 21st Century and let them know you’re interested. No matter what the lawyer says, you’re more than capable of dealing with these people...” He glanced down at the name. “This Douglas Wills.” He handed the letter to her. He inhaled her fresh scent. No perfume could ever be as intoxicating.

Rachel raised her head and looked up at him. Her face was void of makeup, allowing him to see the tiny freckles scattered across her nose. Her eyes were amber, fringed with long dark lashes. His body warmed as desire spread through him. He tried to ignore it, but she was too close, her mouth too inviting. He found he wanted a taste. He heard the quickening of her breathing.

Then she spoke his name. “Cole...”

Blocking out logical reasoning, he lowered his head to hers, anticipating the kiss. Just to taste her, he promised. Just once he wanted to get lost in her innocence...her sweetness.

He was quickly brought back to reality by the sound of a car. Rachel jumped back. He should have been relieved but what he felt was frustration.

As Rachel went to the window Cole followed, amazed at how close he’d come to making such a huge mistake. He couldn’t mess around with someone like Rachel and walk away. That would be too cruel.

The sun was setting right outside the window making it difficult to see clearly. “Who is it?” he asked.

“Not sure.” She walked out of the room, and Cole followed. He finally caught up to her as she stepped out on the back porch just in time to recognize the deputy sheriff getting out of the patrol car along with another man.

Cole stood close enough to feel her tense.

The man in the khaki uniform tipped his hat. “Good evening, ma’am.” He walked toward the porch, but stopped at the base of the steps. “I’m Deputy Clarke.”

“Evening, Deputy,” Rachel said. “What brings you out here?”

“We’re looking for Rachel Hewitt.”

“I’m Rachel Hewitt.”

The two men exchanged a look, then the deputy asked, “Do you have a sister named Sarah?”

A whimpering sound escaped Rachel, and Cole automatically moved closer. “Yes...” she answered.

“Could we come inside? We’d like to ask you some questions.”

Rachel nodded and the two men walked up the steps and into the kitchen. “Have you seen my sister? Is she in Fort Stockton?”

“No,” the deputy answered. “This is Mike Bentley. He’s from social services in San Antonio. That’s where your sister has been living for the past few months.”

Suddenly the back door opened and Cy walked in. “Rachel...why is the sheriff’s car...?”

“Cy, these gentlemen are here about Sarah. She’s been living in San Antonio.”

Cy and Cole exchanged a worried look. The sheriff didn’t show up on your doorstep with good news. “Is that a fact?”

The man from social services finally spoke. “We tried to find her family, but it wasn’t until a friend came looking for her that we knew about you, Ms. Hewitt.”

“Er, maybe you should sit down, ma’am,” the deputy said.

Rachel blinked. “Is my sister in trouble, Deputy?”

He shook his head. "I'm sorry to say Sarah died nearly three weeks ago in an automobile accident."

Rachel didn't hear much more as the buzzing in her head drowned out everything else but the words, Sarah died. She felt herself sinking, until Cole put his arm around her and held her up.

"I've got you," he whispered. "Just lean on me."

Struggling to regain her composure, Rachel straightened. "Please, sit down." She moved around the kitchen. "I'll make some coffee."

She suddenly felt Cole grip her trembling hands and stop her. "Rachel, we don't need coffee. You need to sit down." His eyes held hers. "Do you want me to call someone?"

She shook her head. "Just...can you...stay with me?"

"Of course." He led her to the table and sat her down in a chair, then pulled out another one for himself.

"I'm sorry to put you through this, Ms. Hewitt, but your sister didn't leave much information about her family. And it was important we find you because..." The two men exchanged a long look, then the deputy continued, "Because before your sister died she gave birth to a baby girl."

CHAPTER TWO

AT SIX-THIRTY the next morning, Rachel dressed in a dark skirt and white blouse. The night had passed in a blur. She had relied on Cy and Cole to take the details about her sister's accident. After the words, blown tire, she hadn't processed much more. Later, Rachel learned that Sarah had lost control of her car and crashed into a tree. Her sister had been in a coma when the doctor delivered her baby four weeks prematurely.

