



THE BABY WORE A BADGE

MARIE
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Cherish

Marie Ferrarella

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Аннотация

Decorated police officer Jake Castro is hoping Thunder Canyon will prove the perfect place to raise his baby daughter... But when serious sparks start to fly between Jake and small-town Cinderella Calista Clifton, he's suddenly not sure he's ready to settle down. Can he make Calista's dreams come true – and transform the babysitter into a bride?

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Jake laughed shortly. “I’m not even in a relationship. How am I supposed to find someone to marry me?”

Calista looked from the baby to him and, without hesitation, said, “You could ask me.”

Jake stared at her, stunned. The woman his daughter took to so readily couldn't possibly have meant what he thought she'd just said.

“Ask you what?” he asked her, enunciating each word slowly. “Ask me to marry you. Because I would.”

Dear Reader,

This is my first visit to Thunder Canyon, Montana. (Love that name. Can't you just see the cowboys heading them off at the pass?) A town, I've been told, that has been around for a while.

This is the place that Jake Castro turns to when the world as he knows it crumbles on him. A New Orleans cop who suddenly finds himself a single dad to an infant when his former partner, Maggie O'Shea, is killed in the line of duty, he comes to Thunder Canyon and his family for the emotional support—and help with diapers—he needs. The latter is supplied, along with humor and understanding, by Calista Clifton, his sister Erin's friend. A recent college graduate, Calista has her eye on a career in politics and to that end is already an intern working in the mayor's office. Coming from a family of eight, Calista is an old hand at knowing exactly what babies need. She also, as the story progresses, intuitively knows just what emotionally shell-shocked Jake needs. A little TLC. Neither one of them expected to find love at this point in their lives, but that was the bonus that life in Thunder Canyon provided.

As always, I thank you for taking the time to read my book and from the bottom of my heart, I wish you someone to love

who loves you back.

Love,

Marie Ferrarella

About the Author

MARIE FERRARELLA, a *USA TODAY* bestselling and RITA[®] Award-winning author, has written more than two hundred books for Mills & Boon[®], some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

The Baby Wore a Badge Marie Ferrarella



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To
Marcia Book Adirim
without whose fertile
imagination
I wouldn't have been able to write
this book.
Thank you.

Chapter One

He was burning the candle at both ends.

More than that, both ends were closing in on him. Fast.

New Orleans police officer Jake Castro dragged his hand through his unruly light blond hair as if that could somehow help him drag his mind into some sort of optimal focus instead of the dazed fog it had been in for the last few weeks, ever since his life had taken this dramatic turn that had completely changed his life.

With a deep sigh that came from the bottom of his toes, he glanced at the clock on his nightstand.

Five minutes.

That was all he'd had. Five minutes.

Five minutes of sleep before Marlie had begun to cry loud enough to wake the dead. Or, at the very least, him.

Getting up, still more than half-asleep, he stumbled over to the newly placed crib at the other end of his heretofore bachelor bedroom. Bleary-eyed, he stared down at the small occupant.

"I'll buy you a car if you let me sleep just twenty-five more minutes." His efforts at bargaining fell on completely unreceptive ears. If anything, Marlie cried even louder.

So much for bribery.

With another, now-resigned sigh, Jake reached into the crib and picked up his seven-month-old daughter.

For the moment, Marlie began to quiet down. Ordinarily, he

might take some pride in that, that the baby was bonding with him, but he was way too worn out to take comfort in even that.

He was running on empty and had been for a number of days now.

“I can’t keep doing this, you know,” he said as he made his way over to the rocking chair, also newly acquired, as was his status as a single dad.

Marlie responded best to the swaying motion of being walked around, but Jake was far too wiped out to pace the floor. He’d pulled a long, draining shift today and had come home later than usual, a fact that had made the woman he paid to watch Marlie—Mrs. Rutherford—none too happy.

At this insane juggling act for less than three weeks and he was discovering, much to his chagrin, that he couldn’t be Officer Castro, super-cop by day and then turn into super-dad at night. Somewhere in that time span he needed to get some sleep—desperately—before he had a complete meltdown.

“It’s my own fault,” he acknowledged, addressing his words to the tiny human being in his arms. Oblivious to her father’s words, Marlie began to suck on her thumb—hard—as if it could give up some sort of sustenance if she sucked on it hard enough. “All I had to do was say ‘no.’ ‘No, Maggie, I won’t do it,’ and none of this would have happened. Hell—sorry.”

Jake came to a skidding halt in his self-examination. No more cursing, at least not in the house while Marlie could hear him. He’d made up the rule himself, but it wasn’t easy sticking to it,

especially not when he was this punchy.

“Heck,” he amended, “who am I kidding? Your mother was so pigheaded she would have found someone else to say yes to her. In a heartbeat.” Someone else to donate the male component that had gone into creating this tiny miracle of nature with the mighty lungs made of steel whom he was holding in his arms.

Besides, he’d been half in love with Maggie O’Shea from the first moment she had walked into the squad room and Lieutenant Franco had told him that this vision in a blue uniform was his new partner. Maggie had been sharp and witty and so damn gorgeous with all that red hair that it made him ache just to look at her.

They’d had a good relationship, both on the job and off. And they’d talked about their futures, their goals and visions. That was when he’d discovered that she was determined to be all that she could possibly be—a kick-ass police officer and a mother as well.

She’d been well on her way to becoming the first when her damn biological clock had begun to nag her. And she, in turn, had begun to subtly nag him, working on him every day, eventually relentlessly, until he had finally given in.

For a fleeting moment, he had thought they would go about it the age-old, time-honored way. But Maggie had been very upfront with him about her intentions. She’d told him that she didn’t want any sort of a romantic entanglement, definitely didn’t even want any sort of physical encounter happening between them.

“It’s not that I don’t feel attracted to you, Castro,” she’d said. “It’s just that I don’t like complications. Never have.”

Seemed ironic, in light of all the complications *he* was facing now.

She'd laid out the plan. It was all going to be very clinical, very professional. And once the process was in motion and the procedure "took," Maggie made it clear that he was free to move on. She wasn't going to ask him for anything further.

Until she'd asked him for everything.

Somewhere along the line, between agreeing to this antiseptic, clinical insemination procedure and acting as her coach in the delivery room when her actual coach couldn't be reached in time, Jake had found himself *really* falling in love with Maggie. Hard.

She'd seen it, too.

Seen it in his eyes, heard it in his voice. Enough so that it had spooked her into asking for another partner once she went back to work.

That, too, had been a bone of contention between them. She'd gone back to work a great deal sooner than he'd thought was prudent. He certainly wasn't happy about it. He didn't think she should leave Marlie so soon and secretly—or not so secretly—worried about the risks she'd be facing every day with that badge pinned to her chest.

