

MILLS & BOON

Beauty and the Baby

Marie Ferrarella



Vintage Desire

Marie Ferrarella

Beauty and the Baby

Аннотация

Lori O'Neill surprised herself when she kissed her late husband's brother. Maybe it was pregnancy hormones, but this mother-to-be was looking at Carson in a whole new light. Carson had been there for Lori ever since she'd lost her husband, but, as her due date drew near, Lori suddenly wanted more than just a shoulder to lean on. She wanted to confess how special he was to her—and how his presence alone gave her goose bumps. She had one chance left to give her child the perfect father—but was Carson ready to be Lori's husband?

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“Would you like to hold the baby?”

Carson began to answer no, that the joy of being the first to hold this new life belonged to Lori. But one look at the tiny being and he knew he was a goner. He fell hard and instantly in love.

“Yes,” he murmured, and took the infant in his arms.

The baby was so light, she felt like nothing. And like everything. Carson had no idea that it could happen so fast, that love could strike like lightning and fill every part of him with its mysterious glow. But it could and it had.

Something stirred deep within him, struggling to rise to the surface. Self-preservation had him trying to keep it down, push it back to where it could exist without causing complications.

“She’s beautiful,” he told Lori. “But then, I guess that was a given.”

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To single mothers everywhere, struggling to make a difference in their children's lives.

I wish you strength and love.

MARIE FERRARELLA

earned a master's degree in Shakespearean comedy, and, perhaps as a result, her writing is distinguished by humor and natural dialogue. This RITA[®] Award-winning author's goal is to entertain and to make people laugh and feel good. She has written over one hundred books for Silhouette, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide and have been translated into Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, Polish, Japanese and Korean.

You'll enjoy Marie Ferrarella's new miniseries, *The Mom Squad*—four single mothers who come together to experience life's greatest miracle.

The MOM SQUAD

is...

Sherry Campbell—ambitious newswoman who makes headlines when a handsome billionaire arrives to sweep her off her feet...and shepherd her new son into the world!

A Billionaire and a Baby, SE #1528

Joanna Prescott—Nine months after her visit to the sperm bank, her old love rescues her from a burning house—then delivers her baby....

A Bachelor and a Baby, SD #1503

Chris “C.J.” Jones—FBI agent, expectant mother and always on the case. When the baby comes, will her irresistible partner be by her side?

The Baby Mission, IM #1220

Lori O’Neill—A forbidden attraction blows down this pregnant Lamaze teacher’s tough-woman facade and makes her consider the love of a lifetime!

Beauty and the Baby, SR #1668

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Chapter One

“You look tired,” Carson O’Neill said.

Lifting her head, his sister-in-law smiled at him in response. Carson watched the dimples in both cheeks grow deeper. He wasn’t a man who ordinarily noticed dimples. Involved in his work, he noticed very little these days.

But, in almost an unconscious way, he had become aware of a great many things about Lori O’Neill ever since fate and his late brother, Kurt, had sent the woman his way.

Ever since Carson could remember, he’d been a caretaker. It wasn’t something he just decided to do one day, wasn’t even something he admitted wanting to do. It was just something that needed doing, a hard fact of life. Like the way he’d looked after his mother after his father had left. And the way he’d always looked out for his younger brother. Or tried to.

And the way he’d wound up here, the director of St. Augustine’s Teen Center, a place that had too many kids and too little money, but was somehow—thanks to his all but superhuman efforts—still beating the odds and staying open.

Carson picked up a basketball that had whacked him against the back of his calves a second ago and tossed it toward a boy whose head barely came up to his chest. The boy flashed a sudden grin and ran off with his retrieved prize. As always, there was a game in progress.

His responsibilities weren't something he'd sought out. They'd just been there, waiting for him to walk in and take over. On his father's departure, his mother had all but become a basket case, so, at fifteen, Carson had become the family's driving force.

It wasn't easy. Kurt had been a screwup, albeit an incredibly charming one, and he'd loved Kurt, so he had done his best to help him out, to set him straight. Done his best to be there with silent support and not so silent money whenever the occasion had called for it. Which, as time progressed, was often.

Despite all Carson's efforts to set his brother on the right road, Kurt had managed to kill himself in his search for speed. "Death by motorcycle," the newspaper had glibly reported on the last page in the section that dealt with local news.

Kurt's death, a year after his mother's, should have freed him from the role of patriarch, but it hadn't. There was Lori to think of. Somehow, it seemed only natural that he should take Kurt's pregnant wife under his wing.

Not that Lori had asked.

She was an independent, spirited woman, which was what he'd liked about her. But she was also pregnant and, after Kurt's untimely death, faced with a mountain of Kurt's debts.

The old adage, "When it rained, it poured," was never truer than in Lori's case. Less than a month after Kurt's death, the company for which Lori worked as a graphic artist declared bankruptcy, leaving her jobless. Carson found himself stepping in with both feet.

He'd stepped in the same way when he'd heard that the youth center, where he and Kurt had spent their adolescent afternoons, was about to close its doors because there was no one to take over as director and precious little financing.

His ex-wife, Jaclyn, had called him a bleeding heart when he'd told her he was leaving his law firm and taking over the helm at St. Augustine's Teen Center. He had discovered that being a lawyer left him cold and gave him no sense of satisfaction. Very quickly it had become just a means to an end. An end that had pleased Jaclyn a great deal, but not him. He'd needed more. He'd needed meaning.

The abrupt change in his life's direction had left her far from pleased. She had screamed at him, calling him a fool. Calling him a great many other things as well. He hadn't realized that she'd known those kinds of words until she'd hurled them at him.

The last label had been a surprise, though. She'd called him a bleeding heart. It showed how little, after five years of marriage, she really knew about him. He was pragmatic, not emotional. Taking over at the center had been something that needed doing, for so many reasons.

Besides, his heart didn't bleed, it didn't feel anything at all. Especially not after Jaclyn had left, taking their two-year-old daughter with them. His heart only functioned. Just as he did.

