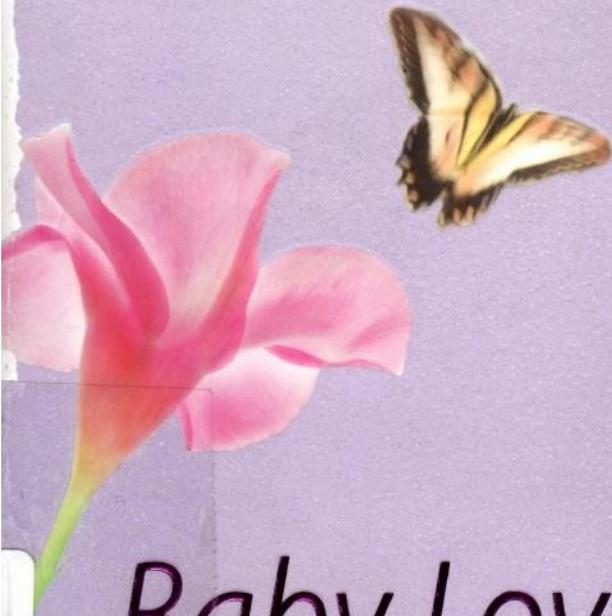


DO NOT PUT ON THE HONOR PAPERBACK RACK

ELIZABETH LOWELL

# Catherine Anderson

*New York Times* bestselling author



*Baby Love*

## *Prologue*

An icy Idaho night wind whistled along the dark, deserted sidewalk, carrying with it the snow-crisp scents of mountain pine and fir. The gusts pushed at Maggie Stanley from behind, tossing her long dark hair over her eyes and cutting through her thin nylon jacket. Shuddering with the cold, she hugged her bundled baby close and forced herself to keep moving. Her feet felt as if they weighed a thousand pounds, and she worried that she might slip on the treacherous black ice that coated the cracked cement.

A flash of automobile headlights from somewhere behind made her heart do a flip. She flattened herself against a building, praying that the shadows cast by the eaves might hide her. The car moved on through the intersection. *Not Lonnie.* Going limp against the wet siding, Maggie gulped back a sob, the jolt of fear so numbing that she could no longer feel her legs.

*Oh, God. Off the street. I have to get off the street.*

She lurched into a plodding run, clutching Jaimie protectively against her. With every step she took, the heavy diaper bag slammed into her bruised leg. As her fear moved away and feeling returned to her extremities, the pain of the blows became so excruciating that nausea rolled up her burning throat.

Up ahead, she saw an unlighted sign through the shadowy gloom. The boldly painted letters beckoned to her.

like a beacon. *Pacific Northern*. She'd done it. She was almost there. Only a few more steps now.

Breathless, she staggered to a stop when she reached the sign and stared incredulously at the chain-link fence. Beyond the sturdy wire mesh lay the railway yard where she hoped to hitch a ride.

### *Chapter One*

Drifting in the misty unreality of dreams, Rafe Kendrick surrendered himself to the images that moved softly through his mind. As he sank deeper into slumber, the details gained clarity and seemed more lifelike. He smiled drowsily. He was down on the lakeshore, he realized, not far from the main ranch house. Through the stands of evergreen trees, he could see the sprawling expanse of ivy-covered brick that was his family home, three of its fireplace chimneys silhouetted against the summer-blue sky. On the gentle breeze, he heard the whinny of a stallion coming from the north pasture behind the stables.

*Home*. On some level he knew this was only a dream, but it felt wonderfully real, a vivid recollection of all that he'd lost. Small, water-worn rocks shifted under his feet as he followed the sweep of shoreline. The soft lapping of the water soothed him. He took a deep breath, identifying the smells that had once been so commonplace he scarcely noticed them. Fir and pine. Sun-warmed grass and fertile earth. A crisp edge to the breeze, even on a summer day, because the high-elevation basin was ringed by snowcapped peaks.

His footsteps slowed as he crested a slight rise. Ahead of him in a shaded grove, he saw a sorrel mare and a buckskin gelding. They grazed contentedly, their reins loosely draped over the limbs of sapling oaks. Nearby

two blanket-draped saddles rested on the green grass.

A sense of *deja vu* filled Rafe. He remembered this day. He and Susan had taken the kids for a short ride through the forest, and then they'd come back here for a picnic by the lake. They had enjoyed themselves, singing silly songs they made up as they went along to entertain their three-year-old son, Keefer. It had been a near perfect outing, and they had ended it here because they loved spending time near the water.

He eagerly scanned the clearing, his yearning to catch a glimpse of his family so sharp that it made his breath hitch. Drawn by a red-checkered tea towel that fluttered in the breeze, his gaze came to rest on the wicker picnic basket first. The hinged lid was wedged partially open by the protruding neck of a wine bottle that their nanny-housekeeper, Becca, had slipped inside to accompany their meal.

Oh, yes... he remembered it all so clearly—Susan, in snug faded jeans and a pink cotton blouse, her golden hair caught at the crown with a clip to spill in a silky cascade to her shoulders. He could almost hear the sound of her laughter rippling around him—and smell the little-boy scent of his son, riding double in front of him on the buckskin. After coming here to eat, he had rocked his baby daughter to sleep while Susan set out the food, and he could recall exactly how his little girl's plump body had felt in his arms.

A slight frown pleated Rafe's brow. This was too real to be a dream. He could actually hear the water lapping and feel the breeze caressing his skin. With every step he took, the beach pebbles pressed sharply into the soles of his riding boots. Dreams weren't this vivid.

*Oh, God.* Could he dare to hope? Maybe a miracle had happened, and somehow he'd been hurtled back in time. Maybe, after all this time, his prayers had finally been answered and God was giving him a second chance.

*Oh, yes, please...* All he needed was just one more

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chance. This time, he wouldn't blow it. He'd put his family first. Nothing had ever mattered more to him than his wife and kids. *Nothing.* He'd just gotten so caught up in the everyday responsibilities and obligations of being a husband and father that he'd lost sight of what was really important for a while.

He'd never make that mistake again.

Wanting, *needing* to believe that this was all actually real, he clenched his hands into throbbing fists and eagerly scanned the clearing. Susan and the kids lay only a short distance away from the picnic basket. The three of them were taking a nap on a Navajo blanket he'd spread on the grass for them. Their snuggled forms were dappled with sunlight that filtered through the fir boughs above them. Susan lay on her back with a child on each side of her, her sweet face relaxed in sleep, her lush mouth curved in a slight smile of contentment. His son Keefer had fallen asleep with his arms around her neck, and he still clung to her, his baby-soft cheek pressed to her breast. The six-month-old Chastity was cradled in Susan's other arm, her tawny curls glistening like drizzles of honey.

Rafe walked toward them, a sharp ache stabbing his chest. Dear God, how he loved them, and it had been so long—so very long—since he'd seen them. *Thank you, God.* He wanted to shout and run to cover the distance more quickly. But no. He couldn't shake the feeling that this scene from out of his past might exist only in his imagination. A loud sound or sudden movement might shatter it like fragile glass.

