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The Sheriff's Christmas Surprise

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

MARIE FERRARELLA

**Babies
&
Bachelors
USA**

Marie Ferrarella

The Sheriff's Christmas Surprise

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The morning after Thanksgiving, Enrique "Rick" Santiago, the sheriff of Forever, Texas, opens his front door and discovers...a baby! Before he has a chance to say "who's the mommy" big-city lawyer Olivia Blayne arrives to claim the adorable infant. She's relieved to find her nephew safe, but is on a desperate search for her missing sister. Rick's only too happy to help, even if he and Olivia instantly clash. Olivia's high-powered life is about responsibility - not laughter, love and holiday joy. But something about joining forces with Rick leads her to realize that there are more things missing from her life than her sister. And passion has its place - even if it is only temporary. After all, her time away from her job in Dallas can't last forever. Or can it? After all, Christmas is a wonderful time for surprises!

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“It’s going to be all right. I promise.”

His words got to her. They made her feel defenseless and vulnerable. And yet, at the same time, they made her feel safe because he understood, maybe better than she did, what she was going through at the moment.

She clung to him, trying to hang on to his strength, trying desperately to get her own back.

Looking back later, Olivia wouldn’t be able to say with any certainty just what steps came next and who was responsible.

One moment, she was crying her heart out, damning her poor self-control for breaking down this way. The next moment, she’d turned up her face to his and found herself kissing him.

Dear Reader,

This is actually my second book for Harlequin American Romance. My first came out in April of 1986. A great deal has happened since then, both to me and to the line. Happily, we’ve both done well and thrived.

What you have before you is my first venture into the small, neighborly town of Forever, Texas. The sheriff there, Enrique Santiago, is half Black Irish on his mother’s side, one quarter Apache and one quarter Latino on his father’s side and a complete tall, dark and handsome hunk. But Dallas trial lawyer Olivia Blayne isn’t looking for a hunk when she blows into town. She’s searching for her infant nephew, Bobby, and her runaway sister, Tina. Rick helps her on her journey and, along the way, these two people from two different worlds find themselves, each other—and love.

I hope you find that you enjoy your visit to Forever because the town has other stories to tell and I’d more than welcome having a friendly face in the audience.

As ever, I thank you for reading and, from the bottom of my heart, I wish you someone to love who loves you back.

Marie Ferrarella

The Sheriff's Christmas Surprise

Marie Ferrarella



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Ferrarella is a USA TODAY bestselling and RITA[®] Award-winning author who has written more than two hundred books for Silhouette and Harlequin Books, some under the name of Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website at www.marieferrarella.com.

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Chapter One

It was a nice little town, as far as relatively small towns went. Hardly any trouble at all.

Which, when he came right down to it, was the problem. The town was nice; it was little and it was peaceful.

And Sheriff Enrique Santiago was restless.

Rick's people had lived in and around Forever, Texas, as far back as anyone could remember. This was especially true of the Mexican and the Apache branches of his family. The Black Irish contingent came later, but still far back enough to be only slightly less old than the veritable hills.

All three branches had left their indelible mark on Rick, found in his gaunt cheekbones, his blue-black, thick straight hair and his exceedingly vivid green eyes, which could look right through a man's lies.

He was a walking embodiment of the nationalities that called Forever their home. But he wanted something different, something that would make his adrenaline accelerate, at least once in a while. The need to feel alive was why he'd taken the post of sheriff to begin with.

But being sheriff in Forever meant breaking up an occasional fistfight when the weather was too hot and tempers were too short. It meant making sure Miss Irene wasn't wandering around town in the middle of the night in her nightgown, sleepwalking again. Or worse, driving through the center of town in her vintage Mustang while sound asleep.

It wasn't that he hankered after dead bodies piled up on top of each other, but he did yearn for days that weren't all stamped with a sameness that had the capacity to drive a sane man crazy.

And that was why these days he was thinking about moving north. Specifically, Dallas. Not just looking, but doing something about it. He had a friend on the Dallas police force, Sam Rogers, a born and bred native of Forever. Sam had let him know that the Dallas police force was hiring again. So he'd filled out an application and requested an interview.

And waited.

A Captain Amos Rutherford had called him Wednesday and told him that they liked what they read and were interested. The man promised to get back to him about a time and place that was convenient for them both for the interview.

The promise of an interview had put a bounce in his step this morning, the day after Thanksgiving. Never one to dawdle, he got ready even more quickly than usual. Moving fast, he threw open the front door and his size-eleven boot came a hairbreadth away from kicking what appeared to be an infant seat that was smack in the middle of his doorstep.

An occupied infant seat.

The occupant of the infant seat made a noise just before the toe of Rick's boot made contact with said infant seat. His hands flying out to the doorjamb in an effort to keep from pitching forward, Rick managed to catch himself just in time.

"What the—?"

Stunned and surprised but ever mindful of the five-foot nothing, formidable grandmother who had raised him, Rick bit off the curse that shot to his lips. He gazed down at the infant seat and the baby he very nearly had wound up punting across his front yard.

As if sensing the attention, the infant, all waving arms and gurgling noises, swaddled in blue, looked right back up at him. Intense blue eyes met green.

The baby was smiling.

Rick was not.

This had to be somebody's really poor idea of a joke, Rick thought, although the point of it eluded him.

Immediately, his deputies came to mind. He'd said more than once that nothing ever happened in Forever and his three-man team, which contained one woman, had also heard him say more than once that he was seriously thinking about leaving the small town because the boredom was getting to him.

This was undoubtedly their idea of "excitement."

Rick glanced around the immediate vicinity. He lived approximately five miles out of town, on a small plot that was barely half an acre. The terrain was as flat as an opened bottle of last week's ginger ale and if there was someone hanging around to witness his immediate reaction to the baby, they would have been hard-pressed to find a hiding place.

There was no one around.

Rick frowned and squatted down to get a close look at the baby. It didn't help. He didn't recognize the infant.

With a sigh, he picked up the infant seat and rose to his feet.

The baby was blowing bubbles, drooling on everything and appeared unfazed by the fact that he was out here, apparently all by himself for who knew how long.

Rick touched the baby's hand to see if it was cold. The temperature had dropped down to the upper forties during the night. The tiny, curled fist was warm. The baby had to have been dropped off in the past hour.

He scanned the area again. Still no one.

Rick had always had an eye for detail and for faces. His only requirement was that the faces had to belong to someone who was at least two years old. Prior to that, one baby looked pretty much like another to him.

Which was why he didn't recognize the infant he was holding.

"This someone's idea of a joke?" he asked out loud, raising his voice.

Only the wind answered.

Holding the infant seat against him with one arm, Rick gingerly felt around the baby to see if a note had been left and slipped in between the baby and the seat. As he disturbed the blanket in his search, an overwhelming, pungent odor rose up.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," he muttered, his nose wrinkling automatically.

His uninvited visitor made another, louder grunting noise, doing away with any doubts about what was going on. There was a full diaper to be reckoned with.

"Okay, enough's enough," Rick called out. "Take your kid back."

But no one materialized. Whoever had dropped the child off on his doorstep was gone.

Rick's frown deepened. "You didn't come with your own set of diapers, did you?" The baby gurgled in response.

"Yeah, I didn't think so," Rick muttered, shaking his head. "Hope you like dish towels," he told the baby as he walked back into the house.