Just as Lori did, he thought, looking at her now. Except that she did it with verve. He motioned her to his office just down the narrow hall beyond the gym. The girls, whose game Lori had

been refereeing, watched her for a moment, then went on without her.

He closed the door behind Lori, then indicated the chair in front of his scarred desk, a desk that was a far cry from the expensive one he'd been sitting behind three years ago.

Ordinarily, Lori seemed tireless to him, almost undaunted by anything that life threw her way. The only time he'd ever seen her be anything other than upbeat was at Kurt's funeral.

But even then, she'd seemed more interested in comforting him. Not that he'd allowed that, of course. He was his own person, his own fortress. It was the way it had always been and the way it would always be. He was who he was. A loner. Carson knew he couldn't be any other way even if he wanted to. Which he didn't.

"What?" Lori finally pressed.

She tried to read her brother-in-law's expression and failed. Nothing new there. Carson had always seemed inscrutable. Not like Kurt. She could always tell what Kurt was thinking if she looked into his eyes for more than a moment. Usually, he was trying to hide something.

"I've been watching you," Carson told her. "You seem tired today," he repeated.

Lori shook her head, denying the observation. She prided herself on being able to soldier on, no matter what. These days, however, the weight of her backpack was steadily increasing. Especially since she was carrying it in front of her.

“No, I’m not tired. Just a wee bit overwhelmed by all that energy out there.” She nodded toward the area right outside the closetlike room that served as the youth center’s general office. There were a few small rooms around the perimeter, but the center’s main focus was the gym. It was there that the kids who frequented the center worked out their aggression and their tension.

Then, with a sigh, she slowly lowered herself into the chair in front of his desk, trying not to think about the daunting task of getting up again. She’d face that in a minute or so. Right now, it felt really good to be able to sit down.

Maybe she was tired at that, Lori thought. But she didn’t like the idea that she showed it.

Just beyond the door were the sounds of kids letting off steam, channeling energy into something productive instead of destructive. Kids who, but for Carson’s concentrated efforts, would have no place to go except into trouble.

She looked at her brother-in-law with affection. Carson had given up the promise of a lucrative life so that others could have a shot at having a decent one. Lori knew that these kids, every one of them, could have been Kurt or Carson all those years ago. Her late husband had told her all about his younger years on their second date, giving her details that had chilled her heart. Life had been hard here.

Both brothers had managed to come a long way from these mean streets, although it was easy enough for her to see that

Kurt's soul had been anchored in the quick, the easy, the sleight of hand that arose from living the kinds of lives that were an everyday reality for the kids who came to St. Augustine's Youth Center. In a way, Kurt had never left that wild boy behind. It was that wild boy, she thought, that had eventually killed her husband.

Carson was another matter. Levelheaded, steadfast, Carson had chosen to walk on the straight and narrow safe side. He'd worked hard, put himself through school as he took care of his younger brother and mother. A football scholarship had helped. He'd believed his destiny lay with becoming a lawyer. He'd worked even harder once he'd graduated. A prestigious law firm had offered him a position and in exchange, he gave the firm his all.

Until three years ago. Thirty-eight months to be exact. That was when her brother-in-law had made the most selfless sacrifice she'd ever witnessed. He'd left the firm he'd been with to take on the headaches of the youth center that had been his salvation. But it hadn't been without a price.

Carson had taken on burdens and lost a wife.

Kurt had been against the move. He'd told his older brother that leaving the firm was the dumbest thing a grown man could do. All of his life, he'd struggled to get them both away from this very neighborhood and now he was returning to it. Embracing it at a great personal and financial cost.

It had made no sense to Kurt. But then, Kurt didn't understand what it meant to sacrifice. He'd never been that selfless. That had

always been Carson's department.

And Carson was Carson, steadfast once he made a decision, unmoved by arguments, pleas or taunts, all of which had come from his wife before she'd packed up and left with their two-year-old daughter. Leaving him with divorce papers.

Lori knew losing his little girl had been what had hit Carson the hardest, although you'd never know it by anything that was ever said. But then, ever since she'd met him, Carson had always played everything close to the vest.

It was a wonder his chest wasn't crushed in by the weight, she mused now, looking at him. His desk was piled high with paperwork, which he hated. The man took a lot on himself. Would have taken her on as well if she'd allowed it. Again, that was just his way.

But she wasn't about to become another one of his burdens. She was a person, not a helpless rag doll. After Kurt's death, she'd squared her shoulders and forced herself to push on. To persevere. There were plenty of single mothers out there. She'd just joined the ranks, that was all. She'd taken this job only after Carson proved to her that it hadn't been offered out of charity, but because he really needed someone to help him out. It wasn't the kind of work she was used to, but it and the Lamaze classes she taught helped pay the bills. And they would do until something better came along.

Lori reasoned that as long as she kept good thoughts, eventually something better had to come along.

“You’re also more than a little pregnant,” Carson pointed out. The sun was shining into the room. There were telltale circles beneath her eyes. She wasn’t getting enough sleep, he thought. “Maybe you should take it easier on yourself. Go home, Lori.”

But she shook her head. “Can’t. Rhonda didn’t show up today, remember?”

He frowned. Rhonda Adams was one of the assistants who helped out at the center. Rhonda hadn’t been showing up a lot lately. Something else he had to look into. Trouble was, finding someone to work long hours for little pay wasn’t the easiest thing in the world.

“That’s my concern,” he told Lori, “not yours.”

She hated the way he could turn a phrase and shut her out. She wondered if he did it intentionally, or if he was just oblivious to the effect of his words. “It is while you sign my paychecks.”

“I don’t sign your paychecks, the foundation does,” he corrected. Foundation money and donations were what kept the teen center going, but times had gotten very tight.

Her eyes met his. He wasn’t about to brush her off. “Figure of speech, Counselor.”

“Don’t call me that, I’m not a lawyer anymore.” Maybe he was getting a little too crabby these days. And he wasn’t even sure why. Carson backed off.

She looked at him pointedly. “Then stop sounding like one.”