As he moved closer to the blanket, Susan's face grew less distinct. He squinted down at her, wanting to see her more clearly. But no matter how hard he tried, her features remained an elusive blur, framed by a nimbus of golden hair. He came to a stop, staring so hard that his eyes burned. It was like trying to see her through a plate of steam-fogged glass.

"Susan?" he called softly. *"Honey, wake up. It's me, Rafe."*

She didn't stir at the sound of his voice. He reached a hand toward her, his need to touch her a craving he couldn't deny. Just as his fingertips nearly grazed her cheek, the ground under his feet shifted and seemed to jerk. In a twinkling, his wife and children vanished, and he found himself surrounded by an endless and horribly empty darkness.

*"Susan? Don't leave again! Susan?"*

He felt a light touch on his arm, and as he turned, a dizzy feeling came over him. As the sensation subsided, he realized that his surroundings had changed. He was still on the lakeshore, only now it was late evening. Susan sat beside him on the grass, and once again, he couldn't see her clearly. She was only a shadowy presence, and he knew she would vanish again if he tried to touch her. The knowledge filled him with a sense of hopelessness and pain that ran so deep his bones ached.

Her face was a blurred, pale oval in the darkness as she turned to regard him. *"What are you doing, Rafe?"* she asked softly. *"You promised me you'd find someone else to love, that you wouldn't spend the rest of your life alone if something ever happened to me. Now, just look at you!"*

He clamped his arms around his knees to resist his urge to reach for her. *"I can't, Susan. I know I promised, but I can't. I'll never love anyone but you. Never."*

Her voice rang with sadness. *"Oh, Rafe, you can't go on like this. Life is such a precious gift, and you're wasting it."*

He closed his eyes. *"I don't have a life,"* he whispered raggedly. *"Without you and the kids, I'm just marking off the days. Why can't you understand that?"*

Silence settled between them, broken only by the gentle sound of lapping water and the night wind whispering in the evergreen trees. Those sounds had once seemed like music to him. Now hearing them only made him

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hurt, and he wanted to escape. Leaving right then was impossible, though. As long as Susan was there, even in this elusive, heartbreaking way, he couldn't leave her.

*"It's time, Rafe"* she whispered gently, her voice seeming to fade in and out. *"You have to let me and the kids go now and move on."*

Move on to what? He wanted to scream the question, only a lump had lodged in his throat, making it difficult for him to speak.

*"You keep praying for one more chance"* she murmured. *"Well, dear heart, now you're getting one. Don't throw it away or mess it up because you're still clinging to ghosts."*

*"Mess what up?"*

*"You'll see."* He heard a smile in her voice. *"Just open your heart, Rafe. You'll see."*

Rafe jerked awake in the middle of a snore. For an instant, he thought it was the bad dream that startled him, but as the grogginess cleared from his head, he decided it was something else. After two years of riding the rails, he had learned to sleep lightly even when drunk. Something wasn't right.

He heard nothing except the constant clank of the train wheels and the clatter of the boxcar. He nudged his Stetson back to regard his four traveling companions, who sat hunched along the rear wall of the boxcar just as they had been earlier, only now they all seemed to be staring at something to his left.

Shaking off the last trace of sleep and the haunting dream along with it, he flicked a glance in that direction and did a double take. *A girl?* He could scarcely credit his eyes. Pushing with the heel of one boot, he sat more erect and turned the full blast of his gaze on her.

A shaft of moonlight fell over her. He could see she was a beauty, slightly built with a wealth of dark hair and that rare milk-white skin you see in pictures but seldom run across in real life.

*A fragile little flower.*

Not likely. Fragile little flowers didn't hitch rides on boxcars. She probably had a switchblade in her hip pocket and was just waiting for some poor bastard to mess with her. Well, judging by the interest she was drawing from his fellow travel mates, she wouldn't have long to wait. As if she sensed Rafe's gaze on her, she turned to look at him, and he found himself staring into the biggest, most vulnerable, and most frightened eyes he'd ever seen. He got the oddest feeling—a tight, achy sensation, dead in the center of his chest.

She ducked her head so fast he had little time to analyze his reaction. Not that it took a genius I. Q. to figure it out. He was drunk, for starters, and it had been a hell of a long time since he'd gazed into eyes that didn't seem shuttered and shrewd.

"Seem" was the keyword in that observation, he felt sure. First impressions were often deceiving, and women could be consummate actresses, especially the hard-as-nails variety who bummed the rails. The gentle caress of moonlight undoubtedly made her look prettier and more fragile than she actually was. She was probably about as vulnerable as a hedgehog and twice as ornery.

While she gazed fixedly down at the jacket she held clutched to her chest, Rafe studied her. An angelic countenance with delicate features. Long, thick eyelashes that cast shadows on her pale cheeks in the eerie illumination. A cute little turned-up nose and a chin that hinted at a stubborn streak.

Who in her right mind would hug her coat instead of wearing it when the temperature was registering close to zero? The boxcar door was jammed and wouldn't slide shut, making it far colder and draftier inside than usual. With no protection from the cold, she'd be dead by daylight. Not to mention that no young woman right in the head would climb on a boxcar with five sex-starved men. Correction: four sex-starved men and one uninterested,

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has-been rancher. Even at that, she was faced with some stiff odds.

Rafe snorted at the unintentional pun and curled his hand over the neck of his whiskey bottle. Thank God she wasn't his problem. He was too drunk to help her out if things got ugly, and he planned to get drunker yet before the night was finished. If there was a code that a man learned to live by while bumming the rails, it was to mind his own business. The little lady was on her own.

Glancing at the other men, who were still staring at her as if they'd never seen a female before, Rafe decided things were definitely going to turn nasty. He'd give it five minutes—ten at the outside.

Picking up the bottle, he gave a mental shrug. She looked on the high side of twenty-one. That was old enough to know better. Right? Damned straight. If you messed with the bull, you got the horn.

Well, she'd better be able to handle it. Those yo-yos weren't your street-corner-variety thugs; they were hardcore railroad trash, the kind who stayed in one town only as long as the welcome lasted and then freeloaded to the next small community before they got arrested and tossed in jail. They slept under bridges and highway overpasses, making a few dollars here and there for cheap wine by begging at traffic lights near shopping malls. They carried all their worldly goods from place to place in their knapsacks or backpacks, living by their wits and the whimsy of chance. When their luck ran out, they played rough and for keeps, surviving any way they could.

To men like them, a pretty, defenseless female was a rare delicacy.

Rafe unscrewed the bottle cap, intending to have a drink. But he burned with curiosity in spite of himself. What in the hell was she doing here? She was too old to be a runaway. He supposed it was possible she was fleeing from a husband, but if that was the case, why do

it on a train? She should have just rolled the creep and bought herself a bus or plane ticket. Rafe sure as hell wouldn't have wanted any woman he cared about to put herself at risk like this.

