

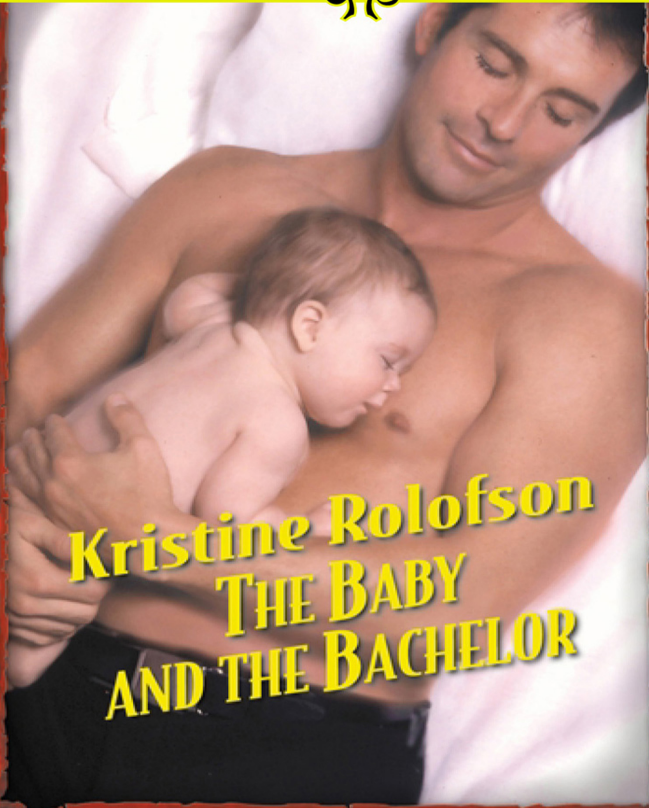


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COOPER'S CORNER



Kristine Rolofson
THE BABY
AND THE BACHELOR

Kristine Rolofson

The Baby And The Bachelor

Аннотация

Dr. Stuart Thorpe can handle any emergency, but baby-sitting his six-month-old niece Bree is another matter! The stressed-out bachelor needs help pronto— and gorgeous baby photographer Kim Cooper is the perfect solution. Surely she's an expert on tearful tots? Her effect on Stuart's libido is a definite bonus....Kim can handle babies, but sexy, good-looking men like Stuart are another matter. Still, she agrees to accompany the two on the short journey home. She hadn't counted on getting stranded overnight...at a romantic country inn. Or falling hard for Stuart's seductive bedside manner. But how on earth can she face the delectable doc the morning after...?

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“I am not going to have sex with you...”

There. Kim had said it. Now they could sleep. Even if they were sharing the same king-size bed.

“Sweetheart, forget about sex. I’d be happy if you would just share some of the sheet,” Stuart teased.

Kim knew that if she turned to look at him she would see a most excellent male body wearing nothing but silk boxer shorts.

“I usually sleep naked,” he had explained earlier. “I bought these to impress you.”

She gazed into his dark chocolate eyes. “It will take more than that.”

“I can take them off,” he murmured.

At her pointed look, he said, “Okay, I shouldn’t be lusting after the baby-sitter.”

Kim smiled in the darkness. “Do not call me the baby-sitter, as if I’m some teen earning money to spend at the mall.”

“All right. You’re the sexy photographer accompanying the heart surgeon to Maine. We’re about to have a sexual encounter in a romantic, historic inn while the baby sleeps like a log and doesn’t wake up till nine the next morning.”

Maybe I am going to have sex with you....

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the Cooper family! Vicki Lewis Thompson, Jill Shalvis and I have the good fortune to introduce a new Harlequin continuity series by bringing you stories about Kim, Kate and Nick Cooper—the Rhode Island branch of the Cooper’s Corner family. Charles Cooper sired twin sons, John and Justin, before dying in World War II. John grew up with a camera in his hand and talent for photography that led to a newspaper job and his own studio in Rhode Island.

Kim and Kate, John’s twins, run the family’s photography business after their parents retire to Florida. When shy Kim meets Stuart Thorpe, little does she know she’s about to hit the road with a baby and the man of her dreams. So, of course, sister Kate will have a wedding to plan, while trying to stay out of bed with the best man. And then there’s older brother Nick, an adventurer looking for peace and quiet only to discover he’s hiding a mysterious woman and her large dog.

The day after I finished this book, my husband and I took off for Plymouth to visit the “rock” and enjoy a gorgeous autumn day. We followed Kim and Stuart’s trail and, like this story’s characters, promptly became lost outside Boston. We’ve also been lost in Salem, Providence, Concord and New Haven, so there’s a pattern here!