“I’m serious, Lori. Don’t tire yourself out. You are pregnant, even if you don’t look it.” His eyes swept over her form. Petite,

the pert blue-eyed blonde was small-boned and if you looked quickly, her slightly rounded shape looked to be a trick played by some wayward breeze that had sneaked into the drafty gymnasium and had snuggled in beneath her blouse, billowing it out.

Lori looked down at her stomach. She'd felt pregnant from what she judged was the very first moment of conception. Somehow, she'd known, just known that there was something different that set this time apart from all the other times she and Kurt had made love.

Carson's words to the contrary, she felt huge. "Thanks," she quipped. "But right now, I feel as if I look like I'm smuggling a Thanksgiving turkey out of the building."

His mouth curved ever so slightly. "Looks to me like there's going to be a lot of people going hungry at that Thanksgiving dinner," he commented. He looked at her stomach again, trying to remember. "You're what, seven months along?"

"Eight, but who's counting?" she murmured.

She was, Lori added silently. Counting down every moment between now and her delivery date, fervently wishing that there was more time. More time in which to get ready for this colossal change that was coming into her life.

No one talking to her would have guessed at her true feelings. She was determined to keep up a brave front. She had to because of the Lamaze classes she taught at Blair Memorial Hospital twice a week. The women who attended them all looked to her as

a calming influence, especially the three single moms-to-be with whom she'd bonded. She smiled to herself. If the women she was instructing only knew that her nerves were doing a frenzied dance inside of her every time she thought of the pending arrival, they wouldn't find her influence so calming.

She missed seeing the three women who had made up the group she'd whimsically dubbed The Mom Squad. But C.J., Joanna and Sherry's due dates were now in the past. The three all had beautiful, healthy babies now, and, by an odd turn of events, they also now had men at their sides who loved them. Men who wanted to spend the rest of their lives with them.

All she had were Kurt's pile of debts, which were dwindling thanks to her own tireless efforts, but none too quickly.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Lori upbraided herself. You also have Carson.

She glanced at the man who looked like a sterner, older version of her late husband. She wasn't about to minimize the effect of having him in her life. Having her brother-in-law's support went a long way toward helping her get her world in order.

Not that she leaned on him—well, not so that he really noticed. But just knowing he was around if she needed him meant a great deal to her. Carson had offered her a job helping at the center when her company had left her almost as high and dry as Kurt's death had. And he'd also been instrumental in pulling strings and getting her the job teaching the Lamaze classes at

Blair.

That and the freelance work she found as a graphic designer helped her make ends meet. More importantly, it kept her sane. Kept her grief at bay. Kurt had never been a steady, dependable man, but in her own way, she'd loved him a great deal. Forgiven him a great deal, even his inability to grow up and take on responsibilities. Even the dalliances she'd discovered. It had taken her time, though, to forgive him his death.

She was still working on it.

Kurt had had no business racing like that, no business wanting to shake his fist at death just one more time because it made himself feel more powerful. Not when he had her and a baby on the way.

She sighed quietly. That had been Kurt—thoughtless, but engaging. At times, though, it had worn a little thin.

“Eight?” Carson echoed.

She looked at him, her thoughts dissipating. Carson had forgotten, she thought. But then, there were a lot more important things on his mind than her pregnancy. Like constantly searching for funding.

“You're that far along?”

She tried not to laugh at his incredulous expression. “You make it sound like a terminal disease.”

Broad shoulders rose and fell in a vague fashion. “I guess I just didn't realize...” An idea came to him suddenly. “I can have you placed on disability—” He didn't know where he'd find the

money, but something could be arranged.

Lori knew what he was trying to do. Contrary to her ex-sister-in-law's beliefs, Carson's heart was in the right place, but in her book, what he was proposing was nothing short of charity.

"I'm not disabled," she countered.

He heard the stubborn tone in her voice. Admirable though her independence was, there were times when his sister-in-law could be a mule. Like now. "Yeah, I know, but technically maternity leave doesn't start until after you give birth."

It was her turn to shrug. "So, I'll stick around until I give birth."

"You should be home, Lori, taking care of yourself."

Carson didn't see what the problem was, or why she had him fighting a war on two fronts, one to get her a paid leave and one to get her to actually leave. When Jaclyn had been pregnant, she'd insisted on having a woman come in and do all the chores that she didn't normally do anyway. After Sandy was born, Hannah had stayed on to care for the house and the baby.

Jaclyn had always maintained that she was too delicate to put up with the drudgery of routine. He'd indulged her because he'd loved her and because she was his wife, his responsibility.

And because he'd been crazy about their child.

In hindsight, Hannah had taken care of Sandy better than Jaclyn ever could. Carson didn't mind paying for that. There was nothing too good for Sandy.

"I am taking care of myself," Lori insisted. She was accustomed to looking after herself. She'd been on her own since

she was twenty. Even after she'd met Kurt, she'd been the one to take care of him, not the other way around. "If I stayed at home with my feet up, I'd go crazy inside of a week. Three days, probably." She smiled at Carson, appreciating his concern but determined not to let him boss her around. "Haven't you heard, Counselor? Work is therapeutic. Speaking of which, I'd better be getting back. There's a basketball game I'm supposed to be refereeing."

Bracing herself, she placed a hand on either wooden armrest and pushed herself up. The movement was a little too sudden, a little too fast. Lori's head started to spin.

The walls darkened. The small room began to close in on her. A tiny pinprick of panic scratched her skin.

Lori struggled against the encroaching darkness, struggled to push the walls back out again. The effort was futile. The walls turned all black as they raced toward her with a frightening speed.

Perspiration beaded along her forehead.

And then there was nothing.

The next thing Lori knew, she felt herself being jerked up. Someone's arms were closing around her. There was heat everywhere, swirling about her.

She realized her eyes were shut.

With a mighty effort, she pushed them open again and found herself looking up into Carson's dark blue, solemn eyes. They were darker than Kurt's eyes had been. And far more serious.

Lori tried to smile. Even that took effort. He was holding her.

Holding her very close. Was that why it felt so hot all of a sudden?