But he couldn't talk her out of it. The more he talked, the less she heard. The upshot was that Maggie had gone back to work three months after bringing Marlie into the world.

And three months after that, she was gone.

He remembered how he'd felt when he'd heard the news over

the dispatch radio. As if someone had shoved a blade right into his belly and gutted him. He remembered the speedometer reaching the other side of a hundred miles an hour as he'd raced to the hospital where they'd taken Maggie.

She'd managed to stay alive long enough for him to arrive and see her. Long enough to extract a promise from him to take care of their little girl—as if he would have allowed anyone else to take the baby. Marlie was all he had left of Maggie.

Maggie had died right after he'd said yes. Died with a smile on her lips.

Died despite the fact that he'd been holding on to her hand so tightly, trying with all his might to pull her back among the living. He must have been crazy to believe that he could.

All his efforts had naturally come to nothing. He hadn't been able to save Maggie, hadn't been able to pull her back. She'd died in front of him, leaving him to deal with monumental guilt. Guilt that had sprung from the very real belief that partner or no partner, he should have been there for Maggie, covering her back. Protecting her.

But he hadn't been able to and now Maggie was gone and he was here, trying to be what he'd been before a crack in the world had shaken his foundations, plus something new. Trying to be a father.

Right now, in his opinion, he was failing miserably at both.

Marlie began to fuss again, her displeasure growing louder. Jake recognized the cry. The infant was hungry. Did that mean he

was getting better at this, or just lucky when it came to guessing?

He didn't know.

Getting up, keeping Marlie tucked against his chest, Jake made his way into the kitchen.

He already had a small saucepan half-filled with water waiting to be pressed into use on the stove. Heading straight for the refrigerator, he opened it and reached in.

Like tall, innocent soldiers, bottles of formula were standing on the top shelf. Right beside equally tall bottles of beer. They clinked slightly as he pushed a couple aside to get at the milk.

"That was your mom's favorite brand," he told Marlie, pausing to let her "look" inside. "Your mom liked to kick back at the end of the day and have one or two, just to unwind—before she was pregnant with you, of course," he qualified.

Jake closed the door with his hip, then leaned against it for a second, trying to pull himself together.

He had to stop doing this to himself, had to stop connecting every deed, every detail he came across with something to do with Maggie. Weaving her into every single second of his life was not going to change anything.

It wasn't going to bring her back.

Jake went through the familiar steps, steps he knew in his sleep now, then stood there, staring at the bottle he'd just placed into the saucepan, waiting for it to heat up.

Three minutes later, he took the bottle out, testing the liquid against the back of his wrist. It was stone-cold.

“Why isn’t this—?” The rest of his question evaporated as he looked down again at the burner. No wonder the formula hadn’t warmed up. He hadn’t turned the burner on.

He needed help.

Putting the cold formula bottle back into the saucepan, Jake switched on the burner and turned up the temperature. Only then did he reach for the cordless phone on the wall and call his sister.

The phone rang five times on the other end. Jake was about to hang up and redial when he heard a sleepy voice answer, whispering, “Hello?” uncertainly.

Even when she whispered, he recognized Erin’s voice. “Uncle,” he said, giving the universal word for surrender. “I give up. You’re right. I need help. I’m in way over my head.”

“Jake?” His sister still sounded somewhat confused, but she was no longer whispering hoarsely.

He heard a deep male voice in the background ask, “Who is it, Erin?”

Jake heard a noise that told him Erin was attempting to cover the receiver in a semi-bid for privacy as she apparently turned her head away to answer, “I think it’s Jake.”

“Yeah, it’s me,” Jake acknowledged. “How many other men do you know who are in over their heads?”

“No one who would call this number at two in the morning,” she replied. “I thought that I was still asleep and dreaming.”

“Damn—darn,” Jake corrected himself again, in deference to the infant in his arms. Curbing his words was turning out to be a

lot harder than he'd thought. "I forgot about the time difference," he confessed. He was calling from New Orleans. His sister lived in Thunder Canyon, Montana. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I'll call back in the morning."

"No, no," Erin insisted, her voice now clearer and insistent. "Don't hang up."

It was half a plea, half an order. Erin knew her older brother. She knew he could very well not call back in the morning. He'd sounded desperate just then. Who knew how long that would last? But while it did last, she could use it to her—and more importantly to Jake's—advantage.

Jake could be incredibly stubborn at times and making him see reason was not always an easy matter—or one that was very readily accomplished. She couldn't afford to allow this opportunity to slip right through her fingers.

"My offer to help still stands, Jake. You and the baby can stay with Corey and me for as long as you need to," she told him, referring to her brand-new husband. Like the rest of the family, he'd been there for the wedding, and then had gone back to New Orleans. "Lord knows we've got plenty of room here."

Jake laughed shortly. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the offer—he did—it was just that he wasn't so self-centered or desperate that he couldn't put himself into his new brother-in-law's position.

"That'll sure endear me to my new brother-in-law," he told his sister. "Nothing like having a third—and part of a fourth—party

around as you're trying to adjust to married life."

Erin had to concede that her brother had a point. "Okay, maybe you're right, but this isn't a small house," she pointed out. "You could stay here for weeks and we wouldn't even know you were here. Besides, I can help you out taking care of my new niece."

Jake sighed. In a moment of desperation, he'd been selfish and he knew it. "You have a life, too, Erin," he pointed out. And he couldn't just impose on it because he found himself drowning.

Even when he was saying "yes"—tantamount to agreeing with her—her brother could be difficult. Actually, she should have expected this, Erin thought. But she was not about to allow Jake to talk himself out of coming back to Thunder Canyon. The bottom line was that Jake needed help and he *had* admitted it, however fleetingly.

"Family comes first," Erin reminded him. It was a principle she believed in with her whole heart, as did Corey. "Besides, I know a great babysitter who can pinch-hit when you need a break and I'm not available."

"A babysitter?" he echoed, saying the word with great disdain. "What, pay some teenager an arm and a leg while she's on her cell phone all night, twittering—"

"Tweeting," Erin corrected patiently. Even though she'd be the first to acknowledge how smart Jake was and how street-savvy he could be, her brother was a babe in the woods when it came to anything electronic.

“Whatever,” he dismissed impatiently. “Or some old woman who smells like cats and falls asleep the second I close the front door?” he continued, then dismissed both with a “No, thanks.”

“Calista Clifton isn’t a teenager,” Erin informed him of the young woman she was thinking of. “And she doesn’t smell like cats. She’s bright, cheerful and comes from a huge family, so she’s no stranger to baby spit-up or diapers. You’ll like her,” Erin promised, for now not bothering to cite the young woman’s other credits or mention her incredible work ethic. There was no response on the other end of the line. “Hello? Hello? Jake, are you there?”

His sister’s voice roused him.

Jake realized that he was no longer looking at anything. Jerking, his eyes flew open.