Rick knew without having to raid his medicine cabinet that he had no powder to use on the baby, but because his Mexican grandmother had been adamant about his learning how to cook when he was a boy, he knew he had cornstarch in the pantry. Cornstarch was fairly good at absorbing moisture.

"Beggars can't be choosers," he told the infant as he appropriated the box of cornstarch off the shelf.

With nothing faintly resembling a diaper and only one set of extra sheets, which he was not about to rip up, Rick was forced to press a couple of clean dish towels into service.

Armed with the towels and box of cornstarch, he laid the baby down on the kitchen table and proceeded to change him.

He had no problem with getting dirty and more than once had sunk his hands into mud when the situation called for it. But when it came to this task, he proceeded gingerly.

And with good reason.

When he opened the diaper, he almost stumbled backward.

“What are you, hollow?” he demanded, stunned at just how much of a “deposit” he found. “How can something so cute be so full of . . . that?” he asked.

The baby responded by trying to stuff both fists into his mouth.

He was hungry, Rick thought. “Well, no wonder you’re hungry,” he commented. “You emptied everything out.” As quickly as possible, he got rid of the dirty diaper, cleaned up his tiny visitor and put on the clean, makeshift replacement. “Let’s get you back to your mama,” he told the baby, laying him back down into the infant seat and strapping him in.

Within five minutes, Rick was in his four-wheel-drive vehicle, his unwanted companion secured in the backseat, and on his way into town.

“YOU BROUGHT us something to eat?” Deputy Larry Conroy asked, perking up when he glanced toward the man who signed his paychecks as the latter came through the front door.

From where Conroy sat, he could see that the sheriff was carrying something. Given an appetite that never seemed to be sated, nine times out of ten, Larry’s mind immediately went to thoughts of food.

“Not unless you’re a cannibal,” Alma Rodriguez commented, looking around Rick’s arm and into the basket. “What a cute baby.” She eyed her boss and asked, “Whose is it?”

Rick marched over to the desk closest to the door—it happened to belong to his third deputy, Joe Lone Wolf—and set the infant seat down.

Long, lean and lanky, Joe jumped to his feet and looked down at the occupant of the infant seat as if he expected the baby to suddenly turn into a nest of snakes.

“I was just about to ask you three that,” Rick answered, his glance sweeping over the deputies.

“Us?” Larry exchanged glances with the other two deputies, then looked back at his boss. “Why us? What do we have to do with it?” He nodded at the baby, who was obviously “it.”

Hope dwindled that this was just a prank. “Because I figured that one of you left him on my doorstep.”

Alma had a weakness for babies and a biological clock that was ticking louder and louder these days. She was making funny faces at the baby, trying to get the infant to laugh. “It’s a he?” she asked.

“Well, yeah,” Larry said, as if she should have figured that part out quickly. “He’s wearing blue.”

Joe slid back into his chair, pushing it slightly away from his desk and the baby on it. “Doesn’t mean anything.”

“It’s a he,” Rick confirmed, his tone indicating that the baby’s gender was not the important issue. “And I want to know where he came from. Any of you ever seen him before?”

Forever had not yet cracked the thousand-occupant mark. Be that as it may, he wasn’t familiar with everyone who called the small town home. In addition, Forever stood right in the path of a well-traveled highway and had more than its share of people passing through. For all he knew, this little guy belonged to someone who had made a pit stop in Forever for a meal and had gotten separated from his family for some reason.

Larry looked at the baby again and shook his head. “Nope, don’t recognize him.”

Joe had already scrutinized his temporary desktop ornament. “Never saw him before.”

“How can you be so sure?” Rick asked. “They all look alike at this age.”

“No, they don’t,” Alma protested. “Look at that personality. It’s all over his face.” She realized that the others were watching her as if she’d taken leave of her senses. “What? Just because you’re all blind doesn’t mean I have to be.”

“So you recognize him?” Rick asked, relieved.

“I didn’t say that,” she countered. Turning back to the baby, she studied him one last time and then shook her head sadly. “No, I never saw him before. This baby’s not from around Forever.”

“You know every baby in Forever?” Larry asked skeptically.

“Pretty much,” she answered matter-of-factly. “Hey, I’m a law enforcement officer. It’s my job to notice things,” she added defensively. Alma had to raise her voice to be heard above the baby, who had begun fussing. Loudly.

Joe looked at him. “I think the kid wants you to hold him.”

“Since when did you become such an expert on babies?” Larry asked.

Wide shoulders rose and fell in a careless manner. “Just seemed logical, that’s all,” Joe responded.

“I’ll hold him,” Alma volunteered. But when she took the baby into her arms, he only cried louder.

Reluctantly, Rick took the baby from her. The infant instantly quieted down.

“Looks like you’ve got the knack, Sheriff,” Larry chuckled.

If he had it, Rick thought, he didn’t want it. People this small made him nervous. He could easily see himself dropping the baby.

“Why don’t you take him to Miss Joan’s?” Alma suggested. “Everyone who comes through town stops there to eat. Maybe she remembers seeing him with his parents.”

“Or if he does belong to someone in town, she’d recognize him,” Larry added, “just in case you don’t know every kid in town, Alma.”

Rick looked at his three deputies one by one, his deep green, penetrating eyes locking with each pair in turn. He knew them, knew their habits. Neither Larry nor Alma could maintain a straight face if this was a hoax. Joe, he wasn’t so sure about.

But to his disappointment, not one of his deputies was grinning. Or looking guilty. This was on the level. Someone had left a baby on his doorstep.

Why?

Rick sighed, placed the baby back into the infant seat, strapped him in again and then picked up the infant seat. He looked down at the baby. The little boy was smiling again.

At least the kid had something to smile about, he thought.

“Anybody wants me,” he murmured as he left, “I’ll be at the diner.”

JOAN RANDALL, fondly referred to as “Miss Joan” by everyone, had run the local diner for as long as anyone in town could remember. Five foot five, with rounded curves and hair that looked to be just a wee bit too strawberry in color, the years had been kind to her. For the most part, she’d kept the wrinkles at bay despite her advancing age. Her eyes were quick to smile and she had an earth-mother quality about her that coaxed complete strangers to suddenly open up and share their life stories with her.

She had the same effect on the people she rubbed elbows with on a daily basis.

Rick had once ventured that Miss Joan had heard more confessions than all the priests within a fifty-mile radius put together.

The older woman lit up when she saw Rick walk through the door, a fond smile growing fonder when she saw that he was not alone.

“Whatcha got there, Sheriff Santiago,” she teased, coming around the counter to come closer to him. “A new deputy?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Rick answered. He carefully placed the infant seat on top of the counter, making sure that the baby was secure and that the seat didn’t wobble.

No longer being lulled by the soothing constant motion of Rick walking, the baby began to fuss and complain again.

Having come over on the other side of the counter, Miss Joan peered into the infant seat. She studied the infant for a moment, then raised her eyes to Rick’s.

“Looks like the little guy who was in here yesterday,” she told him.

“Do you remember what the people with him looked like?” Rick realized that the question had come out a bit testily. He was quick to apologize. “Sorry.” He kept one hand on the infant seat; the other he dragged through his hair. “This hasn’t exactly been one of my better mornings.”

Miss Joan smiled understandingly, then her brown eyes shifted toward the baby.

“I’m sure this little guy could say the same thing.” Leaning in closer, she cooed at the infant. “Where’s your mama, honey?”