Because he looked so concerned, she forced herself to sound light. “Didn’t your mother ever tell you that if you scowl so hard, your face’ll freeze that way?”

“My mother told me very little,” he told her, his voice monotone.

She’d given him one hell of a scare, fainting like that. He had no idea what to think, what to do, other than to feel utterly helpless. Somebody needed to hand out instruction booklets when it came to women. Maybe even an entire desk encyclopedia.

Carson carried her over to the sagging, rust-colored leather sofa and placed her down as gently as he could manage.

His brow furrowed as he looked at her. “You want me to call a doctor?”

She caught hold of Carson’s hand in case he had any ideas about acting on his question. “No, I want you to stop looking as if I’m about to explode any second.”

His eyes were drawn to the small bump in her abdomen that represented his future niece or nephew. It was easy to forget Lori was pregnant at times. She looked so small. How could there be another human being inside of her?

Still, eight months was eight months. “Well, aren’t you?”

She placed her other hand protectively over her abdomen. She could feel her baby moving. It always created a feeling of awe within her. Three months of kicking and shifting and she still

hadn't gotten used to the sensation.

"No," she assured him, using the same tranquil, patient voice she used in the Lamaze classes, "not at the moment. Pregnant women faint, Carson." She used his hand to draw herself up into a sitting position. And then slowly to her feet. He hovered protectively around her. "It's one of the few pleasures left to them." Her smile was meant to put him at ease. "Don't worry about it."

His arm was around her, just in case her knees failed again. "Why do you have to be so damn stubborn?"

She flashed a grin at him. "Maybe that's what keeps me going."

He knew her well enough to know there was no winning. "At least let me drive you home."

Lori shook her head. "I brought my car."

"So?" Carson didn't see the problem. "I'll drive that."

She cocked her head, looking at him. The man was a dear. "Then how will you get back?"

He bit back an oath. "Do you have to overthink everything?"

"Can't help it." Her eyes sparkled as she smiled more broadly at him. "Must be the company I keep." She took a deep cleansing breath, then released it slowly, just as she'd demonstrated countless times in class. "There, all better. Really." But as she tried to walk away, she found that he was still holding her. Still unwilling to allow her to leave on her own power.

She was standing less than an inch away from him. Feeling

things she didn't think that women in her condition were capable of feeling. At least not about men who weren't responsible for getting them into this condition in the first place.

Chapter Two

L ori looked down at her brother-in-law's hands. Strong, capable, and right now they were on either side of her arms, anchoring her in place. She raised her eyes to meet his.

“Um, Carson.”

“What?” Impatience laced with annoyance framed the single word.

She gave a slight tug. “I can't go anywhere if you're still holding on to me.”

By all rights, he knew he should drop his hands to his sides. She was a grown woman, more than capable of making her own decisions. He'd always believed in live and let live. At least on paper. But there were times when he felt she was being unnecessarily stubborn on principle.

“Maybe that's the idea,” he told her.

“Eventually, one of us is going to have to go to the bathroom,” she deadpanned. She glanced at her belly before looking up at him again. “Because of my condition, my guess is that it'll probably be me.” A glimmer of a smile began to play on her lips. “I'd rather not have to ask for permission.”

Carson felt a trace of embarrassment and wasn't sure if it was for her or himself. In either case, Carson dropped his hands in exasperation. But not before issuing a warning.

“First sign of you fading, I'm taking you home, no matter what

you say.” His eyes did almost as good a job as his hands at pinning her to the spot. “I’ll be watching you.”

“I never doubted it for a moment.” The smile on her lips widened, reaching up to her eyes. He tried not to notice and failed miserably. There was something about Lori’s eyes that always got to him. They had been the first thing he’d noticed about her when they’d met. The killer figure had been the second.

“What?” he finally bit off.

Surly on the outside, mushy on the inside, she thought fondly. “I just never envisioned my guardian angel would look like a football player, that’s all.”

Carson laughed shortly, his expression never changing. He’d been accused of being a lot of things in his time, but never an angel. Not even by his mother. Certainly not by his ex-wife.

“Got a hell of a long way to go before I’m anyone’s guardian angel.”

There was something in his eyes for a fleeting moment. Sadness? It was gone the next, but it succeeded in moving her. Carson didn’t like being touched. Because she was a toucher and firmly believed in the benefits of human contact, she patted his cheek anyway. The man had been there for her, awkward, but ready to help right from the start. She wasn’t about to forget that.

“Not nearly as far as you think, Carson.” She turned on her heel with more ease than he thought possible for a woman in her condition. “Gotta get back to work.”

But just as she stepped out the door, a dark-haired young

woman swung open the door to the rear entrance and came rushing down the hall. In her haste, she narrowly avoided a collision with Lori.

Eyes the color of milk chocolate widened as the woman came to an abrupt halt less than an inch shy of impact. She sucked in her breath.

“Wow, sorry about that.” She patted Lori’s stomach. “Could have had an early delivery, huh?”

Carson’s arm had closed protectively around Lori, pulling her back just in time. He glared at the other woman. Good help was hard to find. It was even harder to get it to come in on time. “There wouldn’t have been any danger of that if you’d come in at ten the way you were supposed to, Rhonda.”

The woman, barely three years out of her own teens and in Carson’s opinion not yet fully entrenched in the adult world, gave him a high-wattage, apologetic grin. “Sorry, boss. Chuck decided to have a temper tantrum this morning.”

Carson’s frown deepened. His aide’s current flame reminded him a lot of Kurt. “Either tell your boyfriend to grow up, or get another boyfriend.”

His words rolled off her back like an inconsequential Southern California summer rain.

“Sorry,” she repeated. “You don’t pay me enough for that.”

From what he knew, Rhonda was allowing her boyfriend to crash on her sofa. Chuck was currently “in between jobs,” a place the man had been residing in from the time Carson had hired

Rhonda. “Won’t have to if the next boyfriend could hang onto a job.”