It was at that moment that he realized that the water in the saucepan had almost boiled completely away and that he’d just dropped the phone receiver he’d been holding on the counter. He’d literally been asleep on his feet and the receiver had slipped out of his fingers.

Snatching it up, he pressed the receiver against his ear.

He didn’t bother with an explanation, or apologizing. It would only give Erin more of an upper hand than he was already giving to her.

“Yeah, I’m still here,” he answered.

Pressing his ear against the receiver, he tried to hold it in place using his head, neck and shoulder as he twisted the dial to the off

position and moved the saucepan over to another burner.

Jake stifled a yelp as the metal handle he'd grabbed burned the center of his palm. The pain shot up to the roots of his hair.

Sucking in a steadying breath he pushed beyond the pain and said, "Okay, you talked me into it. I'll take a leave of absence and come up. You can get this Callous person—"

"Calista," Erin corrected.

"Yeah, her," he agreed. And then the policeman inside him came out as he added, "But I want to interview her before I let her watch Marlie."

He heard his sister laugh. The warm sound was comforting. "I wouldn't have it any other way, big brother."

She didn't *really* need the money.

Between her summer internship for her cousin Bo Clifton, who just happened to be the mayor of Thunder Canyon, and her part-time job clerking at the Tattered Saddle, the local antique store, her finances, though not exactly overflowing, were in relatively decent shape. And what with the two jobs, free time wasn't exactly hanging heavily on Calista Clifton's hands.

But the fact of the matter was she really liked children, especially babies. And she also liked the feeling she got when she helped people. So it was hard for her to say no to the situation, as Erin Traub explained it to her, involving Erin's older brother because it actually encompassed both a baby *and* helping.

Even so, the thing that had ultimately cinched it for her was when Erin's brother, Jake Castro, walked into the room. She'd

agreed to meet him and was sitting in Erin's spacious, sun-drenched living room when Jake came in holding his seven-month-old daughter in his arms.

If she was being honest, Calista would have had to admit that she'd noticed the baby belatedly. But that was only because Jake Castro was quite possibly the most incredibly handsome man who had ever crossed her path.

He was certainly handsome enough to cause her stomach muscles to tighten more than a little and for her palms to grow just the slightest bit damp. The latter hadn't happened to her since she was sixteen years old and had that wild crush on the captain of the football team—a guy who had turned out to be as empty and soulless as he was handsome.

Jake didn't look as if he was guilty of being empty or soulless. Not from the way he held that baby.

"It wouldn't be very often," Jake was saying to her after Erin had made the introductions and stated what they hoped her role would be in this situation, then slipped away so they could get acquainted. "Maybe once or twice a week at most, but—"

There was no need for him to try to convince her, Calista thought. He'd had her the second he'd walked into the room. Before he'd ever opened his mouth and she'd heard that baritone voice.

"Yes," Calista said with enthusiasm as she interrupted him.

Jake stopped, shifting his daughter to his other side. It was uncanny how Marlie always picked the wrong time to fuss. He

looked at the young woman his sister had selected. Because he hadn't finished giving her the background information, he wasn't sure just what she was saying yes to.

"What?"

"Yes," Calista repeated with the same smiling, sunny enthusiasm.

"Yes?" He hadn't really even gotten into his sales pitch yet, something that made him feel decidedly awkward because he wasn't accustomed to asking for anything, even something he had every intention of paying for. But this eleven-pound bundle in his arms had all the makings of being his own personal Waterloo.

Calista smiled. "Yes, I can be available for babysitting once or twice a week," she told him. "Or more often if the need arises." Her schedule was filled to overflowing, but she could find a way to make it work. She was utterly determined.

Having taken the job, Calista bit her lower lip, hesitating for a moment, wondering if she should say anything. The next moment she decided that if it was her in Jake's present position, she would appreciate being told.

She nodded at Jake's daughter. "Um, the baby—Marlie, is it?"

"That's right. Marlie," he confirmed. He wasn't all that crazy about the name. Had it been up to him, he would have named her something a little less fancy, but Maggie hadn't asked for his input in that. Maggie had been very specific about what she'd wanted—and didn't want—from him.

"Marlie just spat up on your shoulder," Calista told him.

“What?” He glanced down, embarrassed rather than annoyed.

“Here, let me take her,” Calista offered. The next moment, she was very competently taking the baby into her own arms, drawing the infant away from the scene of the crime.

Even with his limited view, he could see that his daughter had spat up about a fourth of her last meal on the front—and shoulder—of his shirt. That left him with exactly one shirt that hadn’t been christened with recycled baby food and/or formula.

He bit off the oath that automatically rose to his lips. He was still in training when it came down to that. But he was getting there.

Chapter Two

Calista didn't need to be a mind reader to figure out what the man standing in front of her with the newly stained shirt was thinking. When Erin called to ask about her availability to babysit occasionally in the evening, Jake's sister had given her a very brief summary of his present situation, including how he'd come to this point.

Although Erin hadn't gone into any specific detail, she assumed that Jake and Marlie's mother had been lovers, but that nothing formal had transpired, other than his name appearing on the birth certificate, which gave him legal guardianship to the infant.

However, all that was not any real business of hers. What she felt *was* her business was that Jake was obviously going to need all the help he could get to facilitate his getting accustomed to this brave new world of midnight feedings, formula runs and ever-increasing pile of stained shirts.

For starters, she thought, she could tell him how to deal with the last.

"If you give me your shirt, I can show you how to treat it," she said.

He looked at her, not quite sure what she was offering to do. "Treat it to what?"

Calista pressed her lips together, struggling not to laugh. "Not

to something, *for* something. I can help you get rid of that stain,” she explained. “Especially if I can get to it before it has a chance to really set in. Timing’s important when it comes to things like that.”

She could tell by his expression that he felt as if he was navigating in strange, uncharted waters. Most men, like her brothers, weren’t into everyday, mundane complications. Clean clothes were a given, not something you needed to strive for.

And then she saw Jake shrug and then begin to unbutton his shirt.

She stared at him, stunned as she watched the shirt parting down the center of his chest. Her mouth turned to cotton. “What are you doing?”

His eyes narrowed in slight confusion. “I’m doing what you told me. You did say you wanted the shirt sooner than later, right?”

“Right,” Calista murmured, her voice barely audible above a hushed whisper. Her soft brown eyes widened in wonder. She found it hard to tear them away from Jake’s unveiling.

The man had rock-solid biceps and forearms. As for his abdomen, it looked as if it had been carefully sculptured by some divine artistic hand. The last time she’d seen a torso half as good, it had been in a photograph of one of the statues presently on display in a New York museum.

Having stripped off his shirt, Jake now held it out to Calista, exchanging the stained article of clothing for his daughter. As he

nestled the infant against his chest, he couldn't help noting the somewhat dazed expression on the young woman's face. She was staring at him with a trace of disbelief in her wide eyes. Eyes, he noted, the color of warm chocolate.