Unable to sleep, Rachel had wandered through the house, trying to rid herself of the guilt that threatened to consume her. She should have tried harder to find Sarah, tried harder to bring her home.

Now, she was bringing home her sister's baby daughter.

After packing an overnight bag for the trip to San Antonio, she went out where Cy and Cole were waiting beside the dark late-model truck. Cole took her bag and placed it inside the crew cab. She turned to Cy.

"Are you sure you're well enough to handle things?"

"Shoot, I could do it with my eyes closed." He hugged her. "To ease your mind, Bud Campbell is stopping by to help out."

Rachel studied the man who'd been the only loving force in her life. He was like an uncle to her. "Just don't overdo it. I left some chicken in the refrigerator for you. So be sure to eat it, and not that fried food and heavy gravy from the diner in town."

"Stop nagging me, girl." Cy hugged her. "You have enough to worry about." He glanced at Cole. "Make sure she eats, too."

"Will do," Cole promised as he opened the door. "We better get on the road."

After Rachel climbed in, he started the engine and headed toward Interstate Ten. Cole tried not to speed, wanting to arrive safely, but it was a long way to San Antonio. For the first few hours Rachel just sat there and stared out the window. The constant steady hum of the engine was the only sound in the truck cab.

"Do you think she suffered?" Rachel finally asked.

Her blunt question caught Cole off guard. He knew all too well how fragile life could be. How fast everything could be snatched away from you. Rachel knew it now, too. "I don't think so. They said she was unconscious when they got to the car."

He glanced out the windshield at the miles of highway ahead of them. He didn't want to think about Rachel's pain. He had no doubt she was feeling the hurt clear through to the bone. She'd lost a sister she hadn't seen in years and that empty ache wasn't going away...not for a long time.

"I used to hate her, you know." Rachel turned to him. "I was so angry at her for leaving me. And not once did she wonder how I was doing...or how Father was."

"I didn't know your sister, Rachel. But maybe she had her reasons."

"Oh, she had her reasons, all right. She hated the ranch and she hated Father."

"A lot of parents and kids have disagreements," he said, but he knew there was more. He'd heard about Gib Hewitt's reputation. The men who worked for him considered him a tyrant. Apparently he hadn't treated his daughters much better, either.

"Sarah always rebelled. It seemed she did things to purposely anger Father. One day she told me she was going to leave and make a life for herself." Rachel looked away. "She took money from Father's desk."

Cole took his eyes off the road to glance in her direction. "What did your father do?"

"He said that she was just like our mother. That she was no good. He no longer had a daughter named Sarah."

Cole cursed under his breath. "Your father might have been overly strict, Rachel, but Sarah had to know that you loved her."

“All I wanted was for her to come home,” Rachel said and he could hear the emotion in her voice. “Now...it’s too late.”

“It’s not too late for her baby. You can bring her daughter back to the Bar H.”

But deep in his heart Cole knew too well that not everybody got a second chance.

Cole hadn’t been in a hospital in nearly two years. Not since Jillian had been rushed into emergency. Suddenly he felt light-headed and his body began to tremble. He fought it, but couldn’t push away the memories as the antiseptic smell threatened to choke him. There had been many times he’d wished it had. Then he wouldn’t have to face the questions, the accusations...the guilt.

For Rachel’s sake, he had to pull it together. It had been a long day already and she still needed to meet with the social worker in charge of her niece’s case.

Cole punched the button for the elevator and looked at Rachel’s pale face. He took her cold hand in his and held it while they rode up to the fourth floor. All too soon the bell chimed and they got off, then walked toward the nurse’s station.

“I’m Rachel Hewitt, and I’m here to meet Mrs. Nealey.”

The young, blond nurse pointed to the reception area where a middle-aged woman was seated doing paperwork. Rachel went to her. “Mrs. Nealey?”

The woman stood and offered a friendly smile. “Yes, I’m Beth Nealey. You must be Rachel Hewitt.”

“How did you know?”

“I saw a picture of you...in your sister’s things.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. “Sarah had a picture of me?”

The social worker nodded. “You were both a lot younger, but it was you.” She glanced at Cole. “I’m sure the police will give you the rest of her things now that you’ve been located.”