The familiar words made him stop abruptly. He slanted a look at Lori, wondering if his exchange with Rhonda had scraped over any old wounds. He’d lectured Kurt about hanging on to a job more times than he could remember, especially after he’d married Lori. Kurt’s response had always been to laugh off his words, as if he thought his older brother was joking. Kurt had maintained that he was still looking for his niche. As far as Carson knew, Kurt never found it.

“So he could be an old grump like you, boss man? Don’t think so.” Rhonda winked broadly at Carson, shoving her hands into the back pockets of her worn jeans. “I’d love to stand around and talk like this, but some of us have work to do.” She waved to one of the young teens and hurried across the gym.

Carson turned his attention back to Lori. “There goes your excuse.”

Lori looked at him. “You’ve lost me.”

Interesting choice of words, he thought. And very appropriate.

“Just what I’m trying to do. At least for the rest of the afternoon. Rhonda can handle the kids.” He nodded in the direction of the front entrance. “Go home and take a nap before class tonight.”

It surprised her that he remembered her schedule, but then, she supposed it shouldn’t. Carson liked to keep tabs on everything. It felt confining to her at times, but he never realized

it. She knew he meant no harm.

She pressed her lips together, debating. It wouldn't hurt to grab a few minutes of her own, she thought. She'd been up half the night working on a new Web design project that had come in. When opportunity knocked, she couldn't afford not to be home. "You're not going to be satisfied until I go, are you?"

"Nope."

"Okay, you win." She sighed, surrendering. "Always like to keep the boss happy."

Carson crossed his arms before his rock-solid chest. "Right, and I'm the bluebird of happiness."

Her eyes swept over him. He was still every inch the football player who'd made the winning touch-down in the last game he ever played. "I wouldn't perch on any branches if I were you."

He grumbled something not entirely under his breath. Laughing, Lori walked away, heading for the lockers on the other end of the first floor. She was very conscious of his watching her and tried very hard not to move from side to side the way she felt inclined to these days. Or to place a hand to the small of her back in order to ease the ache there. Pregnant women did that and Carson seemed to equate pregnancy with weakness. The more she fit his stereotype, the more determined he would be to try to convince her to stay home.

She wasn't the stay-at-home type.

Lori made her way to the shadowy row of lockers where the kids stashed their backpacks, books and various paraphernalia

while they used the facilities. Once out of eye range, she pressed her hand to the small of her back and massaged for a moment. For a peanut, this baby was giving her some backache.

After stretching, she went to her locker. Wanting to seem more like one of the teens, Lori had taken a locker to store her own belongings there. Usually, she only had her purse.

She paused in front of the upper locker, trying to remember her combination. It was nestled in overcrowded memory banks that retained every number that had any bearing on her life. She seemed to retain all manner of numbers, not just her own social security number, but her late husband's as well. It was in there with her license plate and the phone numbers and birthdays of several dozen people who currently figured prominently in her life.

She smiled as the combination came to her. Turning the dial on the old lock three revolutions to the left, a muffled sound caught her attention. Lori stopped and listened.

The sound came again.

It was a sob, she was sure of it. The kind that was muted by hands being pressed helplessly over a mouth too distressed to seal away the noise.

Concerned, curious, Lori set the lock back against the metal door and moved around to the other side of the bank of battered lockers.

Huddled in the corner, her long tanned legs pulled in tightly against her chest, was one of the girls she'd missed seeing today.

The young girl sounded as if her heart was breaking. Boy trouble?
“Angela?”

The girl only pulled herself in tighter. Someone else might have felt as if they were intruding and left. Lori’s mind had never worked that way. Anyone in pain needed to be soothed.

She took a few steps toward the girl. “Angela, what’s wrong?”
“Nothin’.” The girl jerked her head up, wiping away the tears from her cheeks with the heel of her hand. She tossed her head defiantly, looking away. Her silence told Lori that this was none of her business.

Lori chose not to hear.

For her, working at the center was a complete departure from life as she had known it. Here the word “deprived” didn’t mean not having the latest video game as soon as it came out. “Doing without” had serious connotations here that involved ill-fitting hand-me-down clothing and hunger pangs that had nothing to do with dieting. Here, life was painted in bleaker colors.

But then, that was what the center was for, painting rainbows over the shades of gray.

“Sorry, but I think it’s something.” Angela kept her face averted. “The tears were a dead giveaway.” Still nothing. “You know, for a pregnant woman, I can be very patient.” Lori planted herself in front of the teenager. “I’m not going away until you level with me and tell me why you’re sitting here by yourself, watering your knees.”

Normally, her banter could evoke a smile out of the girl. But

not today.

This was worse than she thought. With effort, Lori lowered herself to the girl's level. Her voice lost its teasing banter. "C'mon, Angela. Talk to me. Maybe I can help."

Angela shook her head. Fresh tears formed in the corners of her eyes. "Nobody can help me." She sighed with a hopelessness that was far too old for her to be feeling. "Except maybe a doctor."

In that moment, Lori understood. She knew what had reduced the fifteen-year-old to this kind of despair and tears.

Lori placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. She was so thin, so small. And living a nightmare shared by so many.

"Are you in trouble, Angela?"

It was an old-fashioned term, Lori knew, but in its own way as appropriate today as it had been when it was first coined. Because a pregnant girl just barely in high school was most assuredly in trouble.

The sigh was bottomless. "Yeah, I'll say." She sniffled. Lori dug into her pocket and pulled out a tissue, offering it to her. Angela took it and dried the fresh tears. Her voice quavered as she spoke. "A hell of a lot of trouble."

There were no indications that the girl was pregnant, but then, she hadn't looked it herself until just recently, Lori thought. "How far along are you?"

"I don't know." Angela shrugged restlessly. She looked down at the tissue. It was shredding. "It's been over two months, I

think.”

“You need to see a doctor.”

Lori could see the beginning of a new thought entering the girl’s eyes. “Yeah, somebody who can make this go away.”

Lori shook her head. She didn’t want Angela thinking that she was cavalierly suggesting she have an abortion. Decisions like that couldn’t be made quickly.