"Something wrong?"

Calista blinked, then lowered her eyes. *Idiot*, she upbraided herself.

"No, nothing's wrong," she assured Jake a little too quickly. And then she added, "I'm just glad that Marlie didn't spit up on your jeans."

"Oh." Wasn't he supposed to give her the shirt now? "I thought you said it was better to work on a stain before it sets in, whatever that means."

If there were some kind of ritual to follow when it came to laundry, he hadn't a clue. He just threw everything in together and hoped for the best. Most of the time it worked. But that was before Marlie had come into his life.

Calista realized that she was staring at him again and tore her eyes away, annoyed with herself. She was acting like some gawky juvenile, not like a twenty-two-year-old college graduate who fully intended to make her mark on the world.

"Right, I did." She focused her attention on the shirt in her hand and not on the man who'd been wearing it.

Whose warmth, she realized, she could still detect in the shirt's material. She felt her stomach tightening even more.

"Do you know if your sister has any lemon juice? Never

mind,” she negated her question in the next breath. “I’ll go ask her.”

And with that, she quickly left the room in search of Erin—as well as a couple of private minutes to herself. She needed to decelerate the rate of her pulse, which had gone into double time and was, even now, threatening to launch into triple time.

Calista found Erin at the front door, just about to leave to meet her husband. Jake’s sister stopped when she saw her and then looked at the shirt she was holding in her hand.

“Boy—” Erin laughed “—I guess Jake was more desperate than I thought.”

Calista shook her head, puzzled by the reference. “What?”

Erin gestured toward the shirt. “Well, Jake’s obviously offering you the shirt off his back to get you to agree to take the job.”

It took Calista almost a full beat to realize that Erin was kidding. The sight of Jake Castro’s bare torso, blended in with his low-slung jeans that hung precariously on well-toned hips had rattled her more than she was willing to admit even to herself.

“Very funny,” she finally commented, then informed Erin, “By the way, I’m taking the job.”

Erin nodded. “I had a hunch.” The sentence was accompanied by a wide—and relieved—grin. And then she raised her eyebrows quizzically. Calista had obviously come looking for her and she rather doubted that it had been just to inform her about her decision. She looked back at the shirt the younger woman

was holding. “Can I help you with something?”

But before Calista could say anything in response, a deep voice right behind her answered the question for her. “Calista says she can get rid of that stain for me—that’s actually my favorite shirt,” he added in case Erin wondered what all the fuss was about.

With Jake on the scene, Calista managed to snap out of her mental reverie and found her tongue.

“Do you have any lemon juice?” she heard herself asking Erin. “Soaking a stain in lemon juice usually helps get the stubborn ones out,” she told the other woman.

That was news to Erin. But then, she really wasn’t all that domestic-minded. Yet.

“Good thing to know,” Erin commented. She thought for a moment before answering. “If we have any lemon juice left, you’ll find it in the refrigerator door, next to the skim milk.”

“I’ll go look,” Calista offered. “If you don’t have any, I can take the shirt home with me. I’ve got some lemon juice in the garage,” she recalled.

That seemed like an odd thing to him to keep around. “You deal with a lot of spit-up during the course of the day?” Jake asked her.

“It doesn’t just work on spit-up. It’s good for getting out all sorts of stubborn stains,” she explained as she made her way into the kitchen. “It’s not a magic cureall,” she added, not wanting to mislead him. “But pretty nearly.”

“Huh.” He looked at the back of Calista’s head for a

split second, thinking she had pretty light brown hair, then commented, “Learn something every day.”

Jake was right behind her and she was finding it more and more difficult to pretend that the man wasn’t practically mouth-wateringly naked.

“That’s life,” Calista responded cheerfully. “One great big beautiful learning process.”

My God, had she just uttered those inane words? Great. Now he probably thought she was some kind of dork, half Mary Poppins, half nerdy science geek. Or maybe even worse.

Erin opened the front door and quickly crossed the threshold. If she didn’t leave now, there was no telling when she’d finally get the opportunity.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to your chemistry experiment,” Erin called out. “Let me know how it goes.” She glanced one final time toward the young woman she’d brought over to meet Jake. “See you soon, Calista.”

“Soon,” Calista echoed with a nod, then looked at Jake. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about hiring me as your sitter,” she qualified.

She had a strong hunch that the man with the rock-hard chest had an acute aversion to women who gazed up at him with doe eyes. If he’d suddenly changed his mind about the arrangement, she didn’t want to make it hard for him to tell her.

“Why would I change my mind?” he asked, mystified by her thinking. “You’ve definitely got the job,” he assured her, then

laughed. “I don’t strip off my shirt for just anyone.”

He was teasing the young woman, he realized. He hadn’t done something like that—or anything else that was remotely lighthearted in nature—since he’d heard the awful news about Maggie getting shot.

He remembered his breath suddenly freezing in his lungs despite the warm weather—spring in New Orleans had a sticky dampness to it like no other place. And then, for weeks, he’d alternated between suppressed rage and numbness. He’d just assumed that things like teasing and smiling were behaviors he wouldn’t be revisiting for a very long time to come and were, consequently, tucked away deep in his past.

Calista swallowed. Her mouth was inexplicably—not to mention incredibly—dry.

“I see,” she replied, doing her best not to appear as affected as she was by this man.

At bottom, she tried to tell herself, individuals were all just a bunch of skin, tissues, organs and a great deal of water, haphazardly thrown together to form an arbitrary whole.

But, oh, the composition that had gone into making Jake Castro, she couldn’t help thinking, growing warm all over again.

The next second, she was chastising herself for a second time. What was she, twelve? No, she was twenty-two, a grown woman, for heaven’s sake, on a clearly cut path that was to ultimately lead to some sort of a position with the local government, possibly even an elected one. All of which meant that she couldn’t

afford to act like some starry-eyed juvenile just because the man standing next to her with the baby in his arms didn't appear to have an ounce of fat on him, even in his spare back pocket.

“Ah, lemon juice,” she declared, spotting the little green plastic bottle with a picture of a lemon on it tucked away in the far end of the refrigerator door.

Saved by a grocery item, Calista thought, mocking herself sarcastically.

Bottle in hand, she looked around for somewhere she could continue this baptism-by-lemon-juice process. At first glance, nothing seemed to stand out.

“Do you know if your sister has a large plastic bowl she isn't using, or a sink I could take over for, say, a few hours?” she asked him hopefully.

The question caught Jake off guard. His eyes shifted to the shirt, then back to her. “This is going to take a few hours?”

“It might,” Calista allowed, then qualified. “It can be sooner and I'm not going to hang out here the entire time waiting,” she promised, guessing that was probably what he was afraid of. “I just need somewhere I can leave your shirt to soak without having it disturbed or in the way.”