I hope you enjoy our branch of the Cooper clan. And please visit New England. Order a lobster roll. Spend a romantic night at a bed-and-breakfast—maybe in the town of Cooper’s Corner. But please don’t forget to buy a map.

Happy reading!

Kristine Rolofson

The Baby and the Bachelor

Kristine Rolofson



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1

“I GOT YOU OUT OF BED? That figures.”

“Payne, I worked until five-thirty this morning.” Stuart Thorpe, dressed in his oldest T-shirt and khaki shorts, took the baby from his sister’s arms and watched Payne dump an armload of baby paraphernalia on his marble-tiled floor. “I’m relaxing. What do you think I’m doing on my day off?”

“Having orgies, wild parties, and other sorts of things I won’t mention,” she answered, giving him that disapproving older sister look he was very familiar with, having experienced it for all of his thirty-five years.

“My college memories are very important to me,” he teased, since Payne knew full well that he had worked too many hours studying to spend time on parties of any kind.

“You don’t have a woman asleep in there, do you?”

“No.” His sisters tended to exaggerate the extent of his social life, only because he hadn’t settled down yet, something that seemed to worry both of them. “Bambi left early to go to work at the Foxy Lady.”

Payne glared at him. “I never know if you’re joking or not. Isn’t the Foxy Lady that place where exotic dancers serve breakfast?”

“Yes, it is and yes, I’m joking. I swear. I haven’t been to the Foxy Lady since my twenty-first birthday.”

“You don’t need to,” she muttered, moving past him to deposit a fistful of bottles in his refrigerator. “Women throw themselves at you all the time. It’s ridiculous.”

“I think it’s nice.” He grinned at his niece, whose chubby fingers patted his cheek. “Uncle Stuart has lots of very pretty friends.”

“Well,” Payne said. “Keep your pretty friends away while Bree is here. I don’t want you distracted from baby-sitting.”

“Sure.” Stuart would have laughed, but he didn’t dare. He kept his family and his social life separate, so whatever lovely lady he was dating wouldn’t get the wrong idea and think there was going to be anything permanent in the future. Payne didn’t look the least bit relieved, but she couldn’t take the baby to Maine with her either, not right now.

“Do you really think you can handle this until Temple gets home?” she asked. Temple was their younger sister.

“No problem,” Stuart uttered, but he knew and his sister knew that taking care of a six-month-old baby was one hell of a job and not under the “no problem” category at all. But Stuart figured he and Bree could muddle through. “What’s an uncle for?”

“Are you sure?” Payne looked worried, but his older sister almost always looked worried. Stuart moved her toward the door.

“We’ll get along just fine.” His niece was in his arms, tugging on his earlobe as if she wanted to remove it from his head and fling it across the polished wood floor. Brianne Nicole Johnson liked to throw all sorts of things. “You brought her playpen,

right?”

“It’s outside, by the door.” She paused and looked around his black-and-white living room. “This ultramodern furniture looks dangerous.”

He looked at his glass and chrome coffee table, his leather sofa and an entertainment center that had cost more than a semester at college. “It costs too much to be dangerous and besides, Bree is going to be too busy to have time to hurt herself, Payne. The activities list you gave me is two pages long.”

His oldest sister frowned again, but this time she walked toward the door. “Temple will be back in town by dinnertime. She said she’d call you from the airport and then come right over and get Bree.”

“Fine. Give me a call tonight and let me know how Phil’s mother is.”

“I will.” Now Payne looked as if she was about to cry. She loved her in-laws, and the thought of her mother-in-law in the hospital was almost more than Payne could bear, especially now, with her husband in Australia on a business trip. The three Thorpe siblings shared the same dark hair, athletic builds and dark brown eyes, but Payne was the emotional one of the family. And, as the oldest, the bossiest. “Make sure she eats on time.”

“Mummm,” the baby hummed, one chubby hand reaching out to her mother. Payne kissed her three more times and then hurried toward the door. She turned around once more and gave her brother another order. “You will make sure she takes a nap?”

And that her car seat is fastened correctly? And if she gets sick or anything, you can call her pediatrician. The number's in the bag."

"Fine."

"And tell Temple I'm counting on her."

"We can take care of Bree," he assured her, knowing damn well his sisters didn't actually believe he was thirty-five.

"Don't forget her photo appointment at four-thirty. If she doesn't get it done now I'll have to wait another three months to get in. Oh, and I scheduled it between her nap and her dinner, so make sure you follow the schedule," was Payne's parting order.

"Will do." Stuart shut the door and turned to Bree. "Your mom's a real pain in the—well, you'll figure that out when you're fifteen." Bree's big brown eyes stared unblinking at him. "Then you call Uncle Stuart for help, okay?"

"Mmmm," his niece gurgled and gave his ear another painful twist.