“No. Somebody who can tell you what’s going on with your body.” She took the girl’s hands into her own, forming a bond. “You might not be pregnant, it might be something else.” Although, Lori thought, other possibilities could be equally as frightening to a fifteen-year-old as having a baby.

Thin, dark brown brows furrowed in confusion as Angela looked at her. “Like what?”

She didn’t know enough about medicine to hypothesize. “That’s what you need to find out. Do you have a doctor?”

Again the thin shoulders rose and fell, half vague, half defiant. “There’s this doctor on Figueroa Street. I hear she’s pretty decent.”

Lori thought of her own doctor, a woman she’d been going to and trusted since she’d gotten out of college. Dr. Sheila Pollack had become more like a friend than just a physician. Angela needed someone like that right now, a professional who could clear up the mysteries for her and keep her healthy. Someone who could make her feel at ease rather than afraid.

“All right, go to her.”

Angela frowned. “Word on the street is she don’t do no abortions.”

The girl’s mind was stuck in a groove that might not be the answer she needed, or would even want a few months down the line. “Don’t do anything hasty,” Lori counseled. “If you’re pregnant, talk to your mother.”

Angela looked at her as if she’d just suggested she cover herself with honey and walk into cave full of bears. “Yeah, right and have her kill me? No thanks.” There was disdain in the teen’s voice, as if she’d just lost all credibility in the young girl’s eyes.

When she moved to put her arm around the girl’s shoulders, Angela jerked away. Lori wasn’t put off. She tried again, more firmly this time. Angela needed to get a few barriers down. “She might surprise you.”

Angela blew out a mocking breath. “Only surprises my mother gives me are the boyfriends she brings home.” She shivered.

Had one of them put the moves on Angela? It wouldn’t have been the first time in history something like that had happened. Lori tread carefully, determined to do the right thing and not fail this girl she hadn’t known six months ago.

“If you want, I can talk to your mother for you.”

Angela buried her face in her hands. Lori sat beside her on the floor, stroking her hair. “What I want is not to be pregnant.”

“First find out if you are pregnant.”

Angela slowly raised her head and looked at her. “And then?”

“And then—” With effort, Lori raised herself to her feet, “—

we'll go from there. One step at a time. When I see you tomorrow, Angela, I want you to tell me you have an appointment with the doctor."

The girl nodded, scrambled up to her feet and wiped away the last of the telltale streaks from her face. She looked at her for a long moment. And then, slowly, just the barest of smiles emerged. "You know, you're pretty pushy for a pregnant woman."

"You're not the first one to tell me that." Lori slipped her arm around the girl's shoulder and gave her a quick hug.

She couldn't get Angela's face out of her mind. All through her instructions at the Lamaze class, Lori kept visualizing Angela in her mind's eye. She could almost see her here at Blair, taking classes to prepare for the monumental change that lay ahead of her.

The classes weren't enough, Lori thought. Not for her and certainly not for a fifteen-year-old.

The classes Lori gave with such authority taught woman how to give birth, but not what to do after that. Not really, not if she was being honest with herself. There was more to being a parent than knowing how to give a sponge bath to a newborn and that you should support their heads above all else. So much more.

Lori walked down the long, brightly lit corridor of the first floor of one of Blair Memorial's annex buildings. She'd waited until the last couple had left before locking up. The building felt lonely to her despite the bright lights. Seeing Angela huddled in

a corner like that today had brought out all her own insecurities and fears. She had no mother to cower before, but there wasn't a mother to turn to for guidance, either.

She missed her mother, Lori thought not for the first time as she unlocked the door of her 1995 Honda Civic. Missed her something awful. For once, she lowered her defenses and allowed the sadness to come.

With a sigh, she started up her car. Leukemia had robbed her of her mother more than a dozen years ago. A heart attack had claimed her father just as she was in the middle of college. By twenty, she was all alone and struggling to make the best of it. And then Kurt had entered her life and she felt as if the sun had finally come out in her world.

Now here she was, eight years later, struggling all over again. The upbeat, feisty manner that the rest of the world saw was not always a hundred percent authentic. There were times which she really ached to have someone in her corner.

She had someone in her corner, Lori reminded herself as she turned down the hospital's winding path. She had Carson.

Leaving the hospital grounds, she fleetingly debated stopping by the old-fashioned Ice Cream Parlor where she and the other three single mothers had so often gone after classes, eager to temporarily drown their problems in creamy confections sinfully overloaded with whipped cream and empty, sumptuous calories.

It wasn't nearly as much fun alone.

Lori drove by the establishment. It was still open and doing

a brisk business. The tables beside the bay windows were all filled. She wavered only for a moment before she pressed down on the gas pedal. The Ice Cream Parlor became a reflection in her rearview mirror.

She couldn't help wondering what the other women were doing tonight and if they still found motherhood as exciting as they had in the beginning.

Would she? Or was her only certainty these days the fact that she found the prospect of giving birth and motherhood scary as hell?

She came to a stop at a red light. Her hands felt slippery on the steering wheel.

Opening night jitters, she told herself.

Her due date was breathing down her neck and although part of her felt as if she had been pregnant since the beginning of time, another part of her did not want to race to the finish line, did not want the awesome weight of being responsible for the welfare of someone else other than herself.

"I know what you're going through, Angela," she whispered into the darkness as she eased onto the gas pedal again.

Right now, Angela probably felt isolated and alone. Maybe if she gave the girl a call, to see how she was doing and if she'd called to make an appointment with the doctor, Angela wouldn't feel so alone.

The next moment, the thought was shot down in flames. She didn't have Angela's number. On top of that, she wasn't even

sure where the girl lived or what her mother's name was, so surfing through the Internet's numerous helpful sites wouldn't be productive.

The number, she realized, was probably on Carson's computer.

Lori made a U-turn at the end of the next block and pointed her vehicle back toward the center.

By car, St. Augustine's Teen Center was only fifteen minutes away from Bedford and home, but it might as well have resided in a completely different world. Here, the streets were narrow rather than wide, and the neighborhoods had not grown old gracefully. The windows of the buildings seemed to be staring out hopelessly at cars as they drove by. The street lights cast shadows rather than illumination. It made Lori sad just to be here.