“My sister and I haven’t seen each other in over eight years,” Rachel whispered.

As much as he tried to stay back, Cole found himself stepping closer to offer his strength. “Had Sarah always lived in San Antonio?” he asked.

Mrs. Nealey shook her head. “The police and I have recently learned Sarah had been in town for only the past few months.” The social worker continued, “She rented a furnished apartment, and paid week to week. She worked as a waitress at a local diner. The car she was driving was registered in a friend’s name, Carrie Johnston, who was out of town at the time of the accident. Ms. Johnston returned this week and that’s how we learned about you, Ms. Hewitt.”

“What about the baby’s father?” Rachel asked. “Was Sarah married?”

“We haven’t found any record of a marriage license. According to your sister’s friend, the baby’s father wanted no part of the child’s life. If that’s so, you’re the baby’s only known relative.”

Thirty minutes and several questions later, Rachel excused herself and walked down the hospital corridor to the restroom. She needed some time to pull herself together. After washing her hands, she splashed cold water on her face. Instead of returning to the waiting area, she ended up in the small hospital chapel and knelt down.

For a while she prayed for the sister she’d missed every day since she’d left home. Then she began to question God as to why he took Sarah away.

A sadness like she’d never known before threatened to overwhelm her as she pictured the once laughing little girl she’d shared so much with. She raised her baby sister after their mother abandoned them. Sarah had followed Rachel around, mimicking her.

But as Sarah had gotten older, she began to rebel, refusing to let Gib Hewitt keep her under his thumb. Rachel had envied Sarah her courage...her courage to leave. That hadn’t stopped Rachel’s years of wishing Sarah would come back home.

But her sister wasn’t coming back. She had to accept that.

Rachel drew a shaky breath. A quiet peace settled within her as she said her final goodbye. Now she needed to concentrate on making a home for her niece.

Cole watched Rachel as she came down the hall. It was obvious this was taking a toll on her. It hadn't helped him much, either. No matter how hard he fought it his own memories had returned, threatening him with his own painful past, sending him back to the best and the worst times in his life.

He turned his attention to Rachel as she tried to smile, but didn't quite pull it off. He automatically drew her close, reveling in her warm touch seeping into his skin. It could be addicting if he let it.

"I was in the chapel. Was Mrs. Nealey looking for me?"

Cole stepped back. "She came by and asked if you wanted to see the baby."

Rachel's brown eyes grew wide. "Really? But I thought she was still in the neonatal unit."

"She is, but you're allowed in because you're family."

This time her smile made it. "I am, aren't I?"

"So, you ready to go meet your niece?"

Just then Beth Nealey arrived and led them down the hall to the glass window of the nursery. "The baby has been putting on weight for the past two weeks," she said. "She's at six pounds five ounces now. She's taking three ounces of formula per feeding and keeping it down. Of course, the nurses will fill you in on her schedule before you take her home."

Home. So soon?

Beth smiled. "I can't tell you how happy we are that we found you—not that this little one would have any trouble finding loving parents, but a blood relative is always our first choice. Have you come up with a name for her?"

Rachel opened her mouth, but had no answer. "No...I haven't thought about that."

"It may help you to know that in your sister's things, she had a baby blanket with the name Hannah Marie embroidered in the corner. But it's up to you."

Rachel nodded.

"Well, then, let's meet your niece." Mrs. Nealey motioned for her to follow.

She looked over her shoulder at Cole.

"I'll wait here for you," he told her.

Rachel hoped he'd go with her, but realized she shouldn't depend on him, especially since he was leaving soon. At this moment she was selfish enough to take what was offered. She went through the door, and after she scrubbed up, was taken into the unit where a nurse removed a bundled baby from the clear plastic incubator, and placed the infant into Rachel's arms.

She looked down at the tiny girl with a full head of dark hair, and scrunched up face, and her breath caught. The baby yawned and opened her eyes. They were the identical color of Sarah's, crystal-blue. Rachel took the infant's hand and when the tiny fingers gripped hers she fell instantly in love.