“You remember what his parents looked like?” Rick pressed again, hoping that he would be able to get to the bottom of this fairly soon.

If the boy’s parents had really abandoned him, then there were consequences to face, but he was hoping a logical reason was behind this.

“I sure do, they were the only strangers here on Thanksgiving. They looked like two sticks,” Miss Joan told him. “One thinner than the other.” She frowned, recalling. “The guy hardly looked old enough to shave and he had one short temper. Kept complaining and telling the little bit of a thing with him to shut the baby up. The little guy kept fussing.” She smiled as she nodded at the infant. “Like the way he is now.”

“The baby’s mama seemed kinda tense,” Guadalupe Lopez, one of Miss Joan’s three waitresses and the only one who worked part-time, volunteered as she set down the sugar dispenser she was refilling and crossed over to them. “I thought she was going to cry a couple of times. I wanted to say something, but it wasn’t my place. The customer’s always right.” She raised her eyes to her boss. “Right, Miss Joan?”

“Most of the time,” Miss Joan amended. She turned her attention toward Rick. “I felt sorry for the baby and for his mama, but can’t rightly say I was sorry to see them all go. That baby’s daddy had a mean streak a mile wide. Didn’t want any trouble—” Her knowing eyes shifted to Rick’s face. “Unless it means that it would keep you hanging around here—and us—a little longer,” Miss Joan said, looking at Rick significantly.

So what happened between yesterday and this morning to separate thin parents from chubby baby? Rick wondered. “Did you happen to see if his parents were leaving town or if they were visiting someone?”

“Looked as if they were headed out of Forever to me. I heard the guy saying something about wanting to burn rubber.” Miss Joan slid her forefinger along the baby’s cheek. Her smile deepened. “So where did you find this little guy?”

“On my doorstep.”

The two women looked surprised. “Huh,” Lupe uttered, looking amused. “Don’t that beat all.”

“Not hardly,” Rick muttered. This didn’t make any sense. He definitely didn’t know anyone who resembled sticks. Why had they picked him to be the one they left their son with? Or had they picked him? Maybe it was just a random choice. “Look, I’ve got to go see if I can find these people and find out what the—” he glanced at the baby and switched words “—heck is going on. Would you look after him for me?”

He deliberately didn’t address either woman, leaving it up to them which one would say yes. When there was no immediate taker, he added, “I can’t take him with me while I’m running down his parents. No telling how long I’ll be out and I think the little guy’s hungry.”

The infant was back to shoving his fists into his mouth.

“I can see your point,” Miss Joan agreed. She pursed her lips as she looked at the infant. “I’ve got a diner to run and I don’t have much experience with short people.” Her eyes shifted over to the petite waitress. Lupe came from a large family. Eleven kids in all and she was the oldest. “Don’t you have a bunch of little brothers and sisters, Lupe?”

“Too many,” Lupe said with a sigh. “Why? You want one?”

“No, but...” Miss Joan’s voice trailed off, but her meaning was quite clear.

Lupe seemed to know better than to resist. Besides, it was obvious she thought the little guy was cute.

“I can take care of him for you, Sheriff,” she volunteered. She turned the infant seat around toward her and began to unfasten the straps securing the baby. Freeing the infant, she picked him up. “But make sure you come back.”

“Don’t worry, I will,” he promised. With that, he made his way to the door.

Rick was back faster than he intended.

Strictly speaking, he was back before he left. Opening the door, he was about to walk out of the diner when a statuesque blonde all but knocked him over. Contact was hard, jarring, and oddly electric as their bodies slammed together, then sprang apart.

Stunned, with some of the wind knocked out of her, the woman staggered, somehow managing to keep from falling, but just barely.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to run into you like that,” she apologized in a deeply melodic voice that reminded him of aged whiskey sliding down the side of a thick glass on a chilled winter morning.

His badge and uniform seemed to register belatedly in her brain and she added, “But you’re the man I need to see—” The baby made another noise, pulling her attention over to where Lupe stood holding the baby. Her eyes widened.

“Bobby!” she cried, appearing stunned and thrilled all at the same time.

Chapter Two

Trial attorney Olivia Blayne was seven steps beyond bone tired.

The twenty-nine-year-old had been on the road for more hours than she cared to think about, taking off the second she finally managed to get a lead on her younger sister's location. That was thanks to an ex-boyfriend who knew someone who could track down the coordinates of her last cell-phone call, a service which, ironically, she paid for.

In reality, she'd been paying for her sister since the day their parents had been killed, victims of a senseless robbery at the small jewelry store they owned and operated.

From the moment she'd left Dallas behind in her rearview mirror two days before Thanksgiving, Olivia had haunted every roadside diner from there to here—a small town two steps away from the border—in hopes of finding her sister and her three-month-old nephew, Bobby.

Ordinarily extremely law-abiding, she had driven like a woman possessed, determined to bring both of them back to Dallas—preferably over Don Norman's dead body, she thought bitterly.

But as the hours peeled away—and her stomach protested more frequently that she'd put off eating—Olivia started to despair that she was on a fool's errand and was never going to find either her sister or the baby.

Robert Blayne, her father and ever the pragmatic one, had taught her to rely on logic; Diana, her mother, to believe in miracles. In Olivia's estimation, she needed the latter, not the former. The former was far too daunting to think about now.

When she all but collided with the six-foot-something rugged officer in a khaki uniform, she found her miracle. Or at least half of it.

It took Olivia less than a second to recover and rush over to the young, fresh-faced Hispanic woman holding her nephew.

Her heart, all but bursting with joy, leaped into her throat.

"Bobby," she cried again, tears smarting her eyes. She blinked twice, refusing to let them escape. She'd always hated women who broke down and cried. Crying was a sign of weakness and she couldn't allow herself to be weak, not even for a moment. Far too much depended on her being strong.

Olivia stretched out her arms to the infant, eager to take him from the petite, dark-eyed waitress.

Hesitating, Lupe looked toward Rick for guidance and he nodded. Only then did she let the baby be taken from her by the woman in the deep blue—and somewhat dusty—power suit.

Bobby felt like heaven in her arms. For a second, Olivia pressed her cheek against his, just savoring the moment, the contact.

"Oh, Bobby, I was beginning to think I'd never see you again," she whispered to him.

Bobby wriggled, making a noise and seeking freedom. Reluctantly, Olivia loosened her hold on him, resting him against her shoulder. She'd discovered that, at least for now, it was his favorite position.

"So 'Bobby' is yours?" In Rick's estimation, the question was a needless one, but he still had to ask it. There were rules to follow, even in a town as small and laid-back as Forever.

The question indicated that the sheriff thought Bobby was her son, so she said, "No." The second the word was out, she negated her response, afraid that the man might think she was just some crazy woman, jumping at the chance to grab a baby.

God knew she probably looked the part, she thought, catching a glimpse of her reflection in the aluminum-covered bread box.

"Yes."

The woman in the expensive suit looked just a bit flustered, her pinned-up hair coming loose in different sections. Rick allowed his amusement to show. "Is this like some kind of a Solomon thing?"

For a moment, Olivia didn't answer. She hadn't realized how good it would feel to have this little bundle of humanity in her arms again until she'd begun to believe that she never would.

"No." Swaying just a little to lull the baby, Olivia continued to hold him against her shoulder as she looked at the man with the rock-solid chest and the annoying questions. "Bobby's my nephew." One hand cupping the back of Bobby's downy head, she turned and scanned the all-but-empty diner. A sinking feeling was setting in again. Tina wasn't here. "Where's my sister?" she asked.