Memories of Susan sifted through his mind. He tried to call up a picture of her face, but just like in his dream, her features remained a blur. Guilt swamped him. She'd been his whole life. Now, in only a little over two years, he couldn't recall her smile. His memories of his family were like color snapshots steadily fading with time.

The thought hurt so much he felt as if a knife were slicing at his guts.

He tipped back his head to swig the whiskey. The blessed burn promised oblivion, and he closed his eyes as the warmth spread through him, needing it—craving it—grabbing for it. Tomorrow he'd find an odd job and buy another bottle before this one went dry. At the bottom of a jug, he found sobriety, and for him, that was abhorrent. When he was drunk, at least he couldn't think.

A sudden wailing trailed to Rafe over the rhythmic clanking of the boxcar wheels. The sound startled him so much that he choked. *A baby?* Liquor backwash went up his nose. He strained to breathe, his eyeballs feeling as if they might pop from his skull. *Jesus Christ.*

He turned an appalled gaze back to the girl. The wind-breaker she hugged to her chest was *wiggling*.

Judging by the size of the bundle, the baby could be no more than a month or so old. She'd brought an infant on a freight train? He shot a concerned glance at the other four men. A baby put a whole new shine on things. He could look the other way when a woman angled for trouble and got some. But how could he do nothing when a kid was involved?

He immediately cut that thought short. She and her kid weren't his problem. *Nope.* He wanted nothing to do with her, period. And he really, really wished she'd make her kid shut up. The pathetic sound of the baby's

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wailing brought back painful memories of Keefer and Chastity.

Rafe shoved to his feet. He didn't miss the way the girl shrank away, as if she expected him to jump on her. *Sorry, sis. Not in the market.*

Staggering with each sway of the boxcar, he went to its opposite end, staking claim to the left front corner where he could slump and nurse his booze bottle in peace. Partly drowned out by the noise of the train, the baby's crying was a little less unsettling there. He took a long pull from the bottle, determined to consume enough liquor to pass out.

"Shut that kid up, lady!" one of the lowlifes yelled. "That cryin' is wearin' on my nerves!"

*Amen to that.* Rafe took another swig of booze and turned up his coat collar. *Chastity.* She'd been only six months old. Picture-clear, an image of her tiny, flower-draped coffin flashed through his head. He chased it away with another gulp of whiskey, wondering why he could remember the coffin so clearly and not her precious little face. The realization made him want to throw back his head and howl right along with the baby.

He had murdered his wife and kids—*murdered* them as surely as if he'd put a gun to their heads and pulled the trigger—and in less time than his three-year-old son had lived, he was already forgetting them. There was only one name for a man who could do that—a rotten, no-good son of a bitch.

"Either shut the kid up, or out it goes, lady!" another man yelled. "I'll throw it off, and don't think I won't! This ain't no place for a brat, anyhow."

Rafe froze with the whiskey bottle midway to his lips. Even in the poor light, the girl's face looked milk white, her eyes huge splashes of darkness and fear. Staring at the man who'd just threatened to toss her baby from the car, she drew the windbreaker over her shoulder and began to fumble beneath it.

Rafe clenched his teeth to bite back a curse. Of all

the things she might do to fix the problem, that ranked way low on the smart chart. Although, to be fair, he guessed she didn't have an option. If a baby was hungry, you had to feed it. The other men snapped to attention like retrievers that had spotted a plump goose, their stares riveted to the activity going on under the girl's jacket. Her stiff movements spoke for themselves. Rafe found himself gaping right along with the others as she unbuttoned her blouse. Even with the nylon to block his view, he knew the exact instant when her breast popped free from her bra. As though plugged with a cork, the kid suddenly stopped screaming.

"Say now, honey. Whatcha got under that there coat?" one man asked.

The girl drew her knees higher and bent her head, her long, dark hair falling forward to further conceal her motherly undertaking. Rafe saw that she was shaking, whether from terror or the cold, he couldn't be sure. She looked so pathetic that his heart twisted.

The baby started to screech again. Her movements frantic, she jiggled the infant and cuddled it closer. One of the bums laughed. "Say now, sweet thing, if the brat don't want it, I sure as hell won't turn it down. "

*Shit.* Rafe really didn't want to mix it up with these lowlifes, but there were some things a man just couldn't walk away from. Four slimeballs raping a defenseless girl was one of them. Even more alarming, Rafe doubted it had been that long since she'd given birth.

He screwed the cap back on the whiskey bottle. The other men were undoubtedly packing switchblades. Just that morning, he had hocked his own knife to buy the booze.

He could think of better ways to die than with his guts spilled all over the filthy floor of a boxcar. But hey, better him than the girl. She might hemorrhage to death if those creeps got hold of her. Besides, it wasn't as if he honestly cared all that much if he died—or how he

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went. Quick and painless would be nice, but a man didn't always get his druthers.

One of the bums pushed to his feet and moved toward her. The other three rose to follow him.

*This really isn't my problem,* Rafe tried to tell himself one last time.

The man in the lead grabbed her roughly by her arm. She lost her hold on her baby, and the kid rolled from her lap onto the dirt-encrusted wooden floor. That cut it. Rafe could ignore a lot of things, but watching a baby get a raw deal wasn't on the list.

He was on his feet before he even realized he'd moved. He shifted his grip on the neck of the half-gallon jug and bent to set it on the floor, thankful for once that his taste ran to Early Times and not one of the cheaper brands bottled in plastic. Going to a knife fight with nothing but his fists had never been one of his aspirations. First though, he had to move the child out of harm's way.

After wrapping the infant in his coat and carrying it to the opposite end of the boxcar, Rafe retrieved his whiskey bottle and returned to help the child's mother. With the loud *clackety-clack* of the train to muffle the sound, he felt as if he were watching an eerie scene in a silent movie as he strode the length of the enclosure. The moonlight painted the men at the opposite end of the car in shades of white, gray, and black, and the shuddering of the train lent their movements the jerky rapidity common in dated films. Only this was no scene being played out on a screen. It was real. Unless he intervened, that girl didn't have a prayer. With vague surprise, Rafe realized he was no longer staggering. Fury could be damned sobering.

He didn't bother to announce himself before he started busting up the party. He just gripped the glass bottle as though it were a club and waded in. \* \* \*

Maggie scrambled across the floor to get away from the men's feet, her breath coming in shallow pants. When she attempted to stand, her legs were so weak that she slid down the wall like a dribble of wet paint. Huddling with her back pressed into the corner, she twisted to and fro to avoid being stepped on, a fist shoved against her teeth to stifle her screams.

Watching the cowboy fight, she recalled her first impression of him when she'd gotten on this train, that he might be dangerous. She'd been right. The wild man in repose had come to life swinging; his chiseled features taut with feral rage. For a drunk, he moved with impressive speed and precision, his shoulder-length mane of tangled black hair whipping with every quick turn of his head. His big frame was oddly graceful, lean muscle and bone working together in a harmony of motion, the tendons in his thighs bunching under the loose legs of his faded jeans as he feinted and then pressed a vicious attack.