For the time being, until he could find his own place, Erin had insisted that he remain with her and her husband. When he and Marlie had arrived and Corey had chimed in with the same invitation—and as far as Jake could tell, his brother-in-law was actually sincere—Jake found himself agreeing. Secretly, he had

to admit that he was relieved. It was always easier looking for a place if he had somewhere that served as his home base until he found something suitable for himself and the baby.

“There’s a bathroom off the guest room that I’m using,” he volunteered. “You could leave my shirt soaking in the sink.”

Calista grinned, nodding. “Sounds like a plan.” She gestured vaguely toward the front of the house. “Lead the way.”

Marlie made a gurgling noise as her father turned on his heel. The next moment, Calista saw him shiver. She guessed at what had happened even before he told the baby, “At least this time there’s nothing for you to get dirty.” Marlie had spat up on his bare shoulder.

With that, Jake led the way to the stairs.

No doubt about it, Calista thought as she followed behind him and walked up the stairs to his room, the man looked good coming *and* going.

There went her stomach again, contracting into a knot.

Get a grip, she ordered herself. *The man needs someone to help him out, not to drool all over him. He’s already got the latter covered.*

When they came to the landing, Jake brought her over to the second door on the right. The door was closed. He opened it, then walked in and nodded toward the bathroom located over in the far corner of the room. There were four other guest rooms in the large house, but this one was the largest. Erin had told him that she thought this would be more suitable to his needs, especially

with the baby.

“Right in through there,” he told Calista. He pointed in the direction of the bathroom as he stopped by the bureau. Opening the top drawer, he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped away the latest deposit of baby drool from his shoulder. That done, he absently shoved the handkerchief into his back pocket.

Setting Marlie down in her portacrib for a moment, Jake went over to the closet. He was still in the process of unpacking, but there were a few shirts already hanging there. He grabbed the one closest to him, a blue pullover that, once on, brought out the color of his eyes more intensely.

His stained shirt still clutched in her hand, Calista forced herself to look away and head toward the bathroom. She couldn't help but notice that the room looked as if it'd had an encounter with a tornado, and lost.

“Still unpacking?” Calista asked, raising her voice so that he could hear her.

“Still hunting for things,” he amended. “Well, I'm decent again,” he said to his daughter after he'd pulled on the new shirt. “Try to keep your lunch down for at least a few minutes,” he urged her, picking up the baby again.

Marlie cooed in response, as if she understood him and was telling him that she'd do her best to try.

The noise made him smile. Funny how outwardly perfectly insignificant things like a sound coming from a seven-month-old infant could make him feel so warm inside. He supposed

this was what being a father was all about, celebrating the small, personal things that no one else was privy to or could begin to comprehend.

He looked over toward the bathroom. The woman he'd just agreed to allow to watch over his daughter was still in there, but he wasn't hearing any sounds.

"Let's go see what's up," he said to his daughter as he crossed to the other end of the bedroom. "So how's it coming?" he asked Calista, raising his voice.

Calista glanced at him over her shoulder. He was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, once again holding Marlie in his arms, and mercifully wearing a shirt again.

Now if only that fact would register with her racing pulse and make it settle down, she thought.

"It's coming along," she repeated.

To prove her point, she picked up the shirt and held it up over the sink to allow him to see for himself. She'd filled the basin with a little water to dilute the concentrated lemon juice and it was dripping down as she raised the shirt for his perusal. The spot that Marlie had branded with a gooey, milky-white substance was actually growing fainter.

"Like I said," she repeated, pleased, "sometimes it takes a little longer than other times. But it looks like you won't have to throw this one away."

He joined her at the sink for a closer look. It really was fading, he thought, impressed.

“So that’s all I have to do?” he asked, his eyes shifting to look at her. “Just pour lemon juice on it and let it soak? Because I’ve got about ten shirts that really need work,” he confessed. “None of them would really come clean, even after I threw them into the washing machine a couple of times.” He was on the verge of throwing them all out. Tossing out shirts after wearing them only once or twice wasn’t exactly something he could afford to do indefinitely.

Calista looked a little skeptical as she asked him, “When you washed your shirts, you didn’t have the setting on hot, did you?”

Damned if he knew. “The machine has settings?” he asked.

“Why don’t you pile them up for me and I’ll take a look at your shirts the next time you have me over to watch Marlie?” she suggested.

Initially he had balked at asking for help or letting anyone know that he wasn’t up to handling this situation he found himself in. But after closer scrutiny, maybe this wasn’t going to be such a bad deal after all, Jake thought. If this cheerful woman with the sparkling brown eyes and endless brown hair could save his shirts as well as help him save his sanity, she was clearly worth her weight in gold.

“Sounds good to me,” he responded to the suggestion with feeling.

Yes, Calista thought, unable to contain her smile any longer, it certainly did.

Chapter Three

“You’re late.”

Jasper Fowler bit off the words as he glared at Calista from beneath shaggy gray-and-white eyebrows.

Just coming in, Calista eased the door to the Tattered Saddle antique shop closed behind her. If Fowler expected her to flinch at his obvious displeasure, he was going to be sorely disappointed, she thought. Growing up amid seven brothers and sisters had long since taught her how to hold her ground and stand up for herself. It was either that or suddenly find herself getting plowed under and lost in the shuffle.

So far, she’d never once gotten lost in the shuffle.

“I’m on time,” Calista corrected pleasantly, deliberately pointing to the closest clock to her on the wall.

Currently, there were several clocks on display, all hanging on the shop walls, all antiques, all fashioned with a decidedly Western flavor. And each and every one of them testified to the fact that she, and not the crotchety, cantankerous elderly owner of the store, was right. She was right on time.

With a frame that resembled nothing if not an animated question mark, his shoulders hunched in so far that they appeared to be almost touching one another, Fowler moved past her and grumbled, “Well, you would have been late in another minute.”

As was his habit, he refused to give in or concede the point. If

asked, no one in town could recollect *ever* hearing the old man admit that he was wrong—about anything.

“But I didn’t take another minute,” Calista countered cheerfully. “So I’m here on time.”

In her own way, she was just as stubborn as the old man she was working for this summer. Beneath it all, she wanted to think that the man rather enjoyed sparring with her, enjoyed the challenge of having someone who didn’t cave in to him. Everyone else, she’d noted, always backed away, considering a verbal bout with the man just a waste of time and energy.

Maybe she was wrong, she thought, picking up the ancient feather duster he required she use every day to dust the eclectic collection of memorabilia he housed within the old shop’s four walls. But in complying with his specific instructions and using the duster, Calista couldn’t help but feel that all she was accomplishing was pushing the dust around, ineffectively moving it from one spot to another and then back again the next day.