Rick had a question of his own for her. "I take it that's the baby's mother?"

At twenty-four, Tina had turned out to be much too young to be a mother. Or at least, much too immature. But, for better or for worse, Tina was still Bobby's mother.

"Yes."

Rick nodded, leaning back against the counter. "I was hoping you could tell me where she was." Damn.

Olivia focused on the small-town sheriff for the first time, her eyebrows drawing together as she did a quick assessment of the man, a skill she found useful in the context of her present vocation. She could tell if a man was being sincere, or if he was lying. The only time her ability seemed to fail her was when it came to Tina. But maybe that was because the thought of her sister lying to her, after all that they'd been through, was particularly hurtful.

She wanted to believe that Tina was better than that. Wanted to, but really couldn't. Not any longer. Not after the disappearing act she'd pulled.

"Sheriff, I've been trying to find Tina and the lowlife who forced her to run off with him for the last forty-eight hours. All I know is that she should be somewhere around here."

As she spoke, Olivia became aware that the matronly looking woman behind the counter, who was quite blatantly listening intently to every word, had placed a cup of coffee and a powdered bun on a small plate practically directly in front of her.

Olivia raised her eyes to the woman's, an unspoken question in them.

The woman was quick to smile. "Thought you might need that right about now, honey," the older woman said. "You look like you're running on empty."

Admitting a weakness, or even that she was human, was not something Olivia did readily, even to someone she'd never see again. But she had been turned so inside out these past few days, what with one thing and another, that the protest that quickly rose to her lips turned into a simple "Thank you."

The next moment, giving in to her tightening stomach, she took a long sip of the inky coffee. And felt human again. Almost.

Watching, Miss Joan slanted a quick look toward Rick and then chuckled, pleased that, once again, her intuition had been right.

"I was gonna ask if you wanted cream and sugar with that, but I guess not."

"Better?" Rick asked the baby's aunt when she came up for air and set down the cup.

Olivia nodded. "Better." Her eyes shifted toward the woman behind the counter. "How much do I owe you?" she asked, setting her purse on the counter and attempting to angle into it with one hand while still holding Bobby.

Miss Joan waved away the gesture. "It's on the house, honey." And then she winked. "It's my good deed for the day. Everyone should do one good deed every day. World would be a whole lot nicer," she declared with a finality that left no invitation for debate.

Rick had waited patiently for the almost criminally attractive woman to finish her coffee. He figured it would help her pull herself together. He wasn't going anywhere and there was no hurry, but he did want some answers. Most of all, he wanted to know why the infant had been left on his doorstep. Was it happenstance, or was there some reason he'd been singled out?

"Is your sister an underage runaway?" he asked the baby's aunt.

Olivia sighed. "Tina's not underage, she's twenty-four and technically, she's not a runaway." She set her mouth hard as she thought of her sister's boyfriend. She had tried, really tried, to make him

feel welcome—she should have had her head examined—and drop-kicked the jerk into the middle of next year. “He forced her to go with him.”

Rick raised an eyebrow. First things first. “Who’s he?”

Olivia laughed shortly. The sheriff had inadvertently echoed her own sentiments. Just who was the tall, gangly, brooding individual who looked like a poor, dark-haired version of a James Dean wannabe? Or maybe it was that new sensation, the actor who was playing a vampire, that Don fancied himself to resemble? Whoever Don Norman envisioned himself to be, he had managed to brainwash her sister, turning Tina into some kind of mindless lemming who would follow this worthless human being off the edge of a cliff.

Well, not while she was around, Olivia silently vowed. Not while there was a breath left in her body. If she had to, she would drag Tina back kicking and screaming and sit on her sister until she came to her senses.

But none of this did she want to share with a virtual stranger no matter how good-looking he was. Her sister’s insanely poor judgment was her business. It was not up for public scrutiny. “He is Don Norman,” she told the sheriff. The moment stretched out and she knew the man was waiting for more. “And ever since he came into my sister’s life, Norman has turned it upside down, and turned my sister into some pathetic, mindless groupie.”

“Groupie,” Rick repeated. The word had a definite connotation. He made the only logical connection. “This Norman’s a musician?”

Olivia laughed shortly again. Don thought of himself as a musician, but as far as she knew, he’d never gotten paid and was currently part of no band.

“Among other things, or so he says,” she replied crisply. “Mostly he’s just a waste of human skin.” She looked down at the baby in her arms.

Please don’t take after your father, she implored Bobby silently.

“Sounds like you don’t like him much,” Miss Joan speculated, wiping down the same spot on the counter that she’d been massaging for the past few minutes.

“No, that’s not true. I don’t like him at all,” Olivia corrected. “I tried, for Tina’s sake.” She patted the baby’s back, moving her hand in slow, small concentric circles. The repetitive movement tended to soothe him. “And for Bobby’s. But it’s really hard to like someone who repays you for putting him up for six months by stealing your jewelry.”

“He stole your jewelry?” Rick asked, his interest in the case piquing. “You’re sure that he was the one who took it and not—”

Olivia saw where the sheriff was going with this and cut him off.

“Tina didn’t have to steal anything from me. All she had to do was ask and I’d give her whatever she needed. I have been giving her everything she’s needed.” Olivia pressed her lips together. And how’s that working out for you? a voice in her head jeered. “Norman’s the thief,” Olivia insisted. “He stole the jewelry, he stole my sister. I don’t care about the jewelry, that’s replaceable,” she told the sheriff, struggling to hold on to her temper. It wasn’t easy. Just thinking of Don pushed all her buttons. “My sister is not. And I am really afraid that something terrible is going to happen to her if she stays with the man.”

She raised her eyes to the sheriff’s. It killed her to ask a stranger for help, but she knew when she was out of her element. Tina’s welfare took precedence over her pride.

“Can you help me find them, Sheriff?”

He’d always been a fairly decent judge of character. He had a feeling that the woman before him was used to taking charge of a situation. Was this actually nothing more than a glorified matter of power play? Did she resent the fact that her sister had run off with a boyfriend she disapproved of?

“If your sister left with this Norman guy of her own free will—” Rick began.

Olivia knew a refusal when she saw it coming. Quickly, she changed strategies. “All right, then go after him for stealing my jewelry. I’ll press charges. Whatever it takes to get him out of my sister’s life and mine, I’ll do it.”

“I’d be careful how I phrase that if I were you,” Rick warned her.

Olivia felt her back going up. She’d been through a lot these past few days and there was precious little left to her patience. “I’m a lawyer, I don’t get careless with words, Sheriff.”

“And there’s abandonment,” Lupe chimed in, speaking up for the first time. “You could get this guy for that.”

The word “abandonment” suddenly sank in. Olivia realized that with her mind racing a hundred miles an hour and going off in all different directions at once, she’d gotten so caught up in finding the baby, she hadn’t asked the sheriff a very basic question. There was a huge chunk of information she was missing.

“What are you doing with my nephew in the first place, Sheriff? Why do you even have him?”

“I found your nephew on my doorstep this morning when I was leaving for work,” he informed her matter-of-factly.