It seemed to Maggie that the fight was over almost before it started. Boots spread, knees slightly bent, the cowboy stood there, glancing at the human deadfall around him as he swiped glass from his shirt and pants. Then he moved toward her, his eyes glittering gunmetal blue in the moonlight.

To her frightened eyes, he looked a yard wide at the shoulders and twice that long in the legs. He walked with that loose-hipped, slightly bowed stride common to tall men who'd spent years in the saddle. Horribly aware that her blouse was partially unbuttoned, she tried to cross her arms over her chest, but for the life of her, she couldn't make the quivering muscles in her arms work properly.

He hunkered in front of her, the sheer breadth of his shoulders eclipsing the moonlight. Maggie shrank against the wall. Even in the shadows she could see the hard cast of his features. In contrast to his dark skin, his

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steel-blue eyes gleamed and seemed to miss nothing as he swept his gaze over her.

For an awful moment, she thought he meant her harm. Not that she considered herself to be any prize, but she doubted a man like him was any too particular.

She heard a strange whimpering sound. It took her a moment to realize the sound came from her. She tried to stop, to swallow it back, but it just kept erupting from her—awful and animal-like.

"Are you all right?" His large hands settled gently on her shoulders, his palms radiating warmth through the thin cotton of her blouse. "Don't be afraid, honey. I'm not going to hurt you. "

Maggie had heard that line before. She expected his long fingers to tighten brutally on her flesh, but instead, he lightly caressed her arms, the touch so feathery and soothing that a sob of relief escaped from her.

"Well, hell. "

He slipped an iron-hard arm around her waist, and the next thing she knew, she was drawn to her knees and trapped in his embrace, one of his hands cupped firmly over the back of her head. As he pressed her face against his shoulder, the musky male scent of him filled her senses. To her surprise, it wasn't an entirely unpleasant smell, as one might expect from a bum. Evidently he bathed occasionally, at least. He swayed slightly from side to side with the rocking of the boxcar, one big hand gliding over her back. Even gentle pressure on her bruised flesh hurt, and she flinched when he touched a particularly tender place on her shoulder.

He went suddenly still, and she felt him stiffen. He drew his hand from her head and carefully separated the rent in her sleeve. After a moment of breathless waiting, Maggie thought she heard him curse, but the clack of the train was so loud, she couldn't be certain.

"You're all right now, " he assured her in a louder voice. "And so is your baby. I checked him over good.

The bastards didn't hurt him, and they aren't going to. I promise you that. "

The gruff vibrancy of his voice curled around her like warm tendrils of smoke, and the gentle caress of his hands eased away some of her fear. As her panic subsided, Maggie's thoughts went instantly to Jaimie. She shifted to peer around his arm to where her baby lay at the opposite end of the boxcar. She kept remembering how Jaimie had rolled from her lap onto the floor, and despite the cowboy's reassurances, she couldn't help but worry. Oh, God. If her baby was hurt, she'd never forgive herself.

To her surprise, the cowboy seemed to understand how concerned she was and loosened his hold on her. Maggie drew back, fumbling with her blouse. She jumped with a start when he brushed her hands aside and made fast work of refastening the buttons for her.

He smiled slightly, his mouth tipping up at one corner. Even in the shadows, she could see the amused twinkle in his eyes.

"Better?"

Though she couldn't imagine why, she did feel better. And if that wasn't sheer madness... He was the kind of man you didn't want to meet in a dark alley.

He reached to smooth her hair back from her face. "Go check on your baby while I get rid of these bastards before they start coming around. "

While he got rid of them? Maggie had forgotten all about the other men who lay around them. She cast a worried glance at them now. Surely the cowboy didn't mean to just toss them off the train? A hysterical urge to laugh struck her. Of course he didn't.

"It'll be all right, " he said, gathering up her jacket and sweatshirt, then thrusting them into her arms. "Go see to your baby. I'll handle it. "

Handle it? Maggie wasn't about to ask what he meant. Right now she had worries enough just watching out for herself and Jaimie. Besides, after what those men had

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tried to do to her, they deserved whatever they got.

Quivering with delayed reaction, she collected Jaimie, quickly checked to make sure he was all right, and then went to sit in the left front corner of the boxcar. Only seconds later, she heard the faint thud of the cowboy's boots over the sound of the train as he followed in her wake. He stooped to retrieve his hat and coat, then turned slightly to regard her.

"Here, " he said as he extended the coat to her. When she hesitated, he dropped it in her lap.

"That wind-breaker and shirt won't keep your baby warm. Put it on, " he ordered gruffly as he settled the Stetson on his head. "It's big enough for two men and a boy. It'll cover you both with room to spare. "

The warmth of the sheepskin over Maggie's legs felt heavenly. She was freezing; there was no mistake about that. The thought of the thick wool all around her was tempting. But it seemed wrong for her to be warm while he suffered the cold with nothing.

He resumed his seat in the opposite corner, snorting with impatience as he settled his broad shoulders against the wall. "Do I have to come over there and stuff you into it?"

Maggie shook her head and laid Jaimie lengthwise in the cleavage of her upraised thighs as she drew on the coat. When she tucked her baby inside and pulled the woolly leather closed, warmth immediately surrounded her icy body.

"Thank you, mister. "

He shifted to get more comfortable and tugged the hat down over his face. His voice gravelly and muffled, he said, "No problem. Just don't grow attached. I want it back when we part company at the next stop. "

Maggie gnawed the inside of her cheek. "Not just for the coat. Thank you for—" Her voice trailed away like a talking toy that had wound down. She gulped and tried again. "Thank you for—for helping me. You risked getting badly hurt"

"Yeah, well..." He shifted again. "I didn't, so let's forget it happened. "

Maggie's thoughts returned to the four men he'd tossed from the train. "Do you think those bums will be all right?"

He released a weary sigh. "I don't know, " he admitted. "Sometimes circumstances don't allow you any choices. "

She closed her eyes, thinking how very true that was. No choices. If not for that, she would never have climbed on this train in the first place. It had been a desperate move and a dangerous one. But the bottom line was, she'd run less risk of getting caught this way than if she'd hitched a ride on the highway. Once Lonnie raised an alarm, the cops might start looking for her. Standing alongside the interstate, she would have been a sitting duck.

With that thought, she found herself wondering what had led the cowboy to this pass. Had circumstances robbed him of a choice as well, or was he here simply because he wanted to be?

The faint smell of cow manure drifted to her nostrils, making her suspect this car had once been used to haul fertilizer. *Oh, God.* Just the possibility gave her the heebie-jeebies, and she cuddled Jaimie closer. Who in his right mind would *choose* this mode of transportation? It was madness. Yet she had recently seen a television special about perfectly respectable individuals all across the nation who sought adventure by riding the rails with bums. A new craze, evidently, the appeal of which totally escaped her. One young man had been killed during his spring break from college last year when crates of heavy freight shifted and crushed him. Another had ended up dead of multiple stab wounds from an unknown transient's knife.