Stuart glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was going to be a long afternoon.

"I JUST DON'T KNOW WHERE the time goes," Anna Gianetto muttered. She squinted at her watch. "Is it four-thirty or three-thirty?"

"Four-thirty," Kim told her neighbor.

"Already? Ooh," she said, fanning her ample bosom with a Providence Photography brochure. "I brought you too many things today."

"It's okay. My last appointment isn't here yet." Kim adjusted

the array of children's clothes so that the light was right and then, with Anna's digital camera, took the picture.

"You do good work," Pat O'Reilly said, patting Kim on the back while Anna retrieved the clothing. "You're a good girl to do this for us."

"I don't mind," she told them. She knew they were worried about her right now. Everyone was, which was more than a little disconcerting. Kim Cooper never liked being the center of attention.

"Well, you're a good girl," Patrick repeated.

"I know." She winked at him. Her neighbors were like family since she'd known them almost all her life. Their venture into selling things on eBay, an online auction house, provided them with extra spending money and Kim with their company. They made her laugh, though her sister Kate thought Kim was a little bit crazy for hanging out with the elderly neighbors. "It's a nice change from babies and cats and dogs."

Patrick, a short, wiry man in his early eighties, shook one gnarled finger at her. "One of these days you'll have your own babies, Kimmy, don't you worry."

"I'm not worried," she promised. Two years ago, when Jeff broke off their engagement and said he "couldn't commit," she'd believed her family's declarations that life held all sorts of wonderful surprises and all she had to do was stay cheerful. Recently she'd decided that maybe her life was simply going to be one long day after another. The men her sister had tried to fix

her up with hadn't been the least bit interesting—or maybe, to be fair, the men themselves weren't interested in a nonglamorous version of her twin.

“You should get out more,” Anna said. “You spend too much time by yourself.”

“I will,” she promised, as she did every time her neighbors came to the studio. “I promise.”

“Robbie likes you,” Anna said. “He stops by from that gym of his sometimes, you know. ‘Aunt Anny,’ he says, ‘what am I doin’ wrong that Kim won’t marry me?’”

“I’m not in love with him, Anna.” Kim secretly thought Robbie, a competitive weight lifter, was more in love with his own body than wanting anything to do with hers. Anna, determined to take care of her young neighbor, had a legion of nephews she’d thought were “just right” for Kim.

“You could try harder. Women shouldn’t wait so long to get married these days,” Anna advised. She put the carefully folded clothing into a brown shopping bag. “That’s why they have trouble having babies, now. Their eggs are old. That’s not the way it was in our day. I got pregnant on our honeymoon.”

“Yeah,” Pat said. “Mary and I had our first boy when we were twenty.” He frowned, trying to remember. “Or maybe it was nineteen. My memory sure as heck isn’t what it used to be.”

“It’s too bad that things are different now,” Kim said, hoping her own eggs would give her a few more optimistic years before drying up. She was only twenty-six, not exactly middle-aged, so

shouldn't those little suckers be thriving? "Maybe I'm not the marrying kind."

"Nonsense," Pat said.

"Give me the old days," Anna said. "When men were men."

"And women were women," Patrick added with a sigh. Kim often wished she could have seen what he looked like when he was younger. She suspected he'd been as handsome as sin and twice as charming. "No one even bakes anymore."

"Hey," Anna said. "You come by and I'll make anise cookies for you."

"Me, too?" Kim had a weakness for her neighbor's Italian specialty.

"Sure, honey. We'll have ourselves a little party," Anna declared, satisfied that she had stuffed everything into her shopping bag.

"We'd better get out of here, Anna." Pat jerked his thumb in the direction of the reception area. "Kimmy has real work to do now."

They all looked toward the open door and heard a baby fussing and a low male voice trying to soothe—Kim searched her memory—Brienne Johnson.

"Hello?" the man called, sounding a little flustered. It was unusual for a father to arrive for a baby's first photo. She hoped Brienne's mother was out there, too, so the little girl would calm down.

"Coming!" Kim hurried over toward the door, a welcoming

smile on her face. Her specialty was babies, while Kate did the glamour shots and more artistic projects. And this baby, she saw, was especially gorgeous. She had dark curling hair and big brown eyes, and a dimple in her left cheek when she stopped fussing and smiled at Kim.

“How did you do that?” the father said, and that’s when Kim’s gaze lifted to the man’s face. His very familiar face. At first she didn’t think she believed what her brain was trying to tell her: Stuart Thorpe was standing eight feet away.

“Do that?” she echoed, her mind blank except for one thought: Stuart Thorpe was holding a baby.

“Kim?” he said, his beautiful mouth turning into a smile. “Kim Cooper?”