But the pay was the same whether she eliminated the dust or just gave it another place to stay, so she had given up trying to introduce a few basic improvements into the daily routine. Fowler, she’d quickly discovered, was a stickler for adhering to routines, to all but worshipping the status quo.

She’d learned her first week here that it was pointless to try to point out the benefits of doing anything new or different.

But then, she reasoned, if Fowler had been opened to new things, he probably wouldn’t be dealing with items that were

older than he was.

“When I finish dusting out here, if there aren’t any customers, maybe I’ll just go dust the storeroom,” she volunteered.

Although she’d brought along a couple of books to review, books that promised to help her get a better handle on her internship at the mayor’s office, she really didn’t like being idle for any stretch of time and because Fowler *was* paying her—minimum wage to be sure, but it was still her salary—her first efforts should be to do something worthwhile in the antique store.

About to shuffle off into the very same storeroom she was proposing to clean, Fowler stopped short and turned around to glare at her.

“No,” he all but shouted, then struggled to regain his monotone composure. “I already told you to stay out of there.”

He’d told her that the very first day she’d worked here. At the time she’d thought the edict was just fueled by his myriad of idiosyncrasies.

“I know, but I thought maybe you’d like to have me straighten things up in there, maybe do an inventory for you,” she proposed.

“Don’t need no inventory,” Fowler retorted. “I know everything that’s in there and where it is if I need to get at it. I don’t need some eager beaver messing things up with her own damn system that makes no sense to nobody on God’s green earth but her.”

He was really getting heated about it and she couldn’t help wondering why. She’d glanced into the storeroom once in passing

and it was just a dark storage space as far as she could see.

“Okay, I won’t go in there,” she surrendered, at the same time trying to figure out just what it was that the old man was trying to protect. Most likely, it was nothing, but he certainly was behaving peculiarly—even more so than usual. Every time she mentioned the storeroom, he acted, in her opinion, as if she was trying to break into the U.S. Mint and he was its only defender.

But then, she reasoned, she’d known what the old man was like when she’d initially answered his want ad and interviewed for the job. Everyone in town—her family included—had warned her about going to work for “crazy ol’ Jasper Fowler.” And everyone from around the area knew about the legend.

Knew how, according to the legend, Fowler had once driven cross-country with a coffin rattling around in the back of his pickup truck. Moreover, the same legend claimed that there’d been a rotting corpse in that coffin, supposedly the remains of a woman who had once jilted him.

Over time other identities had been assigned to the so-called decaying cross-country traveler. Some said it was a business partner who had tried to cheat him out of the profits of their business. Others said that there were two bodies in there, his late wife and the infant son she’d given birth to minutes before both she and the baby had died.

That, at least, would explain his winning personality.

As for her, Calista figured that because the old man *was* so eccentric, Fowler invited these kinds of stories to be made up

about him, maybe even reveled in them and that, ultimately, none of it was true.

Although, if it *was* true she supposed that might be a good reason why Fowler wouldn't allow anyone but him to enter the storeroom. That might be where he was keeping the legendary coffin.

Stop it, she told herself. You're smarter than that. There's no coffin. It's all just a bunch of fabrication about an odd old man.

She heard the front door open. The next second she heard the bell attached to it ring, announcing the entrance of another person into the store.

Having already walked into the storeroom, Fowler poked his head out to see who had come in. The etched-in frown on his stubble-laden face seemed to deepen as his small eyes focused on the woman who had just come into his shop.

Recognizing her, he challenged Erin Traub. "You here to buy anything today?"

Erin knew how to play the game. "I might be," she answered evasively.

Fowler allowed a dismissive sound to escape his lips as he waved his hand at Erin's words. "No, you ain't. You got five minutes to talk to the girl and then you go," he ordered. "And you," he said, shifting his hawk-like intense gaze to Calista, "consider this your break, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," Calista answered, inclining her head with a formal little bow, as if he was some small far-from-benevolent despot.

Uttering another dismissive noise, Fowler withdrew back into the storeroom.

Erin looked at the younger woman she'd come to see in disbelief. "How can you stand it, working for Old Man Fowler? He's so rude."

"I've had practice dealing with foul moods. When you've got seven siblings, there's always someone who's bound to be in a snit—or worse," she added with a careless shrug. "And besides, it's not exactly like I don't need the money," she confessed. At twenty-two, she'd just graduated, but that didn't mean that all that struggling was behind her. A great deal of it was just up ahead. She was currently living at home to save as much money as she could, but it was still slow-going. "I've got school loans to pay off and other expenses to juggle as well. Right now, I can't afford to be picky." Besides, she added silently, afraid of being overheard, Fowler was harmless.

"Is that why you agreed to babysit for my brother?" Erin asked her.

She'd stopped by to get her friend's take on working for her brother and to make sure that Calista didn't decide to suddenly change her mind and tell Jake that she'd had second thoughts about agreeing to babysit for him. Dealing with an infant could be draining. Especially after having had to put up with a Neanderthal despot like Fowler.

"Oh no," Calista said with feeling, "I'm more than happy to take the job. I think that Marlie's really adorable."

Erin laughed. She had fallen in love with her niece at first sight, but she had to admit that there were drawbacks. “For a child who never sleeps, she’s wonderful.” Erin raised her slender shoulders and then let them drop. “At least it feels that way. Our bedroom is just one door down from Jake’s room. I can hear him pacing the floor with her at all hours. That baby cries every night.”

“Well, yes, that’s not unusual. They do that for a while,” Calista assured her. “But that eventually changes and they sleep through the night. For the record, babies don’t learn to manipulate their parents until they’re a few years old.”

Erin sighed, wondering how she would measure up when the time came to have a baby of her own. Right now, it seemed almost daunting to even think about. “You sound a lot more knowledgeable about how to handle things than I am.”

Calista shrugged off the compliment. “I come from a really big family,” she pointed out. “Somewhere along the line, I started taking care of my younger brothers and sisters. Suddenly, I was the expert when it came to changing diapers, feeding and burping. The funny thing is, I don’t really mind, so I can’t complain. The truth of the matter is,” she freely admitted, “I kind of like it.”

“You don’t have to sell me,” Erin assured her with feeling. “I actually just stopped by to find out if there’s anything I can do to make the experience better for you.”

Several things popped up in her mind, none of which she

could have ventured to say out loud. All of them concerned Jake Castro. The very thought of him made her feel warm, a reaction she did her best to stifle. It wasn't something she could readily explain to the man's sister.

Instead, she guessed at the reason behind Erin's impromptu field trip to the antique shop, and her. "Don't worry, Erin, I said I'd babysit and I'm not going to change my mind."

"Good." Erin released a large sigh, then immediately asked, "Are you busy tomorrow night?"

Calista hadn't expected to be asked to babysit so soon. She looked at Jake's sister in surprise.