The grieving parents of both youths had gone on the air to warn viewers of the danger in riding the rails.

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according to the television report, there were thrill seekers who ignored the statistics, risking not only arrest and conviction for breaking the law, but putting their lives in jeopardy as well. One of the men interviewed had been a heart surgeon, of all things. He claimed the excitement and danger provided a form of stress release he could find nowhere else.

Stress release? She guessed most people's everyday problems would seem less daunting after experiencing something like this. Sort of like curing the burn with a wildfire, in her estimation, but to each his own.

She opened her eyes to find that the cowboy had nudged up his hat to study her. Even with the shadows to cloak her, she felt as easy to read as large print.

"Don't tear yourself up feeling guilty about those men, if that's what's eating you. If I hadn't stopped them, they would have raped you and slit your throat. And that's not to mention what they would've done to your kid afterward. " He shrugged. "I Could've hauled ass before they came back around, but where would that have left you? You couldn't jump from the train. Not with a baby to worry about. Leaving you here alone to deal with the assholes didn't strike me as an option. You understand? It was them or you. " Maggie couldn't bear to even think about it.

He pushed more erect. After studying her for an interminably long while, he gently asked, "What are you doing here, anyway? Somehow you just don't strike me as the type to be riding the rails. "

"What type of person does?" she asked, forcing herself to meet his gaze.

His mouth went hard, and even in the moonlight, she saw a sharp, measuring look enter his eyes. "Lots of types, " he finally replied, "but most of them fall into two categories, crazy or desperate. "

Hoping to keep the conversation centered on him, she retorted, "And which type are you?"

"The type who can take care of himself. "

Maggie conceded the point by averting her gaze. Even though she owed him for saving her life, she didn't dare tell him her reasons for being there. Judging by his appearance, he probably had very little money, and it would be just like Lonnie to offer a reward for word of her whereabouts. After all, unless Lonnie managed to find her and got his hands on Jaimie, he'd have to return all that cash.

The cowboy sighed. "What's your name? Can you tell me that much?"

She weighed the possible consequences and decided sharing her first name couldn't hurt. "Maggie. How far is it to the next town, anyway?"

"I'm not sure of the distance. I think the next stop will probably be in Squire, and that'll take a few hours.

" He drew up his shoulders, which told her the cold was already starting to bother him. "That where you're headed?"

Maggie had no idea where she was going. She was just—going. "I don't know. It'll depend on how large a place Squire is, I guess. "

Long silence. "You mean you don't know where you're headed?"

"Sure I do. I'm going where the train's going. "

"Christ, " he said, half under his breath. And then she could have sworn she heard him mutter, "Why me, God?"

"Is Squire a fairly big place?"

"It's not so little you'll miss it if you blink. It's just this side of the Washington state line. "

Maggie needed to find a good-sized town—someplace where she could easily land a job, melt into the population, and not be traced.

"Who knocked you around?" he asked without preamble.

She stared at him. "Pardon?"

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"I didn't stammer. I know damned well you didn't get all those bruises on your arm in that tussle tonight.

Who beat the hell out of you?" He gave her a slow once-over, for all the world as if he could see through the sheepskin. "It's obvious someone did. And please, don't insult my intelligence by telling me that age-old story about running into a doorknob, unless, of course, you ran into it several dozen times. "

If he hadn't been quizzing her about something so personal, Maggie might have smiled at his dry sense of humor. She was fresh out of smiles, though, and there were some things you didn't relate to strangers.

"We have lots of doorknobs at our place. "

"Who's we?"

She tried for a vacuous expression as she drew the coat closer.

"How bad are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. "

"Looks to me like those ribs of yours are a little ticklish, and maybe other places as well. "

Ticklish didn't say it by half. "I'm fine, " she repeated.

He huffed, the sound disgruntled. "You nursed the kid since that legion of doorknobs worked you over?

When you tried a few minutes ago, it appeared to me that you were having some problems. "

She gaped at him. No man had ever asked her something so personal, and his saving her didn't give him the right to be the first. She averted her face.

The *clackety-clack* of the train seemed to grow louder. She could feel him studying her. She wished he'd just lower that filthy hat and go back to sleep.

"Appears to me you're down on your luck. If you're that banged up, how do you plan on feeding him? With your good looks?"

Through the sweep of her lowered lashes, Maggie stared at the cowboy's lean body, dread rising in her

throat until it nearly suffocated her. His question rang in her ears. *How do you plan on feeding him? With your good looks?*

*Maybe so, mister, she thought numbly. Maybe so.*

### *Chapter Two*

Freezing his ass off was a great way to sober up. It beat drinking coffee all to hell, anyway. Rafe clamped his arms over his chest and drew his knees higher, his body swaying with the boxcar. From under the edge of his hat, he could see the pinkish light of dawn. The temperature wouldn't rise for about three more hours, but at least there was an end in sight.

He stared into the black void provided by the crown of his hat. Against the darkness, he kept seeing the girl's pale face and those gigantic, expressive eyes. He'd been a little rough on her. There was something indefinable about her that brought out his protective instincts, and it scared the hell out of him.

For two years, his sole focus had been on his own misery. Now, in the space of only a few hours, a half-pint girl had turned him inside out and tied his guts into knots. This wasn't like him. Usually he had no trouble at all in ignoring the rest of the world and all its injustices. In fact, he'd gotten so good at not giving a damn, he'd practically turned it into an art. So why was Maggie getting to him like this?

He remembered his dream and Susan's entreaties. *You'll see.* Was this the second chance she'd been telling him about?

He shoved the thought away, scoffing at himself. The booze must have pickled his brains for notions like that

to find a foothold. Maggie with-no-last-name meant nothing to him. Here shortly, he'd say adios and never clap eyes on her again.

Despite his resolve, though, he couldn't stop thinking about those bruises on her arm. Was her entire body banged up? Where he hailed from, a man didn't strike a woman, period, not even with the flat of his hand. Something heavy plopped on Rafe's legs. He shoved up his hat to see Maggie standing over him. She cradled her sleeping child in the crook of one arm. Pitching her voice to be heard over the train, she said, "You're freezing. You take the coat for a while." She cuddled the baby closer, her gaze reflecting gratitude mixed with wariness. "I was thinking maybe we could switch back and forth. Only after you get warm again, of course."

Settling the Stetson on his head, Rafe pushed himself to a sitting position. The fear of him that he read in her expression didn't bode well for the suggestion he was about to make. "Why don't we just share it?"

A frown pleated the skin between her delicately arched brows. "Share it?"

She sounded as scandalized as if he had suggested they have hot sex on a city sidewalk. Rafe felt a grin tug at the corner of his mouth. That surprised him. Smiling was a rare occurrence for him these days.