“Yes,” she managed to gulp. He would never in a thousand lifetimes mistake her for her twin, of course. No one ever had, not since they were in elementary school. She made an attempt to brush her hair back with her hand and then gave up. Stuart Thorpe still wouldn’t notice her unless she was blond, busty and running her hands over his chest—none of which was likely.

“It’s been a long time,” Stuart said, adjusting his grip on the baby so she wouldn’t wriggle out of his arms.

“Years,” she agreed. He looked as handsome as ever, she noted with some disappointment. He hadn’t lost any of that thick dark hair. He hadn’t gotten fat. He still looked good in anything he wore, even a rumpled polo shirt and shorts that looked as if Brianne had spilled six or seven spoonfuls of baby food on them.

“Five or six years, at least,” he repeated, looking dazed. “How are you? And your sister Kate?”

“We’re both fine.”

“You haven’t changed a bit,” Stuart said, which wasn’t the most flattering thing he could say. Kim knew she had been an awkward, innocent and terribly shy art student with a passion for photography and a secret crush on a young doctor in the apartment downstairs. And she hadn’t changed much either, obviously.

“So,” she said, trying to regain some resemblance of professionalism. “Let’s get Brianne settled in the studio so that she’s comfortable. Your wife said she wanted an assortment of pictures to choose from and—”

“Oh,” he said, following her into the next room where Anna and Patrick waited, transfixed with curiosity. “That wasn’t my wife. You talked to—”

“What a beautiful baby,” Anna interrupted, holding out her arms. Brianne, obviously sensing a more comfortable chest to snuggle against, went willingly into Anna’s embrace as the plump woman settled herself on Kim’s leather sofa.

“Thanks,” Stuart said. “She takes after my side of the family, I think.”

So he wasn’t married to the baby’s mother. Divorced? Kim eyed the baby, who wasn’t more than five or six months old. No. It was more likely that Stuart and Brianne’s mother had never married. No surprise there. Stuart Thorpe attracted women like

her twin sister attracted men.

It was a gift.

“Mrs. Gianetto, this is Stuart Thorpe, an old friend. Stuart, this is Anna Gianetto and Patrick O’Reilly, my neighbors.”

Patrick frowned at the younger man, but he stepped forward to shake Stuart’s offered hand. “Nice to meet you,” he said, not sounding as if he meant it. “You know our Kim, huh?”

“Yes.”

“She’s a nice girl,” the old man declared. “A good girl.”

“Stuart,” Kim said quickly. “I heard that you’re a heart surgeon now.”

“Uh, yes—” he stopped, watching his baby. “Uh, Mrs.—”

“Gianetto,” Kim supplied, watching Anna cradle the child.

“Mrs. Gianetto,” Stuart tried again. “If you hold her like that she’ll think she’s going to get fed and then I’m afraid she’ll—”

Scream.

Kim winced. Brianne’s wail of frustration bounced off the ivory walls of the studio and effectively stopped conversation. Patrick winced and reached for his hearing aid.

“Mamma mia,” Anna exhaled. “This one has a temper like my first husband.” She lifted the little girl and aimed her toward Stuart.

“She takes after her mother,” he said, looking amused as he took the baby back into his arms. His smile faded as Brianne’s wails escalated.

“Where is her mother?” Kim asked.

“In Maine,” he shouted. “Family emergency!”

“Maybe it would be better if you waited until her mother returns,” Kim suggested. “Your little girl might be in a better mood for her pictures then.”

“I’ll catch hell for messing this up,” he muttered, awkwardly patting the baby’s back. “Can’t you do something? Some photographer tricks?”

“Give her to me.” She held out her arms and Stuart quickly handed over the baby. Brianne let out one more complaint and then stared at Kim as if she was trying to decide whether to scream again or not.

Patrick glared at Stuart again. “That baby of yours doesn’t seem to like her daddy very much.”

Stuart ignored him and looked at Kim. “Can you do anything with her? There are some extra clothes in her bag, I think, if we need them. And her blanket.”

“Look, sweetheart,” Kim said, keeping her voice low. “Would you like to see some pretty toys? Or some funny puppets?” Brianne’s brown eyes didn’t blink, but she took a deep shuddering breath.

Kim looked over at her audience of three. Stuart appeared relieved and tired. Anna sat on the couch as if she was watching a particularly fascinating television show and Patrick stood with his arms folded across his chest, clearly convinced he was protecting his women from a dangerous stranger.

“I take it you’re all staying?” she asked.

“I can wait outside,” Stuart offered, taking a step backward.

“Good idea,” Patrick said.

“But she knows you,” Kim told Stuart. As much as she wished he would leave, she couldn’t risk Brianne throwing another fit if she discovered she was alone with strangers. Babies were sensitive little beings, she knew. And they knew what was going on around them.