"Tomorrow," she repeated, thinking for a second. "I was just planning to do a little dry reading on government procedures so I don't come across like some empty-headed little intern. I don't want people to think that Cousin Bo's guilty of nepotism, although technically, I suppose he is." Their connection was distant, but they were still family. "Why? Is Jake going out tomorrow night? He didn't mention anything to me about it during the interview."

She would have assumed that he would have right after telling her that she had the job. Had something come up, or had he just held back for some reason of his own?

The smile that rose to Erin's lips was a self-satisfied one. "That's because my big brother doesn't know he's going out yet." "You're having him kidnapped?" Calista guessed drily.

To her surprise, Erin answered the quip seriously. "In a

manner of speaking. I want Corey and Jake to have a guys' night out."

She might not have a whole lot of experience beyond her academic one, but that struck Calista as rather unusual.

"You haven't been married all that long," she recalled, then marveled, "Boy, talk about an understanding wife."

Amused, Erin set the other woman straight. "Don't stick wings on me yet, Calista. There's a reason for my shipping those two out of the house. I want a clear playing field so that I can help Corey's sister get ready for her date."

It was a small enough town to keep up on the various activities of the locals. Corey's baby sister Rose was, like her brothers, a recent transplant to Thunder Canyon. As such, she didn't know all that many people yet.

Calista greeted the news with surprise. "I didn't know that Rose was dating."

Even though they were alone in the front room of the shop, Erin still drew closer and lowered her voice. "That's just the problem, she hasn't been and she's really nervous about going out."

To Calista, going out on a date was just an extension of talking. But she supposed she could see why it might make someone else a little nervous. If she were about to go out with Jake, there might be more than one or two butterflies involved.

"So who's the lucky guy she's going out with?" she asked Erin.

Erin paused for a moment. This wouldn't have been her first

choice, but it certainly was going to be a great way for Rose to get her feet wet again. “It’s Nick Pritchett.”

“Bo’s brother-in-law?” Calista asked, surprised.

The name belonged to yet another one of her distant relatives, this one being really distant. On the stocky side and more than a little opinionated, Nick Pritchett was one relative she certainly didn’t mind keeping distant.

Erin nodded, deliberately masking her own thoughts on the matter. “The very same.”

Calista laughed shortly. “Well, you can tell Rose she doesn’t have anything to be nervous about. All she has to do is show up and breathe. From what I hear, Nick’ll take it from there and do all the talking. And I do mean *all*. The man really does like to hear the sound of his own voice.”

There was no point in pretending that this was a good thing. Erin surrendered the charade.

“Well, she has to start somewhere,” she said helplessly.

At least she hadn’t been the one to arrange this, Erin thought. Nick had asked Rose out and her sister-in-law, responding to some sort of newly instituted panic that she was liable to be alone for the rest of her life, had jumped at the chance.

Picking up on the less-than-thrilled note in Erin’s voice, Calista’s inner optimism suddenly rallied and rose to the surface.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” she told the other woman encouragingly.

Blowing out a breath, Erin nodded again, more to herself than

to Calista. She needed to deal with what was, not with what she wished would be. And Rose needed to learn how to take baby steps. Whatever her sister-in-law might be thinking about her future with Nick, this was really just a practice run, getting her prepared for when a more suitable man came along.

“And you’ll be there tomorrow?” she asked Calista.

Calista smiled and nodded, ignoring her own butterflies when she thought of seeing Jake Castro again. “I’ll be there tomorrow. What time do you want me to show up?”

Erin quickly calculated optimal time for everything to take place. Corey would be available around five-thirty or so. “Six o’clock okay?”

Six was when she left the mayor’s office. She really didn’t want to ask for a half-hour time-off so soon into her internship. “Six-thirty would be better.”

She wasn’t inflexible. “Fine. Six-thirty,” Erin agreed.

There was just one more thing Calista wanted to know before tomorrow night. “You are going to tell your brother about his ‘guys’ night out’ before I get there, right? I mean, he’s not going to be surprised when I just show up on your doorstep, is he? I wouldn’t want the guy thinking I’m stalking him.”

When they were growing up, Jake was the brother beset by females, all eager for his attention. All in all, Erin was fairly sure that by now, Jake was accustomed to having a woman turn up on the doorstep, looking for him.

“Don’t worry, I’m telling Corey about it tonight and I’ll have

him twist Jake's arm. He won't say no to Corey," Erin assured her. She could see that Calista was wondering why she wanted to get rid of both her husband and her brother for the evening because Rose's "big date" didn't really affect either one of them. "I don't want either one of them hanging around while Rose gets ready. You know what brothers are like. She doesn't need to be teased unmercifully about this. She's already nervous enough as it is. I just want her to be as confident and poised as she can be under the circumstances."

To Calista, it was a case of much ado about nothing, but she kept that to herself. Anything else she might have said would have to wait. Fowler came shuffling in from the back just then and peered at Erin, scowling.

"You still here?" It was more of an accusation than a question.

Erin shifted, turning toward the door. "I was just leaving, Mr. Fowler," she informed him. With effort, she pasted a wide smile on her face for Calista's sake. She didn't want the old man taking Calista to task because she'd overstayed her welcome.

If she thought it might get her on Fowler's good side, she'd wasted her time. It made no difference.

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out," he retorted, pointing a bony finger toward the door.

Most of the time she could just turn a deaf ear to the old man's rudeness, but when it was aimed at someone else, it really irritated her. Walking Erin to the door, she debated that perhaps it was time for her to start looking for another job. It was just a

matter of time before she couldn't hold her tongue around Mr. Personality. Eventually, she was going to put him in his place.

"I'll see you tomorrow night," Calista promised. She saw pity in Erin's eyes as the woman glanced toward Fowler. It didn't take a genius to figure out what Erin was thinking.

"Maybe the mayor can give you a raise," Erin suggested in a whisper as she crossed the threshold.

"That would *really* be nepotism," Calista said with a laugh.

"I'm not paying you to stand there, jawing the day away," Fowler informed her, raising his voice so that people in the street outside could hear him.

"No, you're not," Calista agreed, forcing herself to sound cheerful.

Closing the door, she looked at her part-time employer. In truth, she felt sorry for the old man. He obviously had no friends and he alienated almost everyone he came in contact with. She had no idea how he even made a living. Since she'd started working at the shop, there had been only a handful of customers and maybe five sales. Of course, she was only here part-time, so maybe the bulk of the sales were conducted when she wasn't around. For his sake, she hoped so. Otherwise, she couldn't see how he would be able to manage to stay in business for any length of time.

But that, she reminded herself, wasn't any of her concern. Instead, she focused on the fact that she was going to be seeing Jake again tomorrow night, however briefly.

The butterflies in her stomach returned, bringing friends.