He lifted the heavy sheepskin with the crook of his finger. "I'll wear the coat, and you and the baby can slip inside with me. That way, we'll all stay warm."

She shook her head, the movement drawing his gaze to the fall of dark hair that lay over her shoulders.

Against the white blouse, the silky curtains made him think of rich chocolate. Dressed in blue jeans and sneakers, she might have passed for a young teenager if not for the slight fullness of her hips and breasts.

"I don't think that's a very good idea."

"For your baby's sake," he quickly added. "No matter how you circle it, switching back and forth with the coat won't be good. The baby will get cold, then warm."

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I've always heard that causes colds. You want it to get sick?"

She dropped a worried gaze to the small bundle cradled against her. His stomach knotted. He was so cold his teeth were damned near clacking, but he wouldn't wear the coat while she and the child went without. He nearly smiled again as he watched her struggle to reach a decision. Share the coat? God forbid.

"I have him wrapped in my jacket and sweatshirt. Do you really think he might get sick?"

Rafe was actually more worried about her than the baby. He cocked an eyebrow and lifted the coat higher.

"I think it's a risk you don't have to take."

"I suppose it *is* more practical to share it than to switch back and forth."

*Amen.* He watched her take a hesitant step toward him. Not that he faulted her wariness. After what those four bums had tried to do to her, any woman would want to run in the other direction.

He leaned forward to shove his arms down the coat sleeves. "Come on," he coaxed. "I don't know about you, but I'm about to freeze my ass off."

She took another hesitant step. Then she stopped to stare down at him, looking very like a skittish doe, her lithe body tensed for flight.

Suddenly tense himself, Rafe spread his feet to make room between his bent knees. As he held the front of the coat open in invitation, he felt that odd, achy sensation in his chest again. It was that stubborn little chin of hers and those large, frightened eyes, he decided. The combination packed a wallop. "Come on," he repeated huskily. "I swear I won't try anything,"

When she knelt on one knee between his spread boots, she searched his face, her expression so dubious that he nearly chuckled. Instead he faked a shiver. "Hurry, honey. I'm letting in cold air."

She turned and sat with her back to him. The top of her dark head hit him just below the chin. As she cud-

dled the baby in her arms, his whiskers caught on her silky hair. He waited, expecting her to relax against him, but instead she kept her spine so straight it could have ruled paper.

Biting back another smile, he drew the front of the heavy coat closed over her and the child, his arms forming a loose circle around them. The chill of her body made him yearn to hug her closer to share his heat, but he didn't want to scare her.

"You say your name's Maggie?" he inquired softly next to her ear.

"Yes. "

*Maggie.* It suited her perfectly somehow. Rafe breathed in the sweet scent of mother and child. "Is your baby a little boy?"

She bent her head and curled her fingers over the edge of blue nylon to reveal the child's tiny face. "Yes, " she replied, her voice throbbing with love. "His name is Jaimie—with two I's. I named him after my father.

"

"That's a Celtic spelling, isn't it?"

"It may be. My father was a Scot. "

He didn't miss the fact that she referred to her father in the past tense. Whoever had beaten her up, it hadn't been her dad.

She wore no wedding ring. He decided she was probably running from a boyfriend. "My name's Rafe Kendrick. "

She turned to meet his gaze, her guarded expression making his heart ache. It had to be damned miserable, being trapped inside a coat with a man she didn't trust. Though she was trying to keep a safe distance between their bodies, he could feel her trembling, and he doubted it was from the cold now.

She lowered her lashes, the long dark spikes casting feathery shadows on her cheeks in the rosy light of dawn. An urge came over him to trace the shape of her mouth with his fingertips. He was relieved when she averted her face.

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She continued to sit ramrod straight, which he knew couldn't be very comfortable, especially with aching ribs. Splaying a hand over the section of coat where he guessed the baby to be, he applied gentle pressure. "I don't bite, Maggie. At least not hard enough to break the skin. Go ahead and lean back. "

"I'm fine, " she insisted.

She looked exhausted. He suspected she was running on her last reserves of energy. He forced the issue by applying more pressure. Just as he anticipated, she relented instantly, which he doubted she would have done if he'd pressed his palm against her instead of the child.

Her body felt slight and wonderfully soft where it nestled against him. His breath froze in his chest. It had been so long since he'd held a woman that he'd nearly forgotten how good it felt. He wanted to bury his face in her beautiful hair and inhale its scent. And, oh, God, how he yearned to free his arms from the coat sleeves so he could slip his hands inside and explore her softness—the curve of her waist, the swell of her hips, the soft fullness of her bottom.

It had been too long since he'd had a drink, he decided. Without the constant infusion of booze into his system, the numbness was wearing off.

Normally he swept parking lots to get a new jug before the old one ran dry. Now that his most recently purchased bottle had been shattered, he'd have no choice but to go all day without a drink until he earned the money to buy more. What if he got the shakes and couldn't hold a broom? The thought made him feel frantic.

Rafe felt the girl flinch. He realized that in his agitation he'd increased the pressure of his hand on her and the baby. Concern for her chased away his sudden yearning for alcohol. Leaning around to regard her face, he saw that she was biting her bottom lip.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Your belt buckle. It's poking my back. "

He relaxed his hold. As he reached a hand inside the coat to slide the silver buckle off to one side, she gave a startled jerk when he grazed his knuckles over her lower back.

"I'm not making a move on you, honey. I'm just shifting the buckle so it won't jab you. " "There's no need. I can just sit straight. " As the train rounded a curve in the tracks, she nearly toppled with the sway. He caught her from falling with the brace of his arm. A faint ray of rosy sunlight came in through the open doorway to illuminate her face. For the first time, Rafe could see her features in detail. What he saw scared the hell out of him. She wasn't just pale. Her skin had a white, bloodless cast to it, and dark smudges underscored her eyes.

Disturbed by the train's sudden motion, the baby chose that moment to awaken and emit a weak bleating sound. She murmured soft endearments, parting the windbreaker again. The infant's blue eyes blinked open, and small fists flailed the air, terry sleeper sleeves flashing yellow against the navy nylon.

An unpleasant odor drifted up to Rafe. He nearly groaned. Any man who'd once been a father knew that smell. Why was it that the odor of baby poop always seemed to drift upward and never sideways? But, oh, no. It was one of those smells that shot straight to a man's nose.

Rafe glanced around the cavernous boxcar, expecting to see a diaper bag. When one didn't appear, he scanned the enclosure again, convinced one would materialize. On a rational level, he realized kids weren't born with a diaper bag attached. But in his estimation, that was a major screwup on God's part. With a baby tossed into any equation, the absence of disposable diapers and Wet Ones equaled a major disaster. "Where's the diaper bag?"

She didn't glance up as she replied. "I dropped it. " "You *what?*" Surely he couldn't have heard her

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right No diaper bag? "You're kidding. Right?"

She shook her head.