“If you insist,” Stuart said.

“Fine.” She didn’t want to insist. She wanted her heart to beat normally again and she wanted to stop worrying that her face was red. She also didn’t know how much longer she could hide how nervous she was.

“I’ll stay, too.” Patrick moved over to the couch and sat beside Anna.

“Great,” Kim muttered, moving over to the staged area where she photographed children. “You all have to be quiet. I don’t want her to be distracted.” She turned back to Stuart. “Did you bring any of her favorite toys?”

“I’ll look.” He practically ran out the door to the waiting room.

“What a nice young man,” Anna said. “You were friends, eh? What kind of friends?”

Kim shook her head. “Never mind about that, Anna. It was a long time ago. I was a senior in art school and he was in residency at Rhode Island Hospital. We lived in the same apartment house in East Providence.” She wondered if Brianne would be happier if she was propped into a sitting position or if she would be better

on her tummy, lifting her head and smiling for the camera. She would have to try it both ways and hope the little girl wouldn't object too loudly.

"Hmm," her neighbor said. "You must have liked him. I can tell."

"No," Kim said. "Not really." A secret crush, that was all, which she would never admit to anyone. Of course, Stuart hadn't given her a second look after one casual date, except to ask who her twin was dating.

"Humph," was all Anna said as Stuart, holding a pink terry cloth turtle and a darker rose blanket, hurried back into the room. He looked ridiculous and also terribly appealing, Kim thought, hoping she didn't appear too pathetic and wistful as she watched him cross the room.

Funny that the man who swore he'd never settle down was now a father.

HE'D FORGOTTEN Kim Cooper was a photographer—or maybe he never knew. He hadn't forgotten that reddish-gold hair or jade-green eyes or her slender little body. Kim Cooper had had a great-looking ass and still did, despite the fact that she wore baggy shorts. Stuart watched her work with his moody little niece, coaxing the baby into smiling for the camera. He caught the outline of her breasts when she bent over to adjust a black cord, glimpsed a bit of appealing cleavage in the V of her white blouse.

Stuart glanced over at Mr. O'Reilly and hoped the old man

couldn't read his mind. Patrick reminded him of an old bulldog his friend Harry had owned years ago.

He turned his attention back to Kim, who now held the baby's toy turtle in the air, coaxing Bree into a smile as she clicked another picture.

"Good girl," Kim cooed and Stuart swore the baby preened.

"What a little sweetheart," the Italian woman declared. "She likes having her picture taken, doesn't she."

"What about a different outfit?" Kim scooped the baby into her arms and turned and looked at Stuart. "Your—Bree's mother wanted quite a lot of proofs from which to choose."

"I don't have a clue." Stuart wondered if he should apologize for not calling Kim, but that seemed silly since six years had passed since their one and only date.

"She didn't tell you?"

He reached in his pants pocket and pulled out a folded piece of yellow-lined paper. "She wrote it down." Stuart unfolded the list and noted that he'd forgotten to call off the "Baby and Me" exercise class, something so important that Payne had starred it. Nap, pink turtle, four-thirty appointment, pink outfit with white bunny and white dress with lace. He looked over at Brianne, who was dressed in a pink one-piece outfit with a teddy bear on the front. "I think I might have a fancy dress," he said.

"Do you want to put it on her while I change the film?"

"Sure." Before he knew it the baby was back in his arms and Kim was immersed in sorting through a strange array of

equipment.

He'd forgotten how pretty Kim Cooper was. He didn't see a wedding ring on her left hand, though he sneaked a peek before he went back into the waiting room to fetch the diaper bag. No diamond either, which surprised him. Kim had been the "marriage and babies" kind of woman he'd learned to avoid. Sweet, domestic, innocent, she had been perfect "wife" material.

For someone else.

Which meant he had run like hell in the opposite direction.

Stuart grabbed the baby's bag, stuffed full of her belongings and headed back to the studio.

"We'll do some outdoor pictures now," Kim said, glancing out the window at the bright May sunshine.

"Outside?" Payne hadn't said anything about that. If Bree got stung by a bee, his ass was grass and he'd never be invited to another one of his sister's holiday meals again.

"I have it all set up," she said, doing something with her camera. "The lilacs are going to bloom early this year. If we're lucky we might be able to get a touch of color. At least we'll get some background texture from the bushes, and the light should be good."

"Our Kim is famous for her lilac pictures," Anna confided to Stuart, who thought about ants, bees and ticks. Rhode Island was famous for mosquitoes, too. He rummaged through the bag for Bree's sweater.

"Don't worry about shoes," Kim told him. "She can go

barefoot. Baby toes are wonderful.”

“They are?”