“On your doorstep?” Olivia echoed, stunned. “That’s impossible. Tina would have never let Bobby out of her sight.” She paled as a possible explanation came to her. “Unless something’s happened to her.” Her eyes widened as she caught hold of the sheriff’s arm, a sense of urgency telegraphing itself from her to him. “Sheriff, you’ve got to help me find—”

“Don’t go getting ahead of yourself,” Rick told her. He thought of one plausible explanation, although it was a stretch. “Maybe your sister figured that what was ahead was too dangerous for the little guy.”

He was being kind, making up an excuse to calm the blonde with the ice-blue eyes. In his heart, though, he believed that perhaps the woman’s sister had gotten bored with playing house and had decided to abandon her latest toy, leaving him in the first place that came up. Maybe they’d passed his place on their way out of town and impulsively decided to drop the baby off on his doorstep.

Technically, his mother had done that, Rick thought, leaving him and his younger sister, Ramona, with her mother-in-law. He could still remember what she’d looked like as she’d promised to be “back soon.”

“Soon” had turned into close to eighteen years. By the time she actually had returned, he didn’t need her, or her lies, in his life. She’d come back too late. He’d grown up with a substitute mother, his tough-as-nails grandmother, molding his life and Mona’s. Maria Elena had been a hard taskmaster, but her heart had been in the right place and she had made him the man he was today. And for that, he would always be grateful to the pint-size martinet.

“Or maybe Don felt that the baby was dragging them down and he told my sister to get rid of Bobby—or else,” Olivia said.

“But he is the baby’s father, isn’t he?” Lupe asked, horrified.

“The baby’s his,” Olivia allowed slowly. “But it takes more than getting a woman pregnant to make a man a father,” she said with feeling, raising her chin.

Rick saw the anger in her eyes and found the sparks oddly fascinating.

“That vermin has no more of an idea on how to be a father than a panther knows how to walk around in high heels,” Olivia declared angrily.

“Interesting imagery,” Rick commented. He glanced down at her feet and saw that she was wearing fashionable shoes whose heels could have doubled as stilts. They had to be around five inches. How did she manage to walk around in them?

“Feet hurt?” he guessed.

They did, but that was something else she wasn’t about to admit. Besides, she’d gotten used to the dull ache.

“No,” she denied. “Why do you ask?”

“Haven’t seen heels that high since the circus came through a couple of years ago.” He glanced at her shoes again, shaking his head. The women he knew were given to jeans and boots. But on the other hand, he had to admit the woman had a great set of legs. Best he’d seen in a very long time. “They just look like they might hurt.”

She lifted the shoulder the baby wasn’t leaning against in a partial shrug. Bobby’d fallen asleep and she wasn’t about to disturb him. Olivia lowered her voice. “That all depends on what you get used to,” she told him, the inflection in her voice distant.

The woman wasn’t kidding when she said she knew her way around words. “I suppose you have a point. By the way,” he said, and extended his hand toward her. “I’m Sheriff Enrique Santiago—Rick for short.”

There was no way this man came up short in any category, Olivia caught herself thinking before she blocked any more personal observations.

Where was her mind?

Impatient with her oversight—names should have been exchanged immediately—rather than put her hand into his, she wrapped her fingers around his hand, automatically assuming the dominant position. “Olivia Blayne.”

“Olivia?” he echoed. She couldn’t tell if the sheriff was amused or charmed. “Now there’s a name you don’t hear every day.” Amused, she decided, he definitely sounded amused. Why? “What do they call you?” he asked.

Undoubtedly he was waiting for her to render up a nickname, something along the lines of “Livy,” or maybe “Livia.” He couldn’t possibly be thinking of “Olive,” she thought in horror. That name conjured up the image of a certain tall, skinny cartoon character from her childhood days.

There’d been a boy in the neighborhood, an older boy—nine to her seven—Sloan something-or-other, who’d teased her mercilessly. He’d called her Olive because she had been that skinny back then. The nickname had turned into the driving force that motivated her to not only put some meat on her bones, but to get fit as well. She’d been relentless about the latter in her teens.

“Olivia,” she informed him tersely. Only Tina got to call her something else. Tina called her Livy, but right now, Olivia didn’t know if she was up to hearing that name.

Many thoughts crowded her head. She was far too worried that something had happened to her sister. She was absolutely certain that Tina would have never just left Bobby like that. Not unless she wasn’t around to prevent it.

Don’t go there!

If it turned out, mercifully, that Tina was all right, she was going to kill her sister with her bare hands for putting her through this, Olivia thought angrily.

She took a deep breath, forcing the dark thoughts into the background. Instead, she focused on the infant sleeping on her shoulder. Focused on how good, how soothing that felt, to know that he was safe and that he was here, with her. It allowed her to pretend, just for the moment, that everything would be all right. That Tina was all right.

“Where are you from?” Rick asked.

“Dallas,” she told him. A look she couldn’t read came into his eyes. “We’re both from Dallas.”

That was over four hundred miles away. She was a long way from home. “How did you happen to track them to Forever?”

“Luck,” she replied. Because she could feel his eyes on her, waiting, she elaborated. “Tina called a friend of hers, Rachel. She told Rachel that she thought she’d made a mistake, but it was too late to change things. Rachel knew I was looking for Tina so she kept Tina on as long as she could. I have a…” Olivia hesitated for a moment, looking for the right word, then settled on “friend at the cell phone’s service center.”

There was no need to say that Warner had also been someone she'd once cared about until things got too serious, spooking her. For now, maybe forever, she was committed to her career and her sister—and Bobby—and that was more than enough.

“He managed to get the location of Tina’s last call to Rachel triangulated. I used the coordinates and came here instead of Nuevo Laredo,” she said, mentioning another small town in the area. And then an idea occurred to her as she said the name. “Maybe that’s where they went,” she said hopefully.

“Easy enough to check out,” he told her. “You have a picture of your sister?”

Olivia smiled in response. It was a confident smile, the kind that lit up a room, and a man if he happened to be in the path of it, Rick speculated.

Shifting slowly so that she didn’t wake the baby, she told Rick, “I can do better than that.” Yes, he thought, I’m sure you can.

The next second, he upbraided himself for his lack of focus.

She put her hand into her purse, rifling around, searching for the copy of the picture she’d almost forgotten to bring with her. She’d had to double back to the condo in order to pick it up. Finally locating the object of her search, she pulled it out and held it up for him to see.

“It’s a picture of my sister with the slime.”

Rick bit the inside of his mouth to keep from laughing. He had a feeling that Olivia Blayne would interpret it as laughing at her and wouldn’t appreciate it.

Chapter Three

Rick studied the photograph he'd been handed.

"Not bad looking, as far as slime goes," he commented.

The woman in the photograph looked more like a girl, really, and clearly resembled her older sister. They had the same golden-color hair, like a spring sunrise in the desert. The same bone structure as well, but while on the girl, it appeared almost too delicate, on the woman in the diner, it seemed far more classic and refined. He could see her moving with ease through influential circles in high society.

Indicating the photograph, he looked back at Olivia. "Mind if I hang on to this for a bit? I'd like to send it out with the APB." Realizing that he was guilty of just tossing around initials that she might not be familiar with, he began to explain, "That's an—"

"All points bulletin," she concluded for him. "Yes I know. You don't have to stop to break things down to their lowest level for me, Sheriff. I am familiar with some of the terms used in law enforcement." And then, because she needed something to hang on to, something to reassure her, despite her facade of confidence and bravado, that Tina was all right, she asked, "Did you happen to see my sister when she was in town?"