"I think I've decided on a name for her," she said. "Instead of Hannah Marie, I'm going with Hannah Sarah...after her mother."

"I want to talk with the doctor," Rachel insisted when she came out of the nursery.

"Tomorrow is soon enough," Cole said as he led her to the elevators. "I know you want to stay with the baby, but you need rest, Rachel. When you take the newborn home, you aren't going to get any...for a while anyway. We'll let the doctor know where we're staying. In the meantime let's get something to eat."

An hour later, after a light supper, Cole registered them at the large chain hotel across from the hospital. He carried in the overnight bags they'd thrown together for the trip. They rode the elevator to the third floor, and walked silently down the corridor.

"I've never stayed in a hotel before," Rachel announced. "Father would have thought it was a waste of money."

Cole didn't doubt that was something Hewitt would think. "Well, this isn't the fanciest place around, but it's nice enough." In his travels, he had stayed in more places like this than he wanted to remember. He inserted the key card, showing Rachel how to open the door, then ushered her inside and flipped on a light, revealing two double beds, a dresser, desk and television.

"Oh, this is nice," she said, looking around, and peering into the small bathroom.

Cole tossed her bag on one of the beds. "You'll be comfortable here," he said. "I'll be next door if you need anything." He went to the door that connected the rooms. "Don't hesitate to call me." He prayed she wouldn't. He'd already broken too many of his rules about getting involved as it was.

Rachel felt awkward, shy. Cole Parrish was practically a stranger, and yet she'd never relied on anyone as much as she had this man. And she'd never been in this kind of situation before. Here she was alone with a man in a hotel room. Not that anything was going to happen. Her face suddenly flushed at the thought. But so many things had changed in the last few days. Her life would never be the same.

"I can't thank you enough for all you've done," she said. "Driving me all the way here...staying with me through...everything. I'll pay you back..."

"No problem," he said and opened the door. "Just get some sleep, Rachel." Then he was gone before she could say more.

"You...too," she whispered as the door clicked closed behind him. She looked around again. Suddenly the silence was oppressive and her feelings rushed to the surface. She collapsed on the bed and finally let go.

In his room, Cole stripped off his clothes and headed for the bathroom. He turned on the tap in the shower, and even before the temperature warmed he stepped in. He wanted the shock of the cold water to make him forget...again. Sticking his head under the spray, he fought back the memories—fought the emotions that threatened to bring him to his knees.

"Not now. I can't," he choked, wanting to remember the child he'd loved, but not wanting the pain that always accompanied the retrospection. But the two couldn't be separated. He couldn't have one without the other.

Cole quickly soaped his body and rinsed, then climbed out of the shower. After dressing in clean underwear and jeans, he walked into the bedroom. He decided some television might be a good distraction. He went to the table for the remote, and lying with his wallet and change, he found the small medallion he'd carried in his pocket for the past months. The tiny St. Christopher's medal that was once pinned in his son's crib, a crib that Nathan never got the chance to sleep in.

The familiar tightness constricted his chest, gripping his heart, making it hard to breathe. He welcomed the physical pain. He deserved it. He rubbed the medal between his fingers. It was a constant reminder of what he'd lost. What he could never bring back.

A faint sound drew Cole's attention. He listened and realized it was Rachel crying in the next room. He told himself it was good she was finally letting go of her pain. He wasn't going to invade her privacy.

Over an hour later, still unable to sleep, he'd gotten engrossed in an action movie, but not so much that he hadn't kept an ear turned to Rachel's room. It had been pretty quiet, and he was grateful she'd fallen asleep.

He had dozed off when he heard the murmured sounds, too loud to ignore. He got up and went to the connecting door, cracked it open and spoke her name.

No answer. He saw her lying on the bed, dressed in a white cotton nightgown that had ridden up, revealing long, gorgeous legs. Desire shot through him and he quickly dragged his gaze to her

face as she tossed back and forth on the pillow, crying out. He went to her, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Rachel...” he said, but she didn’t answer. He finally reached out and touched her shoulder. She jerked up with a gasp.

“Cole,” she whispered in a husky voice. Their gazes locked and he wanted to absorb the sadness he saw in those depths.