“They are,” she said, pointing to the place on the couch that Mr. O’Reilly had just vacated. “You can change her there. And check her diaper, too. If she’s uncomfortable, she’s not going to smile.”

He did as he was told, laying Bree on her back on the sofa cushion. “Are you sure this outside is a good idea?”

“Trust me,” she said, giving him a quick smile that had a strange effect on the part of his body that had no business coming to life at this particular moment, in front of this particular audience.

2

BRIANNE HOWLED HER objections at having her pink outfit removed. She screamed about having her diaper changed. And she made Kim's ears ring when she loudly protested having to put on a new dress.

"Sorry," Stuart muttered, while Anna made the sign of the cross and Patrick once again reached for his hearing aid.

"Maybe I can help." Kim finally put down her camera and took over the care of the child, not that she had much experience in dressing babies. But a blotchy, teary-eyed child would not take a good picture. The little girl knew enough to stick out her lower lip and give Kim a pitiful look from her big brown eyes, so Kim tickled her toes and made her giggle.

"How did you do that?" Stuart stood next to the couch, but out of the baby's sight, as if he was afraid that Brianne would yell at him again.

"I have all sorts of ways to make babies smile," she said, lifting the little girl into her arms. "Peekaboo, tickles with a feather duster, squeaky toys, things like that."

She gathered the props she needed, handing them to Stuart to carry while she took the baby, who had now stopped crying and looked more curious than anything else. Kim's audience followed her outside and around the side of the house to the backyard.

The lilac garden, a secluded rectangle of lawn bordered two

sides by thick lilac bushes, lay behind the next door neighbor's house. The huge white Victorian was the largest house in the neighborhood, and while some of the homes closest to the business-zoned street one block away had converted to businesses, "Lilac House"—with its dark purple shutters and elegant front porch—remained unchanged, as had Patrick's and Anna's large homes across the street.

Until now, Kim thought, ignoring the new No Trespassing sign posted on the whitewashed gate. She'd rented the space from Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle for the past four years, using the area for her outdoor photographs. When Mrs. Carlisle died and her husband went to live with his son, Kim and Kate tried to buy the strip of garden, but their letters to sweet old Mr. Carlisle had gone unanswered. There was little backyard space on their own property; between the garage and the parking area, there was no room to plant lilac bushes.

"Just a shame," Anna muttered, following close behind Kim. "It's so pretty back here and you've gone to so much work."

"What's a shame?" Stuart paused by the wicker baby stroller and frowned down at it. He negotiated his way around Kim's favorite rusted wrought iron table and ornate iron chair, then stepped over several big pots of tulips and hyacinths leftover from the Easter photo sessions.

"That Kimmy can't buy this," the woman explained. "We think the house has been sold and it's going to be turned into apartments and the lilac trees cut down for parking spaces."

“That’s just a rumor.” Patrick gave Kim a reassuring look. “No one’s heard anything for sure.”

“I can’t seem to find out what’s going on,” Kim admitted. “Maybe Mr. Carlisle’s son is the one in charge of the property now.”

“He should be ashamed of himself,” Anna said. “He could have sold you the lilacs after you took care of them all these years.”

“It’s his property. He can do what he wants.” She handed the baby to Anna and then took the vintage sheets from Stuart, who gave her a pleading look.

“Tell me she won’t get stung by any flying insects.”

“She won’t get stung by any flying insects,” she repeated obediently, but her attention was focused on arranging the lace-edged sheet so that the wicker would show, too. She intended to take some black-and-white shots, along with the color.

“And we won’t be out here long,” he added.

“I’ll be as fast as I can be,” she promised. “If you would all stand back out of the way—no, over there, where you don’t cast shadows—Brienne and I will get to work.” Not that it would be easy to work, with Stuart frowning at her with that protective look on his face. His vigilance was surprisingly sexy, Kim realized, until she reminded herself to keep her mind on her work. She had no business thinking Stuart Thorpe was sexy, not when she should be concentrating on the job in front of her.

It didn’t take long to pose the baby in the stroller. The pretty

little girl appeared to like being outdoors in the warm spring air. Most of the children she photographed did, especially if their feet were bare. Kim took some close-ups of those feet. The onlookers kept silent, except once when Stuart swore at a bee who dared come within eight feet of the wicker stroller.

Then Brianne screamed, spit up carrots on her eyelet lace collar and proceeded to call an end to the photo session.

“I guess that’s that,” Stuart said with a sigh, lifting her from the stroller. Since he already had carrot stains on his shirt, he didn’t seem to mind the new ones.

“I’m sure I have enough for you and her mother to choose from,” Kim assured him. Was she one of those socialites she’d seen him with on the front page of the Arts section in the Sunday paper? Was she slim and blond and very rich, with her very own lilacs and a car that didn’t need repairs every three months?