Chapter Four

Jake really didn't feel like going out for dinner that night. There were a number of rentals he'd circled in the newspaper that he wanted to review. Beyond that, he'd just planned a quiet evening getting in some bonding time with his daughter. This being a father thing was all still pretty new to him.

But when Corey had asked him to go out and grab some dinner with him, Jake felt that he couldn't very well turn down his brother-in-law, not when Corey and Erin had taken him in like this with open arms. At the very least saying no to Corey's invitation could come off as being ungrateful.

To win him over, Corey had even told him that he could be the one to pick the restaurant—as if he was familiar with the area, Jake thought.

But, on the other hand, going out would serve as a mental diversion for him and right about now, he needed to be diverted. *And* he really needed to put pressing, serious matters out of his mind.

Jake glanced at the letter he'd balled up and tossed on the coffee table earlier. The letter that had been tracking his whereabouts and had finally caught up with him here.

Maybe he shouldn't have left a forwarding address at the post office in New Orleans, he thought. But then, if he'd just up and completely disappeared, he might have been charged with

kidnapping by the people who'd sent him this letter. He was certain that by now, Maggie's parents had gotten themselves a lawyer to contest their daughter's final decision.

He knew that Mr. and Mrs. O'Shea maintained that Maggie hadn't been in her right mind on her deathbed when she'd given custody of their little girl to him, especially because up until that point, she'd insisted that he have nothing to do with raising the baby, that the responsibility was all hers.

But nothing in the world was going to make him not honor his late partner's request. Hell, even if she hadn't asked him to take care of their little girl, he would have been there to watch over Marlie. He couldn't imagine himself doing anything else.

He might not know what the hell he was doing, but those were just details. They'd work themselves out. The main thing was that Marlie was his blood, his child. He hadn't thought the feeling would be so strong, but the moment he'd first laid eyes on her, it had been there, full-blown and vital. Marlie was his and he intended to do whatever it took to hang on to her. If that meant having to go into hiding someday, so be it.

As a police officer, he considered himself exceptionally law-abiding, but this was his child and there was no way on God's green earth he was about to just turn her over to anyone, even her own grandparents. When she'd gotten pregnant, Maggie had told him stories about her childhood, about how almost fanatically strict her father had been, so much so that she ran away from home the moment she turned eighteen.

Someone like that wasn't going to get his hands on Marlie, Jake thought. The little girl belonged with him. And he was doing his best to become the competent father she deserved.

Granted he was still tangled up in the learning curve, but he was getting there. Slowly but surely, he was getting there. He figured that by the time Marlie was in her teens, he'd have it all down pat. With any luck.

"You probably won't want to have anything to do with me by then," he told the infant he was holding tucked against his chest with one arm.

He could remember Erin when she'd been a teenager. She'd wanted to have nothing to do with either of her parents. Instead, she'd been hell-bent to try her own wings and be independent. There were arguments practically every day.

It wasn't that their parents had been particularly strict—not anything like what Maggie had said about her father—it was just that Erin had been a stubborn mule, determined to have things her own way. He was fairly certain that Erin's unruly behavior was why their father—and their mother—had prematurely gone gray.

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you, Marlie?" he asked out loud, looking down at the tiny round face. Cornflower-blue eyes stared back at him, wide and intense, as if the infant was hanging on every syllable that he uttered. She might have Maggie's red hair, but she had his eyes, he thought, pleased. "You wouldn't turn my hair prematurely gray because you wanted to stay out all

night doing God knows what with God knows who, right, Marlie? You're my good little girl."

"I don't know, Daddy, I think you might look good in gray hair," a high-pitched voice—obviously pretending to give him an answer as Marlie—said behind him.

Caught off guard, Jake swung around, only to see Calista walking into the living room. She flashed an apologetic grin at him.

He looked startled. Not when he'd turned around, but when their eyes had made contact. Why?

"Sorry, didn't mean to spook you," she told him, crossing to the sofa where he stood. "I just couldn't resist."

While he obviously knew it wasn't Marlie talking—he thought she was special, but not *that* special—he'd assumed it was Erin who was pretending to answer him as his daughter. Seeing Calista standing there instead had temporarily thrown him off.

He was about to ask her what she was doing here, but because this wasn't his house, the question would undoubtedly come across as sounding rude and he didn't want that.

So instead he asked, "Are you here to see Erin?"

"Well, this is awkward," Calista said, more to herself than to him. She saw Jake's eyebrows draw together over his electric-blue eyes in a silent question. Trapped, Calista had no choice but to explain what had prompted her comment. "Erin said she was going to tell you."

So far, this wasn't getting any clearer. "Tell me what?"

Belatedly she realized that she'd certainly put her foot into her mouth. Well, might as well make room for the other one as well, Calista thought philosophically.

"That you and Corey are going out together for dinner." She deliberately refrained from referring to the evening as a "guys' night out," thinking he might take offense at that.

"I already know that. Corey already asked me to come with him." He was still unclear what she was doing here. "But how do you figure into it?"

And then suddenly, alarms went off in Jake's head. There was nothing that he hated more than being set up on a "blind" date. Had Erin decided that he needed female companionship to get over Maggie's tragic death and that this attractive little slip of a girl was going to be it? Was Callie—no, Calista—supposed to be his date?

There was no other way but to put it to her bluntly. "Are you coming with us?"

The question, coming out of the blue, stunned her. Was this Jake's way of asking her out on a date?

Don't get carried away. Men like Jake didn't beat around the bush; they asked directly. And they don't ask women like you.

She was pretty sure that to someone like Jake, she came across as a life-size Barbie doll despite her medium-brown hair. It was up to her to prove that she had far more substance than that.

"No, I'm staying here and watching Marlie for you," she explained simply. She made eye contact with the infant, thinking

how much the baby's eyes looked like Jake's. "Aren't I, Marlie?" As if in response, a bubble emerged from the infant's rosebud mouth. Tickled, she looked up at Jake. "I think that's a 'yes.'"

He still didn't understand. "Why are you watching Marlie?" he wanted to know. "Why isn't my sister doing it?"

"Because I'm going to be busy helping Rose get ready, that's why," Erin answered, walking into the room.

After letting Calista in, she'd rushed upstairs to tell Corey to get a move on, then come back down to check on Jake. He'd obviously gotten his signals crossed, she thought.

Jake turned to look at his sister. "Get ready for what?"

She wasn't about to undertake a long explanation. Rose was going to be here any minute. She wanted Corey and her brother to be gone by then. "Never mind, you just go with Corey and have a good time."

As if on cue, Marlie began to wail. "Here, give her to me," Calista urged, taking the squalling infant from him.

It wasn't that he felt he could do anything better than this confident young woman his sister had brought to his attention; it was just that he was suddenly feeling very protective and parental toward his daughter. He didn't want to just leave her like this. What if this wasn't just a regular crying jag? What if Marlie was hurting for some reason?

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