“You were having a nightmare.”

She brushed back her long, wavy hair with a trembling hand. “Oh God, I was dreaming that Sarah came home. She was pregnant, but Father threw her out. I was running after her... begging her not to leave.” Her lips quivered as she fought for control. “Oh, Cole, I can’t believe it. She’s gone. I’d always hoped she’d come back.”

The dim light didn’t hide her anguish. “She might have. But it was Sarah’s choice, Rachel. She chose to leave and you chose to stay on the ranch. You can’t punish yourself for something you didn’t have any control over.”

She drew a shaky breath. “I wish it could have been different.”

“There are things we all wish could be different, but wishing doesn’t make it so.”

“I never got to tell her I loved her.”

Rachel Hewitt was a strong woman, but the past two days would knock the strongest person down. He finally pulled her into his arms and inhaled her soft fragrance.

He wanted desperately to give her strength, but he didn’t have any to spare. All he could manage was human contact, which he needed as much as she did. He caressed her back as he pressed a soft kiss on top of her head.

“It’s going to be all right,” he lied. His hands continued to move over her. The action seemed to calm her. He touched her hair, smoothing it back from her tearstained face.

“You don’t know,” she said. “Before Sarah left, I said so many awful things to her. I was jealous. She was so pretty. I was just... plain. She had everything and she was leaving me with Father.”

“Oh, Rachel, you could never be cruel on purpose and don’t ever say you’re plain.”

She raised her face to his, her eyes wondrous, making his pulse race. Before he knew what he was doing, he bent down and touched his mouth to hers, telling himself it was to reassure and comfort her.

She sucked in a tiny breath as he caressed her lips, tasting her softness, her sweetness. Her fingers raised to his chest and the contact seared his skin. He pulled her against his body and deepened the kiss. His tongue teased the seam of her lips open and Rachel whimpered. More heat surged through him.

It had been so long... so long since he’d wanted anyone, craved any closeness on a physical level. But Rachel was exactly the kind of woman he couldn’t get involved with. She wasn’t a one-night stand. She’d made him feel... too much. No, he couldn’t go through that again. He broke off the kiss and saw her eyes glazed with desire.

“Cole...” She spoke his name so intimately, as if they’d already been lovers.

He shivered and fought to keep his body in control. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that. I was out of line.” He started to get up, but she refused to let him go.

“Please,” she whispered, “don’t leave me.”

Cole froze. He had to get out of there, but seeing Rachel’s panic, he couldn’t move. He of all people knew what it was like to need someone.

Without a word, he drew the blanket over her, then he laid on top and cradled her against him. He held her until he felt her go slack in his arms. She had fallen asleep. He smiled, then eased her off his chest. He started to lay her down on the bed when she tightened her hold.

“Please... stay,” she whispered, sleepily. “Just for a little while.”

He bit back a groan. “Okay, Rachel...I won’t leave you,” he murmured, then stretched out next to her and drew her to his side, her head resting against his shoulder. Maybe together, holding each other, they could keep the demons at bay. For a short time anyway.

CHAPTER THREE

RACHEL came awake slowly. Her head hurt as if she'd been hit between the eyes. Then the memories of last night slowly started coming back to her. The news of Sarah's death, the trip to San Antonio, her niece, Cole's kiss, his holding her in his arms...

She blinked, and opened her eyes to find the man asleep beside her in bed. Not just beside her, but with his hand draped over her...She froze, and forced herself to breathe as her skin under his palm began to tingle. Her heart started to race.

Oh my, what do I do?

She lay motionless and listened to Cole's soft snores. He didn't seem to be too bothered by the situation. Maybe he was used to waking up with a woman. Of course he had, Cole was a good-looking man.

Rachel had never woken up next to a man. She'd dreamed of someone like Cole Parrish coming into her solitary life. But she'd never be the kind of woman who could make him stay.

She closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of his strong arms around her, but knew she couldn't keep depending on this man. He'd done so much to help her already. Neither one of them needed to add to this already complicated situation.

She tried to slip toward the edge of the bed to get away. It didn't work. Cole murmured something incoherent and pulled her closer, tucking his nearly naked body behind hers.