This was the kind of neighborhood Kurt and Carson had grown up in, she thought. The kind they had both tried to leave behind.

Except that Carson had come back. By choice.

Lori saw St. Augustine's Teen Center up ahead. Lights came from the rear of the building where Carson kept his office. She glanced at her watch. It was past eight.

What was Carson still doing here?

Chapter Three

The parking lot was deserted, except for Carson's beat-up pickup truck. His other car, a sedan, was housed in his garage at home. Right beside the classic Buick Skylark he had been lovingly restoring for the past three years. Lori had a hunch that working on the car was what kept him sane.

Everyone needed something, she mused.

Parking beside the truck, Lori got out and crossed to the rear entrance. Curiosity piqued, she let herself into the building and walked down the short hallway to the back office. Light was pooling out into the room onto the floor outside, beckoning to her.

For a moment, she stood in the doorway, watching him, trying to be impartial. Carson was really a very good-looking man, she thought. Handsomer, actually, than Kurt had been. There was a maturity about him, a steadfastness that marked his features. It was a plateau that Kurt hadn't reached yet.

What Carson needed, she decided, was a life. A life that went beyond these trouble-filled walls. Contrast was always a good thing.

Right now, he looked like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. A weight he guarded jealously. Carson O'Neill wasn't a man who shared responsibility or had ever learned how to delegate. He thought he had to do it all in order for it to be

done right.

Carson glanced up. He'd thought he felt someone looking at him, but he hadn't expected it to be Lori. If he was surprised to see her standing there, he made sure he didn't show it. He let the papers he was shuffling through sit quietly on the desk.

"Can't seem to get rid of you, can I?" And then he realized how late it was. How did she get in after hours? It was late. "I thought I locked up."

"You did. I have keys, remember?" She held them up and jingled the set for his benefit before slipping them back into her purse.

He laughed shortly. "That'll teach me to hand out keys indiscriminately."

"You really are in a mood tonight, aren't you?" She noted that he wasn't smiling and there was an edge to his words.

Carson laced his fingers together as he leaned back in his chair and rocked, looking at the stack of bills that never seemed to go away, never seemed to get smaller. It felt as if he had come full circle in his life, except that this time, he was hunting for funds at work instead of in his private life.

"Looking for money that isn't there always does that to me."

She crossed to his desk and picked up the last paper in his inbox. It was from the electric company. The one beneath it was for the phones. Both were past due. She had a feeling they weren't the only ones.

Dropping the papers, Lori raised her eyes to his. "Trouble

keeping the wolf away from the door?”

He shook his head. Times were tight. People picked and chose their charities carefully. St. Augustine's had no name and wasn't at the top of anyone's list. If it closed its doors, no one would notice. No one except the kids who needed it most.

Carson sighed. “It's beyond trouble. More like a major disaster.” He glanced at the figures on the computer monitor again. They didn't get any better no matter how many times he looked at them. “I'm trying to meet 2003 prices with a 1950s budget.”

Her heart went out to him. He was one of the good guys no matter what kind of face he tried to present to the world. But she was a firm believer in it always being darkest before the dawn. Somehow, he'd find the money to make it through one more month. And then another, and another. He had before.

Lori smiled at him. “I think this is the part where Mickey Rooney jumps up on a table and shouts, ‘Hey kids, let's save the old place by putting on a show.’”

The funny thing was, Carson understood what she was talking about. She'd made him watch one of those old movies once. It was while Kurt was still alive. His brother was out of town on some get-rich-quick venture and he'd come down with the flu. This was right after he'd taken over at the center and Jaclyn had walked out on him. Lori had come by with chicken soup she'd made from scratch and a sack of videotapes to entertain him despite his protests to the contrary. It was around then that he'd

begun to seriously envy his brother.

But he scowled now. He needed a miracle, not an old movie grounded in fantasy. “People really watched films like that in the old days?”

She nodded. “Ate them up.”

He pushed himself away from the desk, wishing he could push himself away from the bills as easily. “Well, there’s no one to put on a show here.”

Lori had felt tired until she’d walked in. Now, one thought was forming into one hell of an idea. “No, but there could be a fundraiser.”

“What?” She was babbling, he thought. Fund-raisers were for fashionable causes backed by wealthy foundations and people blessed with too much money and too much time on their hands.

Lori’s mind was racing. There was Sherry’s fiancé, not to mention the man who had returned into Joanna’s life. Both were well-connected billionaires in their own right. It could work.

Her grin was almost blinding. It matched the sparkle in her eyes as she turned them on him. He had trouble keeping his mind on the situation.

“I know a few people who know a few people who have more money than God.” Maybe it was time she got together with the ladies of the Mom Squad again, Lori thought. She’d been the one who had baptized the group, the one who had been instrumental in bringing them all together for mutual support in the first place. Maybe it was time to spread some of that support around. “From

what I hear, they're always up for worthy causes.”

Even so, that did him no good. “And probably get hit up by them every other minute of their lives.”

She looked at him fondly. No one would ever accuse Carson of being a rampaging optimist. “Which is why having the inside track is a good thing.”

He looked at her skeptically. “And you have the inside track.”

He didn't believe her. What else was new? She had a feeling that if he ever traced his family tree, he would find that his lineage went back to the original Doubting Thomas.

“Anymore ‘inside,’ she told him, “and it might have to be surgically removed.”

“What the hell do they put in those prenatal vitamins of yours?” She was dreaming, pure and simple. And wasting his time with pipe dreams. Miracles didn't happen to people like him.

She'd made up her mind about this and she wasn't about to allow him to rain on her parade. “Energy.”

He laughed, shaking his head. Watching her as she moved about his broom closet of an office. “Like you need some.”

Her eyes laughed at him. The man was never satisfied. She'd be satisfied just removing the furrow from between his brows. “This afternoon you were complaining I looked tired.” She grinned. “There is just no pleasing you, is there?”