Visions of all the absolutely *vital* baby paraphernalia in a diaper bag went zigzagging through Rafe's head. Diapers and wipes were only the half of it. Raising his voice to be heard over the now screeching baby, who was thrashing his little legs and stirring up the odor, Rafe said, "You *dropped* it? Where at?"

"Back in Prior. It was an accident. I was trying to get on the train, and I couldn't run fast enough to keep up. I dropped both the bag and Jaimie's quilt. That's why I've got him wrapped in my sweatshirt and jacket. "

Rafe leaned his head against the wall, racking his brain for a solution. The stink aside, somehow they had to change the kid's britches. Left as he was, Jaimie would get a sore bottom.

"I'll manage somehow. "

Rafe couldn't imagine how. Then he felt her wiggling. The movements of her soft posterior against the crotch of his jeans brought about a reaction that brought his eyes wide open. His breath snagged, and he sat there for a full five seconds, staring at the back of her head.

Wonderful. Just frigging fantastic. He hadn't felt a stir in that region in over two years. Even worse than the piss-poor timing was the fact that Maggie might feel it.

He shoved a hand between her butt and his jeans, hoping to escape detection as well as protect himself from further stimulation. At the touch of his knuckles on her rump, she jumped again and jerked her head around to fix him with an accusing look.

"I'm not getting fresh, " he hastened to assure her. "I'm just—"

His voice trailed off. He was just what? The baby's screams seemed to attain super-baby decibels. He was getting a real bitch of a headache. God, he needed a drink.

She squirmed to put some distance between his hand and her bottom, then resumed her activities.

Watching

her from the back, it looked to him as if she were unfastening her top. *Red alert.* "What are you doing?"

"I'll have to use my blouse and wear the wind-breaker. "

Was it actually possible for a man's heart to leap from his chest cavity into his mouth? "Use your blouse for what?"

"A diaper. " "Say *what?*"

"I have to change him, " she said in a shrill voice, "and my blouse is all I've got. I'll need the sweatshirt later to keep him warm, and the nylon jacket isn't absorbent. "

He quickly shrugged the coat from his shoulders. "Here, I'll lend you my T-shirt. " *Lend?* As if he'd ever want it back. "Without your blouse, you'll be exposed to the cold. The nylon of that jacket will feel like ice against your bare skin every time the wind hits it. "

He shucked his shirt in record time, then peeled off the T-shirt and handed it around to her. She took hold of it between thumb and forefinger, raising it up to the weak light of dawn. Shocked by the frigid air that washed over his naked upper torso, Rafe quickly slipped his shirt back on. He paused in the buttoning to stare at the undergarment she held up with such delicate but apparent distaste.

It looked—*gray*. Rafe leaned closer to peer at it, convinced his eyes must be deceiving him. The last time he'd looked, it had been white. Of course, he couldn't recall exactly when that had been—or how drunk he was at the time.

"It'll do for a baby diaper. It's just the light. " At least he hoped it was only the light. "It isn't really dirty. "

"How long since you washed it?" "Not long. " He thought back. "In South Dakota, I think it was. "

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*"South Dakota?"*

"Yeah. This big old gal who ran the mission there washed my clothes while I was sleeping one off. That was only—let's see... " Rafe peered at the shirt again. *Shit.* "What day is this?"

"The twenty-sixth of October. Or is it the twenty-seventh?"

"You mean it's damned near Halloween?"

She flashed him a slightly appalled look.

How time did fly when you never sobered up. "Really? I can't believe it's almost November. "

She let the T-shirt puddle on the floor next to his leg and reached for the front of her blouse again. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kendrick, but I can't possibly put something that filthy on my baby.

Better if I use my blouse and wear your shirt myself. Close your eyes, please, " she said in a shaky voice that told him she felt none too sure he wouldn't attack her the instant he glimpsed bare skin. "I'll just slip your shirt on first. Then I'll change Jaimie. All right?"

"All right. "

He leaned his head back and started to close his eyes. Only just as his lids were fluttering shut, he felt her lean forward to peel the blouse down her arms, and somehow, his upper and lower eyelashes never quite met.

After a two-year abstinence, it seemed to Rafe that he should enjoy stealing a peek at a partially clad female. Instead he felt as if a mule had kicked him in the guts. Her back was covered with bruises, all of them still an angry red, which he knew from experience would darken in another day or so to deep black-and-blue marks. Interspersed among the bruises were superficial cuts. There was no mistaking them for anything but the marks of a man's ring, for they were surrounded by knuckle prints.

Rafe ended up closing his eyes, all right, not to preserve her modesty, but in outrage. The *sick* son of a bitch! The pictures that exploded in his mind snapped him rigid with fury. To bruise a woman like that, a man

would have to repeatedly drive his fists into her body using all his strength.

It seemed like an eternity passed before she finished changing the diaper. As he once again enfolded her in the coat with him, he couldn't help but notice how the fussy baby eagerly nuzzled below her ear.

"I think he's hungry," he needlessly pointed out. "Don't you think you'd better try to feed him again?" She glanced over her shoulder. "Would you mind closing your eyes again, please?"

In answer to that question, Rafe loosened his grip on the coat so she would have room to maneuver and let his eyes fall closed. Jaimie suddenly broke off in mid-screch, his eager little mouth making suckling sounds that seemed inordinately loud, considering the racket of the train.

No more than a second passed before he began to screech again. Rafe could tell by Maggie's movements that she was growing agitated. He heard her make a soft sound of distress. The infant quieted for a bit and then resumed crying.

Concern filled him. He didn't consciously make the decision to open his eyes. One moment, he was being a perfect gentleman, and the next he was getting an eye-full. To give himself credit where it was due, he had not a lascivious thought as he gazed over Maggie's thin shoulder at her breast. It was so swollen and bruised that he cringed. As hungry babies will, Jaimie latched eagerly onto her nipple each time it touched his lips, suckling none-too-gently on the tumid, discolored peak. Rafe knew it had to hurt like hell.

Leaning slightly to one side to see Maggie's face, he spied a tear slipping down her cheek. His heart caught at the resolute expression she wore. She clearly meant to feed her baby, no matter how much pain it caused her. He could almost feel every pull of the baby's mouth. A fragile flower? Not by anyone's standards. She was a

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delicately built woman, but hidden under all that fragility was a spine laced with steel.

In the end, her attempts to feed her child were a failure. Her milk refused to come down in either breast. Each wail from the baby cut through Rafe. A man never forgot being a father, he guessed. An almost overwhelming sense of helplessness came over him. When a baby was hungry, you fed it, bottom line.

Rafe estimated they would reach the next stop in about forty minutes. Every second of that time would seem like an eternity. He had to get away from this pair. They were unearthing feelings inside of him that he'd worked too damned hard to bury. He didn't need the hassle—or the heartache.

Jaimie cried only a short time before falling into an exhausted sleep, which Rafe counted a blessing until Maggie broached a concern he hadn't considered.