Rick took another glance at the photograph. Though he sensed she wanted to ask him questions about her sister, about her condition and how she'd seemed to him, he'd seen neither of the two individuals she attempted to locate.

He shook his head. "Sorry, I didn't."

Miss Joan ceased overcleaning the counter and spoke up. "I did."

Olivia instantly gravitated toward the owner of the diner. "How did she look? Was she all right?" Though Olivia had never seen any firsthand evidence of it, she strongly suspected that Don had a temper. Without a hovering older sister, he'd be free to treat Tina any way that he wanted to.

The very thought brought a numbing chill down her spine.

An intuitive look came into Miss Joan's kind hazel eyes. "I didn't see any bruises, if that's what you're asking," the older woman told her. "But your sister did look like she could do with a decent meal and about a day's sleep. I felt sorry for her, but there wasn't anything anyone could do." There was more than a trace of regret in Miss Joan's voice. "The guy she was with kept her on a real short leash. And he didn't seem too happy about this little fella fussing and crying," she added, nodding toward Bobby. "In my opinion, someone needs to take that boy behind the barn for a good whopping."

Rick could see the woman beside him growing progressively tenser. Olivia's hands fisted, even as they held the sleeping baby against her, and her expression hardened.

"Shooting him would be better," Olivia murmured with feeling.

He had a feeling she meant it. The woman certainly wasn't the squeamish type, he thought. The sooner he tracked down the missing pair and sent them all on their way, the better.

Sliding off the stool, he saw the question in her eyes. "I'm going to go post that APB, see if anyone's seen your sister and her boyfriend. You wouldn't happen to know the kind of car they were driving, would you?"

Not only did she know the kind of car they were driving, she rattled off the make, the model, the color and the license plate for him in a single breath, right down to the long scratch on the driver's side bumper.

"You've got a good eye," Rick commented, impressed. In his experience, women who looked like Olivia Blayne didn't know their way around cars, much less absorb that much about them.

"I've got a good memory," she corrected. "Don doesn't have two nickels to rub together. The car belongs to Tina. I bought it for her when she graduated high school."

“Wish I had a sister like you,” Lupe said wistfully. A look from Miss Joan had her going back to filling sugar dispensers.

Rick hadn't heard what Lupe said. He was busy studying Olivia, trying to get a handle on her. She sounded more like an indulgent parent than an older sister.

Aware of the sheriff's penetrating scrutiny, Olivia called him on it. “What?”

“Let me get this straight. You bought your sister a car. If I understood correctly what you said, she lives with you and you took in her no-account boyfriend even when you didn't want to.” Most women Olivia's age either lived on their own or with a lover, not a younger sister and that sister's deadbeat boyfriend. At least not if they could afford a place of their own, as she so obviously could.

Olivia seemed impatient for him to get to the point. “Yes?”

“Well, looking at those kinds of facts, I'd guess that you were compensating for something.” His eyes held hers. She knew she could turn away at any time, but she decided to face him down. “Were you?” he pressed.

Her first impulse was to indignantly say no, but she wouldn't cut this short. She'd always zealously guarded her privacy, hers and Tina's. Her second impulse was to tell this would-be Columbo in boots and a Stetson that it was none of his damn business and just walk away. But she couldn't.

She needed him.

Finding Tina would take a lot longer if she went about it on her own and the man had resources he could tap. Those resources could prove very useful and time saving in the long run.

Besides, she assumed that he was familiar with the area. She definitely wasn't. That all added up in his favor, even if he was too nosy for her own good.

Since the sheriff continued watching her, quietly waiting for a response, she had to tell him something. Otherwise, she ran the risk of alienating the man. And while alienating people normally didn't bother her, this time it might prove to be a liability.

Oh, damn it, Tina, why couldn't you just stay put? Why are you such a flake? What would Mom and Dad say if they were alive now?

If they were alive now, none of this would have happened. Tina had adored their father and would never have done anything to incur his disapproval.

Instead, Tina had become involved with someone who had no redeeming qualities whatsoever, gotten pregnant and then irresponsibly run off. And on top of that, from at least outward appearances, she'd abandoned her baby. Something like that could get her locked up for a long time in a place like this, Olivia thought.

After a moment's debate, she decided to tell the sheriff something she didn't normally share. None of the people at the firm where she worked were aware of this. But maybe if Santiago knew, it would make him go easier on Tina.

Right now, she could see that he wasn't about to nominate her sister for Mother of the Year, or even of the hour. And she just wanted to take Tina and the baby home, not hang around to do battle over any kind of charges he would want to bring against her sister.

Taking a breath and mentally bracing herself for the words she was about to say, Olivia began. “Ten years ago, my parents were gunned down in the jewelry store they operated.” The corners of her mouth curved in a humorless smile. “Gunned down for two hundred twenty-three dollars and seventeen cents. That was all the money that was in the register. The rest were credit card receipts that did the thieves no good.

“My sister,” Olivia continued grimly, “was in the store at the time, in the back, doing her homework. The gunmen never saw her, but she saw them and what they did. I couldn't get her to talk for a week.”

She remembered rushing home from college. Remembered the awful, empty feeling inside her as she'd identified the lifeless bodies of the people who had once filled the corners of her world so richly, so lovingly.

“Tina started acting out shortly after that, getting into fights at school. Crying at the drop of a hat. She was always afraid to go out by herself, always looking over her shoulder.” Olivia looked up at him and lifted one shoulder in an almost hapless shrug. “I did what I could to make her feel safe.”

Rick didn't follow her reasoning. “By giving her things?” he asked.

Olivia inclined her head. “Among other things,” she allowed. She could see the sheriff didn't understand. Most men wouldn't, she supposed. “Possessions give you a feeling of stability, of continuity. Owning something feels good.”

Rick laughed shortly. The sideways logic interested him, not that he bought into it.

“Then Ed Murphy must feel really stable,” he commented. When she raised a quizzical eyebrow in response, he told her, “Ed's one of Forever's more eccentric citizens. He's always pawing through things other people throw out. A lot of that stuff finds its way into Ed's one-bedroom house. I hear it's like a rat's nest in there these days.”

She didn't know if he was just relating a quaint story or subtly ridiculing her. Sheriff Enrique Santiago looked like a simple man on the surface—sexy as all hell, but simple—but she had a strong suspicion that beneath those prominent cheekbones was a rather shrewd, logical man.

For now, she decided to reserve her final judgment, at least for a little while. She hadn't gotten to the position of junior partner in her rather highly regarded, high-profile firm so quickly by making hasty decisions and snap judgments.

“About that APB,” she prodded.

“On it,” he assured her. With that, he turned on his heel and started for the door. When she followed him, shadowing him step for step to the door, he stopped short. “Are you coming with me?”

She smiled. “Can't put anything over on you, can I?” she asked in what she hoped he'd take to be a teasing manner. She had to keep reminding herself not to get on his wrong side and that she needed him.

He glanced at Miss Joan. “I figured you'd be more comfortable staying here.” And he would be more comfortable going about his job without having her less than five feet away.

“Comfort isn't my main priority,” she informed him, her voice growing more serious. “If you don't mind, I'd like to go with you, see what you do.”

Having a beautiful woman around was way down on his list of things he minded. But, in this case, he knew it wasn't just to keep him company. “Don't trust me to send out that APB?” He was sharp, she thought. He seemed a little too laid-back for her taste and she just wanted to make sure that he did everything he could to locate Tina. But she knew that admitting as much would be a tactical mistake, male egos being what they were, so she forced another smile to her lips, one that was a little sensual around the edges, and said, “No, I just like leaving myself open to new experiences.”