“Ooh, I’d like to see those pictures myself,” Mrs. G. said. She piled the sheets in her arms and Patrick moved the stroller out of the garden area and onto the back porch, while Kim led Stuart to the front of the house and the studio door.

“You have a lot of help here,” Stuart said. “Does Kate work here, too?”

“Yes. She specializes in bridal portraits and graduation photos.”

“Not baby toes?”

“No.” Kim smiled, remembering her twin’s disastrous attempts at photographing a set of triplets last year. “Kate’s not

exactly the domestic type.”

“And her sister?”

She turned and ushered him into the reception room. “Babies are my business.”

“Hold her for a minute, will you?” Stuart didn’t wait for an answer and Kim found herself cuddling Brianne again while Stuart gathered up the baby’s possessions and haphazardly stuffed them into the diaper bag. When they were ready to leave, Kim tweaked Brianne’s big toe and made her smile. “Take good care of your daddy, sweetheart. I think he could use a break.”

“I’m not her father, if that’s what you mean,” he said. “She’s my niece.”

“Whether she’s your niece or your daughter, you’re still taking care of her, right?” His niece? It made more sense, come to think of it. The brilliant and handsome Dr. Thorpe would certainly practice safe sex and birth control. She rubbed the child’s little feet with gentle motions. The exhausted baby leaned against her and sighed.

“Yeah, I’m the baby-sitter until her aunt arrives.” He looked at his watch and then back to Kim. “Which is any minute now.”

“Your niece?” Pat looked from Stuart to the baby and then back again. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

“I thought I did,” he said, shrugging. “My sister’s mother-in-law is in intensive care up in Maine. She had to leave before my other sister—the real baby-sitter—got back from vacation.”

“She couldn’t take the baby?” Kim was surprised.

He shook his head. “There’s no other family up there—her husband is on his way home from Sydney—and Payne didn’t want to leave her with strangers while she was at the hospital.”

“Hospitals are no places for babies,” Anna declared. “Too many germs in the waiting rooms, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure my sister would agree with you,” Stuart said.

“Stuart’s a doctor, Anna,” she reminded her. “He knows all about germs.”

“Well, then, he can tell me what this is.” Anna pointed to her left arm. “Come here, young man, and see if you know your business and can tell me what this spot is.”

“I’m a surgeon, not a dermatologist, but I can tell you if it’s chicken pox,” Stuart said, but he obeyed the woman and crossed the room to peer at her forearm. “It looks like a wart to me.”

“Not skin cancer?”

“I doubt that very much, Mrs. Gianetto, but I can give you the name of a good dermatologist if you want to have it checked further.”

“Nah,” she said. “I trust you.” She stood and reached for her shopping bag.

“Maybe you should do as he says, Anna,” Patrick said.

She laughed. “I just saved fifty dollars. Come on, Pat. Let’s go back to my house and get these things listed on eBay before we run out of energy.”

“Don’t forget the camera,” Kim said. Patrick picked up the camera and took the shopping bag from Anna’s hand.

“Are you closing up?” he asked, clearly unhappy about leaving her alone with a strange man.

“Absolutely,” she promised as Anna stopped to pat the baby’s head. “Brianne was my last appointment for the day.”

“You come for dinner tonight,” Anna whispered. “I’ll fry up some sausage and peppers just the way you like. And I got some good bread at Zachinini’s this morning, too, when I went down to the post office.”

“I can’t,” Kim said, genuinely sorry to miss eating anything from Zachinini’s bakery or Anna’s kitchen, but the knowing sympathy in her neighbor’s expression was more than she could bear. “I’ve got a lot of work to do. Kate’s behind on three weddings—”

“Oh, that one,” Anna sighed, rolling her eyes. “She’ll be zooming up the street in that fast little car of hers tonight?”

“As far as I know.” Kate had called four times today already, unusual for a Friday night, but typical of her protective twin.

“Thanks again, Kimmy,” Anna said. “You doing the yard sales with us tomorrow?”

“Maybe.” Memorial Day weekend was the unofficial beginning of the yard sale season, which meant an early morning on Saturday looking for “treasures.” She knew her neighbors were simply trying to keep her from remembering what she would have been doing this weekend, if things had turned out differently.

“I’ll bring the truck,” Patrick promised. “We’ll go out to

breakfast after.”

“I’ll let you know,” Kim said, watching her friends leave. Patrick gave Stuart one last warning look and then went out the door.

“Watch yourself on the steps, Anna,” she heard the old man say before the door shut. Kim turned toward Stuart, who gave her a devastating smile.

“Thanks for the help calming her down,” he said. “She hasn’t closed her eyes since I’ve had her.”