In a quavering voice, she said, "I think he's already losing his strength."

"How long has he gone without eating?"

"I started having some trouble nursing him late yesterday afternoon. He got a little to eat, I think, but maybe not that much. I was really upset, and—" Her voice trailed away. "Well, you know—things didn't go exactly right. I thought it was because I was so tense. In the book I have, it says nervousness can cause that."

Nervousness could be a cause. But then, so could severe bruising and swelling. After seeing what he had, he figured it was more than likely the latter.

"So he's missed only a few feedings?"

She nodded, looking worried and miserable. "He eats pretty often, though. About every two hours because he's still so small. Do you think he's losing his strength?"

His own babies had never missed a meal unless they were sick, so he was certainly no expert, but it seemed to him it should take longer than this for a kid to grow weak with hunger. On the other hand, though, Jaimie

was tiny, as she said. Newborns didn't have the stores of fat older babies did.

"Nah, " he assured her with more confidence than he felt. "Babies are tough little nuts. "

"Are they?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure they are. We'll reach the next stop soon. He'll be fine for a half hour. There's bound to be a store where you can buy him a bottle and formula. "

She shook her head.

Rafe didn't want to hear this. *Why me, God?*

"I don't have enough money. All I've got is eighteen cents in my pocket. "

He really, really had to get away from her. Why was she telling him her problems? If she was entertaining the notion that he might help her, she had a shock coming. When he hit the next town, he would sweep a few parking lots to buy a bottle, all right. A *booze* bottle.

"Do you?" she asked.

"Do I what?"

"Have any money?" She turned those big brown eyes on him again. "Normally I'd never presume to ask. I'm sure I can find some sort of work in—what was the name of that town again?"

"Squire. "

"Squire. " She darted the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip. "Even if it's a small place, I can find something to do and earn some money. Only it would take hours. Jaimie is hungry now, and he shouldn't wait that long to eat. " She squeezed her eyes closed, as if calling on all her reserves of strength. When she lifted her lashes, she said, "I can't just make him wait and risk him getting sick. "

His throat closed off. *Christ.* Around this girl, he spent half his time oxygen-deprived.

Her mouth started to quiver even as she raised her chin in a futilely prideful way. Oh, God. He knew what she was about to say, and he was tempted to clamp a hand over those sweet lips before she could get it out.

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"I won't lie and say I'll pay you back because we probably won't ever see each other again. " Her eyes went dark with shame, but she didn't lower her gaze. Rafe could see this was the most difficult thing she'd ever done. "But I'll make you a trade if you'll give me the money for a baby bottle and formula. "

"A trade?" Why he posed it as a question, he had no idea. It was blatantly obvious what she meant.

"My baby's hungry, Mr. Kendrick. I'll do anything I have to in order to feed him. " Her white cheeks suddenly pulsed with pink. "Anything. "

Rafe wanted to tell her he had no money and no way of getting his hands on any, but that wasn't entirely true. So instead he just gaped at her, the gold wedding ring he wore on a chain under his shirt burning a hole in his chest.

Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of pink. Then she averted her face, the very picture of humiliation. "I see, " she said, her voice taut.

Only, of course, she didn't see. She was a beautiful young woman, and no unattached male in his right mind could fail to want her.

"Maggie, it's not what you're thinking. "

Keeping her head bent so her hair hid her face, she raised a staying hand. "Don't, " she said thinly.

"Please. "

Rafe tried to imagine how she must feel. It took a giant stretch of imagination. He'd never tried to sell his body and been turned down. He had, of course, been hit up more than a few times, but not by a young woman who had never sunk to such depths and was finding it to be the most humiliating experience of her life.

Though she had a child, there was a sweetness and innocence in her eyes he knew damned well wasn't feigned. He'd have bet every dollar he had in the bank that no man but the father of her baby had ever laid a hand on her.

"Honey, listen. "

She shook her head, her hand still raised to silence him. "Please. Just forget I said it. "

Rafe got a horrible urge to laugh. It wasn't the way she thought, and God help him, he wasn't sure how to set her straight without scaring her half to death. But neither did he want her to continue believing he didn't want her. Thinking that way could wound her in ways that wouldn't heal for years.

"Sweetheart, you're beautiful. So beautiful my eye-teeth ache when I look at you. " She threw him a startled look. "Trust me. If I had a few bucks in my pocket, I'd be one happy man. "

He slipped his arms around her and the baby, knowing even before his voice trailed away how sincerely he meant that. He *did* want to make love to her. The realization stymied him. What the hell was happening to him? He recalled his dream again, and an icy fear slithered through his belly. He couldn't seem to stop himself from caring more about this girl than was smart—or even rational. Was this what Susan had been trying to tell him, that he was about to meet someone very special and—

*No.* He swallowed, hard, and told himself not to be an idiot. He didn't believe in premonitions or fated encounters, and he sure as hell didn't believe he'd had a ghostly visitation from his late wife. It was just a dream. A stupid, whiskey-soaked dream that had meant absolutely nothing.

Marshaling his thoughts, Rafe forced his mind back to the moment. His voice sounded gruff and a little shaky when he said, "Please, Maggie, don't think for a second that I'm not interested in your offer. I'd take you up on it so fast it would make your head spin if I had a cent to give you. But I don't. "

"You don't have any money on you at all?"

"Not a cent. I'm sorry. "

**"Oh. "**

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For some reason, the way she said that made him smile again. "You can always get help from the mission. Most towns have one, and a woman with a baby will get red-carpet treatment. "

She shook her head. "I can't go somewhere like that. "

"Why? If you're feeling embarrassed, don't. Everyone needs help sometimes. "

"It isn't that. I'm just—" She broke off and shook her head again. "There may be people looking for me. "

He tightened his arms, wanting to hug her and the baby close to protect them. Who might be looking for her? *Jesus.* Was it the cops? He burned to ask, but two years of this kind of life had taught him not to ask too many questions. And since he doubted she'd answer anyway, why bother? Even if she was wanted by the cops, he couldn't believe it was for anything serious.

He drew her gently against him. "I'll tell you what. Why don't you get some rest? While you're sleeping, I'll think of some way for you to get help. "

"I can't go around lots of people, " she stressed.

"I understand that. I'll think of something. Trust me. " He smiled slightly. "I'm an old hand at this lifestyle, remember. I know all the ropes. "

To his surprise, she gave in to the slight pressure of his arms, twisting sideways to rest her cheek against his chest, the baby's tiny feet nudging his abdomen. Rafe wanted to think she followed his advice because she was beginning to trust him, but he suspected it was exhaustion getting the best of her.

Within seconds he felt the tension leave her body. He gazed down at her, thinking how sweet she looked with her relaxed mouth pushed slightly off center. He touched a fingertip to her pale cheek, testing the fragile curve of bone under her soft, silken flesh.

When he felt positive she was deeply asleep, he reached inside his shirt and drew out his wedding ring.

The setting of large, fiery diamonds glinted at him in