The amused smile that came to his lips told her that she could have phrased that considerably better.

She was tired, Olivia thought, and there was no denying that emotionally she'd been through the ringer these past forty-eight hours. That was the reason she wasn't at the top of her game.

“Nice to know,” he responded.

She could have sworn a twinkle had entered those incredible green eyes.

Or what could have passed for one, she amended silently. Seeing as how she'd never encountered a “twinkle” before that wasn't captured within an old-fashioned string of Christmas lights. Like the ones her father used to string up around the house during the holidays, she remembered fondly.

The next moment, Olivia felt a pang in the center of her chest. That she missed her parents went without saying, but she missed them the most around this time of year. Thanksgiving this year had been spent with her searching for Tina, an emptiness eating away at her as she stopped at one diner after another, encountering dead ends and pitying looks.

She didn't even want to think about what Christmas might be like if she didn't find Tina.

Decorations had started going up all over Dallas right after the pumpkins had been put away. That only prolonged her nostalgia and the sadness that inevitably overtook her. There was a very real chance that this year, she would wind up spending Christmas alone. Alone because she'd lost touch with all her friends in her drive to succeed, to give Tina a sense of stability and try to meet her every need. Alone because Tina wouldn't be there.

Damn it, since when did you turn into this maudlin, self-pitying creature? Your life is what you make it, so make it good, Livy, make it good.

Besides, she wouldn't be alone. If nothing else, Bobby would be there and Bobby needed her. She hugged the baby to her a little tighter.

"Hey, aren't you forgetting something?" Miss Joan called out after them.

Olivia turned around, reaching into her purse with her free hand. Obviously the woman had changed her mind about being generous. Just as well.

"I offered to pay you," Olivia reminded the woman, crossing back to the counter.

Miss Joan merely shook her head, a patient, tolerant expression on her face.

"I was talking about the baby's infant seat," she said, pointedly holding it up. Olivia had left it on the counter after taking her nephew into her arms.

Rick was at her side in two steps, picking up the seat.

He nodded at Miss Joan. "Thanks." With that, he was back at the front door in time to open it for Olivia and the baby. The latter began to rouse from his all-too-short nap.

"I think he might be hungry," Miss Joan speculated, raising her voice so that they would hear her as they walked out of the diner.

Stopping again, Rick looked at Olivia. He hadn't thought of that. For the most part, babies were beyond his realm of expertise. "She has a point. I could swing by the grocery store," he volunteered. "Pick up some milk and a baby bottle—"

"Or we could go to the backseat of my car," Olivia interjected, stopping him before he could go any further. "I packed a few bottles and some formula for Bobby before I left. Tina only took one bottle with her." A smile that was equal parts affectionate and long-suffering resignation came over her lips. "Tina doesn't exactly plan things out."

But Olivia wasn't like her sister, Rick observed. She came prepared. He found that to be an attractive quality in a woman.

"She's not alone," he told her. "I see that a lot as sheriff."

Olivia unlocked her car. "You can put the seat in the back," she told him.

Seeing as how the diner was barely five feet away, he found the fact that she'd locked her vehicle before leaving it amusing. People didn't lock their doors in Forever, much less their cars. In part that was because people trusted one another around here. In part it was because there wasn't all that much worth taking. It all worked out in the end.

And all that did was remind him that his job was superfluous. A halfway intelligent monkey could handle it. He needed something more challenging.

No sooner had he deposited the seat into the back than Rick found himself on the receiving end of Olivia's nephew, who was now fully awake and not in the best of moods.

"Hold him for a second," she said after the fact.

He cradled the infant in the crook of his arm. "You asking me or telling me?"

"Whichever works," she answered glibly, then inclined her head in a semiapology as her tone replayed itself in her head. He undoubtedly thought she was being too bossy. God knew Tina had accused her of that often enough. "I'm sorry. I have a habit of issuing orders. Comes from taking charge so much, I guess. I didn't mean to offend you."

Secure in his manhood and comfortable in his own skin, it would take a great deal more than a petite blonde in expensive high heels and a designer suit to rattle his confidence. Her apology, however, did surprise him. He would have put money on her never actually apologizing for anything

she did. Maybe you couldn't always tell a book by its cover. "No offense taken," he answered. "I was just being curious."

Shifting the baby to his other arm, Rick peered over Olivia's shoulder into her vehicle. He was about to ask if she wasn't worried that the formula might have spoiled in the car, but he had his answer before he got to ask the question. She'd brought along a large cooler filled with ice and baby formula. He noticed that she'd also brought along several packages of disposable diapers. They were piled up on one side.

Rick laughed to himself. Olivia Blayne struck him as the kind of person others gravitated to during a natural disaster. She obviously knew how to think on her feet and was prepared for anything.

Except a runaway sister.

But then, if he was being honest with himself, he still wasn't a hundred percent convinced that her sister hadn't opted to run off rather than have every moment of her life planned out by a well-intentioned but highly dictatorial older sister.

Or at least that was what he would have surmised Tina's feelings to be on the matter.

If it wasn't for the fact that the baby had been left on his doorstep, Rick had to admit that he would have been inclined to just let the whole matter go, even if the woman making the charge was, hands down, the most gut-tightening attractive woman he'd laid eyes on in a very long time.

Beauty-contest-winner pretty or not, though, that still didn't make Olivia Blayne right, he thought.

Bottle in hand, Olivia straightened up, hit the lock on the rear door and closed it.

"Do you have a microwave or a stove where I could warm this up?" she asked, indicating the chilled bottle in her hand.

"We have a microwave," he assured her. There was one in the small room where he and the others took their lunch and occasionally, when he had someone sleeping it off in their only cell, their dinner. "We got it just after we learned how to make fire by rubbing two sticks together," he couldn't resist adding.

Olivia opened her mouth to respond, then shut it again. She would have to be more careful how she phrased things around this small-town sheriff, she chided herself. There was obviously a vein of sensitivity beneath the rock-solid pectorals.

Taking her nephew back from his arms, she flushed slightly. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound as if I thought you were backward in Forever."

"But you do, don't you?" he asked knowingly. There was no indication that he took offense at that, or even that he found it irritating. "Think it," he added when she looked at him quizzically.

"No," Olivia denied with feeling, then, as he continued to look at her knowingly, she relented. "Well, maybe just a little. This is a small town," she said by way of what she hoped he'd accept as an explanation.

"Little or not, progress finds us all," he assured her, then confided in a conspiratorial whisper, "We've even got one of them there newfangled com-pew-ters. Now if we could only figure out how to make it work."

"All right, all right," she surrendered, "point taken. I'm sorry. I'm really not trying to be condescending. Having to track down my sister and Bobby has thrown me off track. I'm usually a lot better than this."

"Looking forward to seeing that," he told her with a wide smile that somehow found its way into her belly a moment before it unfurled.

The next moment, she quickly blocked the feeling that flowed out through her. Olivia deliberately shifted her eyes away from him and wound up looking at the single-story building that housed Forever's police department.

The only thing that mattered, she told herself as she followed the sheriff inside, was finding Tina and taking her home.

She didn't have time to think about anything else.
At least, not now.