She bit back a gasp, unable to ignore the sudden warmth that shot through her. Then, as if that weren't enough, his hand began to move under the sheet, first over her stomach, then down to her hips and back up again, returning to her breasts, sending tingles over her skin as his fingers gently pinched her nipple. She closed her eyes, lost in the sudden pleasure. Heaven help her, she wanted to know what it felt like to be caressed by this man, but her common sense finally returned and she pushed his hand away.

"Cole," she murmured his name and sat up.

"What?" He jerked up into a sitting position, rubbed his eyes and looked at her. "Rachel? Oh God." He shot off the bed as if it had caught fire. "Please tell me I didn't do anything—"

"No," she quickly interrupted him. "Absolutely not."

He looked relieved and that disappointed her. "I'm so sorry," he began. "I meant to leave after you fell asleep, but I guess I drifted off..."

"I think we were both pretty tired..." she said, filling her gaze with unbelievably broad shoulders, a naked chest covered with a dusting of dark hair that swirled down his flat stomach and dipped into the open button on his jeans. Her attention quickly moved up to his face.

He started to pace. "That doesn't give me the right to take advantage."

"You didn't," she insisted. "Now, let's stop talking about it." Rachel stood, then quickly realized she had on her nightgown. "We should go back to the hospital."

Their gazes locked, his silver gaze had a sexy sleepy look. "I'll be ready in fifteen," he said.

She glanced away. "I need to shower."

He nodded. "Just knock on the door when you're ready to go. We'll have some breakfast, then head to the hospital."

He walked through the connecting door and shut it behind him. Rachel let out a breath and wondered if she'd ever be able to look at Cole, and not think about his kiss...his touch.

He'd kissed her. The one and only other time she'd been kissed, she'd been thirteen and Billy Michaels nearly chickened out. With the less than satisfying end result, she'd wished he had. Rachel never got another chance to repeat the experience. Her father refused to allow any boys out to the ranch. Later on she'd never had the time to even think about a man in her life.

Cole Parrish was different. From the first time he'd arrived at the Bar H, he'd made her feel things. With one glance, one piercing look, her body came alive. And his kiss last night made her desire things...womanly things.

She shook her head, and walked into the bathroom. She didn't have the time to think about a man in her life.

Now all she had time to think about was making a go of the ranch, and making a home for her niece. The thought of little Hannah Sarah Hewitt brought a wistful smile to her face. She had a family now.

"Just keep supporting her head," the nurse instructed.

"Oh...she's so tiny," Rachel said, gazing down at the tiny bundle in her arms.

Cindy, the pediatric nurse, grinned. "They grow pretty fast. Your niece here has already taken her first bottle this morning. And by those sucking sounds, I'd say she's ready again." Cindy led Rachel to the rocking chair. "Get comfortable."

Nervous, Rachel did as she was told. She didn't have any experience with babies. Not unless you counted calves. "What if...?"

"Stop worrying. Babies are pretty sturdy. And this one has proven that. She's a toughie. We nicknamed her 'Champ.'"

"Well, I hope you're not too upset if I call her Hannah." Rachel smiled as she brought the nipple to her niece's rosebud mouth. The baby took it in and began to suck. "She's drinking."

"That's the plan," the nurse said as she stood by watching, then showed Rachel how to burp Hannah.

Through it all, the infant seemed to survive Rachel's inexperience, and in the end, she fell asleep.

"Since I'm not needed anymore, I'll leave you two." Before the nurse departed, she motioned to the window. "You know, your husband can come in if he wants, just so long as he puts on a gown."

Rachel glanced around to find Cole standing behind the glass. "Oh, we're not married. Cole works on my ranch."

"Well, whatever. But that's one good-looking cowboy." Cindy sighed. "And it seems to me, he's pretty attentive for just a ranch hand."

Cole waited outside the window. He tried to ignore the sound of the infants in the nursery, but he was drawn to watching them as they waved their arms and cried for attention. Their lung power was incredible.

Nathan hadn't been that lucky. His lungs hadn't developed enough... The pain hit Cole hard and he turned away. For so long he kept busy so he wouldn't remember, but the memory of his stillborn son was always there. He had to get away from here.