She had a way of lighting up a room, he thought, even when he wanted nothing else than to stay in the dark. “You don't have

to please me, Lori—”

Lori came around to his side of the desk and then sat down on top of it. She looked down on Carson, her eyes teasing him. “No, but I’d like to try. It’s a dirty job but someone has to do it.”

“Why?”

His eyes looked so serious. Her grin softened into a smile. “Because you deserve to be happy.”

He lifted his shoulders, shrugging carelessly. “Not according to my ex-wife.”

“What does she know?” Lori scoffed. She’d never really liked Jaclyn. The woman had turned out to be a self-serving gold digger, pushing Carson to get further along in his career not for his benefit, but for hers. “If she knew anything, she wouldn’t be your ex-wife, she’d still be your wife.”

The assertion embarrassed him. He didn’t know how to handle compliments. He never had. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

She’d almost forgotten. “I came to see if I could find Angela’s phone number.”

More than a hundred and seventy kids came to the center during the week. He was drawing a blank. “Angela?”

“The tall, thin girl who’s so good at basketball. Brunette, dark brown eyes. Laughs like a blue jay,” she prompted.

The last struck a chord. “Oh, right.” And then he looked at her. He couldn’t think of a more unlikely coupling. “Why do you want her number?”

She debated just how much she should tell him. “I want to see

how she's doing.”

“Why? Can't find anyone your own age to play with?” Carson studied her face in the dim light. “You're serious.”

“Yes.”

He couldn't read her expression any more than he could read Japanese. “Why would you want to see how she's doing?” Instincts told him not to drop the matter. “Something wrong?”

Lori didn't want to break a confidence. “It could be.”

The expression on Carson's face told her she'd lost all chance of leaving the building with the phone number without giving him some sort of an explanation. She hadn't promised Angela not to tell anyone, but it had been implied. Still, Carson had a good heart, despite his tough, blustery manner and he'd been running this center for a while now. He had a right to know what was going on. Besides, he might be able to offer some insight into how to handle the situation.

Lori bit her lower lip. “She thinks she might be pregnant.”

The news stunned him. He stared at Lori blankly, wondering if he'd heard right. “She's only, what, thirteen?”

“Fifteen,” Lori corrected, although she could see how he'd make the mistake. Angela had a baby face that made her look younger than she was.

Thirteen, fifteen, there hardly seemed a difference. “A baby.”

She knew how Carson felt. But it was a sad fact of life. “Babies have been having babies for a long time now.”

Carson scrubbed his hand over his face. Damn it, the center

was supposed to prevent this kind of thing. The kids were supposed to use up their energy on sports, not sex. “How do you figure into this?”

“I found her crying in the back of the locker area today and got her to talk to me.”

Lori had that kind of knack, he thought, the kind that made people open up to her, even hard cases. At times even he had trouble keeping his own counsel around her. “Does her mother know?”

She shook her head. “I think Angela’s afraid of her mother.”

“I’d be afraid of my mother if I was pregnant at fifteen.”

She laughed. “If you were pregnant at fifteen, it would have made all the scientific journals.” Her grin broadened and she was relieved to be able to have something to laugh at. “If you were pregnant at any age, it would have made the scientific journals.”

Carson gave her a dry look. “Very funny.” Maybe it would do Angela some good to talk to Lori, he reasoned. Girls in trouble tended to do drastic things. Minimizing his current program, Carson typed in something on his keyboard and brought up a directory. He scrolled down the screen. “Here it is, Angela Coleman.” Taking an index card, he jotted down the phone number for Lori, then handed it to her.

She looked at the single line, then held the card out to him. “How about the address?”

“Oh no, I don’t want you driving there in your condition.” When she turned to look at the screen, he shut the program.

She frowned at his screensaver. “The DMV have a ban on pregnant women?”

She was going to fight him on this, he just knew it. The woman didn’t have the sense of a flea. “Lori, it’s not the safest neighborhood.” He shouldn’t have to tell her that.

“Angela lives there.”

There were times he just wanted to take Lori by the shoulders and shake her. Because there were times that her Pollyanna attitude could put her in serious jeopardy. It was bad enough that she traveled here to work. He didn’t want her taking unnecessary chances by pressing her luck. “There’s nothing I can do about that. There is something I can do about you, though.”

She knew he meant well, but good intentions still didn’t give him the right to order her around. “Slavery went out a hundred and thirty-seven years ago, Carson. You don’t own me.”

He rose from his chair and looked down at her. “No, but I’m bigger.”

Lori wiggled off the desk. And met him toe to toe, raising her chin defiantly. “Plan to stuff me into a box?”

Damn but her chin did present a tempting target. So did her lips. The thought shook him and he blocked it almost immediately. But not soon enough to erase it or its effect on him.

“If I have to.”

And then her expression softened. He couldn’t tell if she’d been putting him on or not. Or was doing so now. “In your own twisted little way, you care about me, don’t you?”

“Don’t overanalyze everything.” He didn’t want this going any further. “You’re carrying around my niece or nephew in there, that gives me the right to tell you not to be an idiot.”

“You do have a way with words.” Lori looked at him for a long moment. Others might buy into his gruff routine, but she didn’t. She’d seen something else in his eyes. A man who didn’t know how to connect. Even though he sorely needed to. “You miss her a lot, don’t you?”

Now what the hell was she talking about? It was getting late and he was in no mood for this. “Who?” he snapped.

“Sandy.”

The mention of his now five-year-old daughter took some of the fire out of him. He let his guard down an inch. There was no shame in admitting his feelings about the little girl. “Don’t get to see her nearly enough.”

That was because he spent nearly every waking minute here, she thought. “Why don’t you take tomorrow off? I’ll cover for you. Go see your daughter.”

It wasn’t nearly that simple. “I’ve got limited visitation rights,” he ground out.

She’d forgotten about that. He’d told her about it during the only time she had ever seen him intoxicated. The terms of the divorce had just been worked out. Jaclyn in her wrath had hit him where she knew it would hurt the most. She’d used their daughter as a tool to get back at him.

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