Chapter Four

Humming a bastardized version of “Here Comes Santa Claus,” Alma emerged from the back storage closet carrying a huge, somewhat worn cardboard box that looked to be almost half as big as she was. Written across the side in big, block letters, were the words Christmas decorations. With a dramatic sigh, the female deputy set the box down on the small table against the wall that functioned as the catchall for everything that didn’t have an assigned place within the office. During the holidays, it housed the pint-size Christmas tree as well as any baked goods that generous citizens—or Alma—wanted to send the sheriff’s department’s way.

Only when she set her burden down did Alma see the sheriff and the person and a half who were with him in the office.

Olivia felt a definite chill as the woman regarded her.

“I see you found the baby’s mother.” The expression on the deputy’s face was far from friendly. It wasn’t hard to see what she thought of a woman who left her baby on someone’s doorstep.

“No, this is his aunt, Olivia Blayne,” Rick told Alma. Alma’s expression softened a degree. “She’s been looking for the baby. And for her sister.”

“Her sister, the mother?” Alma asked, still eyeing Olivia.

“Got it on the second try,” Rick congratulated the woman drily. He glanced at the teeming box the deputy had set down. Once Alma got caught up decorating, there was no stopping her. “Look, I need you to stop decorating the office for a minute and put out an APB for me.”

“Haven’t started decorating yet,” Alma informed him. Resigned that the decorating would have to wait, she held her hand out. “Give me the information.” Rick gave her both the paper he’d written on and the photograph of the missing duo. Alma glanced at the photograph first, then looked at the description of the car. Raising her eyes to her boss, she shook her head. “You should’ve been a doctor, Sheriff. Medical people appreciate handwriting that looks like a chicken did a war dance after stumbling over a bottle of ink.”

Joe glanced up from the book he was studying. He’d been taking classes online, intent on eventually getting a degree in criminology. His face remained expressionless as he told her, “You can’t say that,” in his low, rumbling voice.

They’d been together so long, they were like siblings, she, Joe and Larry, with a sibling’s penchant for squabbling.

“Say what?” Alma asked.

“War dance,” Joe told her.

Alma pressed her lips together, annoyed. “Why not? You say things like that all the time.”

Joe went back to reading. “I’m a full-blood Apache, I can make any reference to Indians I want to. One of the few pleasures that your government forgot to take away from us,” he deadpanned.

Alma’s eyes shifted toward the sheriff.

Rick raised his hand before she could speak, waving away anything that might have risen to her lips. Friendly squabble or not, he was not about to get pulled into this.

“Just get that APB out for me,” he told Alma. “Now.”

She sat down at her desk and looked at the paper again. Her brow furrowed as she turned the paper upside down, pretending to try to make sense of what was on the page. But she really couldn’t decipher what Rick had written down.

“What kind of a car are we talking about?” she finally asked.

“It’s a red Mustang, 2004,” Olivia filled in, moving over toward the woman’s desk.

“Red Mustang, huh? Shouldn’t be too hard to spot,” she commented. She moved the keyboard closer and began to type. “How long have they been gone?” she asked conversationally.

“They took off several days ago. This is the closest I’ve gotten to finding them.” Despite the fact that she was swaying slightly in an attempt to soothe her nephew, Bobby was becoming more audible about his displeasure. Olivia turned toward the sheriff and held up the bottle she had in her other hand. “You said there was a microwave around here?”

About to point her in the direction of the back room, Rick decided he might as well take her there himself. Alma, who was far better at the computer than he, was taking care of putting out the APB. So right now, nothing was on tap except some annoying paperwork that required his attention. The paperwork wasn’t going anywhere.

“This way,” Rick said, walking in front of the woman and her fussing nephew.

The room that did double duty as a kitchen/break area and storage facility was only slightly larger than a walk-in closet. The window on the opposite wall gave it the illusion of being larger than it was.

Rick pointed out the microwave. It sat in the middle of a table that looked only a fraction more sturdy than a folding card table. The microwave itself had seen better days. It had come to them, a second-hand donation from Miss Joan, who had upgraded the one in her diner.

Olivia shifted the baby to her other side, trying to prop him up on her hip. The boy was still too small for that and she didn’t want to have to juggle him while testing the milk. Putting the bottle inside the microwave, she selected a time, then pressed Start. When the oven dinged, she turned to the sheriff and held the baby out to him.

“Hold him, please,” she requested,

Now what? Rick eyed her uncertainly. Why was she giving him the boy? “You want me to feed him?”

She opened the microwave and took the bottle out again. “No, I need to test the milk to make sure that it’s not too hot for Bobby.”

Olivia shook out a few drops on her wrist. Then, because she didn’t want to just let the milk slide down her skin onto the floor, she quickly licked the drops up.

Why he found that simple act so sensual and arousing was something Rick told himself he’d have to explore at a later time. Right now, he figured it was best not to go there.

“What’s the verdict?” he asked.

She smiled, setting the bottle down on the table for a moment and holding out her arms. “It’s warm, but not too hot.”

“Like the fairy tale,” Rick commented, handing the baby back to her.

“Fairy tale?” Olivia asked, curious. Sitting down, she tucked Bobby against her and started feeding him. The moment she placed the nipple near his lips, he started sucking greedily.

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” Rick told her, resting a hip against the table as he watched the baby eat. “You know,” he elaborated, “too hot, too cold, just right.”

“Oh, right.” Her mind hadn’t gone in that direction for a reason, which she explained. “I didn’t take you for the type to know fairy tales.”

Rick laughed shortly. “I didn’t just appear one day, wearing a badge and a gun belt. I was a kid once, just like you were.”

The smile that came to her lips was sad, distant, as if she was trying to access something and wasn’t quite successful. She looked down at her nephew, taking comfort in just watching him. “I don’t remember ever being a kid. It feels like I was always an adult.”

He read between the lines, remembering what Olivia had said to him earlier. “How long have you been at it?”

Her eyes met his. “It?”

He nodded. “Taking care of your sister.”

She didn’t even have to stop to think. She could have told him the figure in months if he’d wanted it that way. “Ten and a half years.”

No wonder she didn't remember having a childhood. She practically hadn't. She had to have been in her teens when she'd taken on the responsibility. "That's a long stretch."

She smiled at his choice of words. "You make it sound like a prison sentence."

He paused for a moment, his eyes on hers. The woman didn't sound bitter about it, which he found impressive. "Is it?"

"No," Olivia said with feeling. "I love my sister." She didn't want him thinking she was being a martyr about this. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Do I wish that Tina was a little more responsible? Yes, of course I do, but that doesn't mean I don't love her."

"Didn't say you didn't." Finished with his bottle, the baby's mouth had traces of formula all over it. Rick took out his handkerchief and gently wiped away the milky substance. "But life's a complicated thing. You can love someone and still find that there are times you don't like them very much."

To be honest, he expected more denials. He was surprised to see that he'd evoked a smile from the woman instead.

Her eyes crinkled a little as she said, "You have siblings." It wasn't a question.

Rick began to tuck the handkerchief back into his pocket and was surprised when Olivia put out her hand for it. He surrendered it to her and watched as she spread it over her left shoulder.

"One," he told her. "A younger sister."

"We have that in common then." Placing Bobby against her shoulder, Olivia gently began to pat the baby's back, waiting for the obligatory burp. "Except that your sister is probably one of those superresponsible types."

He had no idea how she had guessed that. "She is." Then he explained, "Abuela wouldn't have allowed her to be anything else."

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