A nurse came by. "Could you tell Rachel Hewitt that I'll be back in an hour?" he asked her.

When she agreed, he headed for the elevators. There were several details he had to take care of before they could go back to the ranch. He mostly needed some fresh air and to clear his head.

But he knew nothing would ever heal his heart.

The doctor told Rachel he would release Hannah from the hospital in the morning. Was she ready to handle a newborn on her own? She glanced around for Cole but didn't see him anywhere.

When the nurse had given her his message, she wasn't surprised that he needed time alone. He'd had to wait around the hospital most of yesterday and all morning. Who wouldn't want some fresh air? But his disappearance still bothered her. He'd been by her side the entire time. Even though she told herself not to depend on him, she had.

"Don't get used to it, girl, he's not going to be around much longer," she murmured to herself.

Rachel realized that except for Cy, Cole was the only man she'd been able to depend on. And he'd be leaving—at the end of the week.

For the past hour, Rachel had stayed busy with the baby. The police officer who'd handled Sarah's case came by to have her sign papers for her sister's personal things, and to explain the landlord had the rest of Sarah's clothes.

Then Beth Nealey arrived and invited her to lunch in the cafeteria. After they went through the food line, they sat down at a table and began to eat. "As far as we discovered in our investigation, you are Hannah's only living relative. So unless you've had a change of heart, you'll be her guardian."

Excitement and fear raced through Rachel as she tried to eat her tomato soup. Once again she thought about Cole, wanting him with her. "No, I haven't changed my mind. Hannah is my niece. I love her already and I want to make a home for her. When possible, I want to adopt her."

Beth smiled, putting Rachel at ease. "I'm glad." She took a bite of her sandwich. "Not to say becoming an instant mother isn't going to be difficult, especially with running a cattle ranch."

"I have help." She could handle this. She wanted Hannah so much she was willing to do anything. "I may be new at motherhood, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes. If I can't handle both, I'll sell the ranch."

Beth patted her hand. "You'll make a great mother, Rachel." She placed her napkin on her tray. "And I'll be coming by in a few weeks to see how things are going. And if you need anything before then, you can always call me."

"So I can take Hannah home tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll have the papers to sign tomorrow morning before she is released." Beth shook Rachel's hand and stood. "I wish you all the best." With a parting smile, Rachel watched her walk away.

At the door to the cafeteria, Beth stopped when Cole appeared. After a minute they shook hands and Cole came toward Rachel, noticing the other women in the room were giving him an extra long look. She felt her heart speed up as his gaze searched for hers.

He smiled as she reached her table. "I just heard the good news," he told her as he pulled out a chair.

She nodded. "I guess we have to stay one more night," Rachel said. "I'm sorry. This wasn't exactly in your job description."

Cole knew that neither one of them had thought about what was going to happen once they came to San Antonio.

"It's a slow time at the ranch," he assured her with a shrug. Even if Cy was so crippled with arthritis that he could barely get up some mornings, he should be able to handle things while they were gone. "I called Cy while you were in with the baby. He said Bud had been by to help out."

Rachel blinked in surprise. "I'm glad. Cy has trouble asking for help. And since the heart attack, I worry about him overdoing things. And after you leave..." She paused. "I'm sorry, I know you have another job to go to."

He nodded. "If you need me to, I don't have a problem staying on another week. I'll work at finding you another hand." He knew staying on would be tough but how could he leave her alone with a new baby?

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't, Rachel. I offered. Things have changed and you've got to concentrate on the baby for now, not the ranch."

She blinked. "I appreciate it. More than you know. I was worried about what my lawyer was going to say about Hannah." She shrugged. "It shouldn't matter since I'm to take over control of the ranch in a few weeks."

He smiled again. "I hear you're having a special birthday."

"The only thing that's good about it is I can run the ranch my way without having to ask Mr. Montgomery."

He nodded. “You have a lot on your plate. Top of the list is collecting your sister’s things. Mrs. Nealey told me that the police stopped by.” He glanced down at the bag on the chair. “How about we take care of that now?”

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