“She’s very sweet,” Kim said. “I think you’d better take her home and put her to bed.”

“You wouldn’t want to go home with us, would you? She looks pretty comfortable in your arms.”

“I think you can handle it,” she said. It really wasn’t fair for a man to be that good-looking.

“Tell Brianne that,” he said. He stepped closer and, with a gentle motion, lifted the baby and turned her to lean against his food-stained shirt. His fingers grazed Kim’s breasts, something she tried to pretend she hadn’t felt. “Well, it was good seeing you again.”

“You, too. Good luck.”

“Tell your sister I said hello.”

She looked at Brianne drooling on Stuart’s shoulder and smiled. Babies were her favorite clients—and the most challenging.

“Are you sure you won’t come home with me?” He had

a decidedly wicked and desperate expression, she noticed. He made her want to smile, but she resisted. She knew when she was out of her league, baby or no baby.

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Too bad.” He picked up the diaper bag and the rose blanket in his left hand. “Bree likes you.”

“Bye.” She took one more longing look at the baby. Cuddling Brienne had been the brightest spot in her day.

“I DON’T LIKE THIS,” Patrick declared, sitting down at Anna’s kitchen table. He liked Anna’s kitchen, because it reminded him of his own, with its faded linoleum floor and solid red and white Formica kitchen set. And Anna’s kitchen smelled of food, while his just...smelled. He ate too much popcorn now that he’d figured out the microwave oven his daughter had given him for Christmas last year.

“Don’t like what?” Anna’s bulk was hidden by the refrigerator door as she removed pan after pan of Italian concoctions. “Hey, you want a beer?”

“I don’t like leaving Kimmy with that man,” he grumbled, taking the bottle of Budweiser Anna handed him. “Thanks.”

“He’s a doctor,” she reminded him. She lifted the lid off a frying pan and sniffed. “A man of science.”

“He’s not good enough for her.” The twist-off cap popped off easily and Pat took a healthy swallow. His own doctor had told him that one beer a day couldn’t hurt anything, not at his age. But Dr. Shaunnesy was pushing sixty, still smoked cigars and

visited Ireland once a year. He wasn't some pretty-face, fancy-ass surgeon who wouldn't know good beer if it was poured on his Mercedes.

And Pat had noticed the Mercedes, all right, shiny as could be in the parking area north of Kim Cooper's house. "Give me a Cadillac any day," he said.

"What's cars got to do with anything?" She arranged all sorts of pans on top of the stove and then took the cork out of a bottle of red wine. She drank a glass every night with dinner, Anna did. And had, she'd informed him once, since she was fifteen.

"I dunno. Can't you do anything with that nephew of yours?"

"Robbie?" She turned from the stove and shrugged. "He says he's asked her to marry him four times and she keeps saying no."

Robbie Gianetto wasn't the brightest light on the porch, in Pat's opinion, but Kimmy was too young to keep grieving like this. Any port in a storm, he figured. Even as shallow a port as Anna's thickeheaded nephew. "She needs to get on with her life since things didn't work out with Jeff."

"Look who's talking," Anna said, shaking a wooden spoon at him. "Mary's been gone five years now and you won't even get on a plane and visit your sister."

"I get out of the house enough," he said. "I don't have to fly to California to prove anything. I like my house just fine."

"Humph." Anna stirred the peppers in the pan, filling the kitchen with the aroma of good Italian cooking. "I like my house, too, but at least I get to Florida a couple of times a year to visit

my sister and her son.”

“I don’t think much of Florida,” he declared, his stomach rumbling with anticipation. “And I don’t think much of that doctor fella either. He’s not good enough for Kimmy.”

“Somebody better be,” Anna said, waving the smoke away from her face. “She’s not getting any younger.”

“None of us are, Anna,” he said, taking another sip of ice-cold beer. “None of us are.”

“YOU’RE KIDDING. THE GORGEOUS Stuart Thorpe was here?” Kim’s twin sister leaned against the kitchen counter and retrieved her margarita. With short spiky red hair, gold hoop earrings and perfect makeup, Kate Cooper looked like a woman confident of her beauty. Her lime-green shirt fit snugly, as did the black Capri pants that hugged her legs. Kate had a gift for fashion and flair, while Kim had a talent for...babies.

“Yep. All six feet of him.”

“What’d you do?” She took a swallow of her drink and smiled. “See, isn’t it better with extra tequila?”

“I took pictures of his niece, which was why he was here.” Kim sipped her drink, then coughed. “Remind me never to let you near my blender again.”

“It won’t do you any harm.” Kate rummaged through the cupboards until she found a bag of tortilla chips, which she poured into one of Kim’s yard sale finds. “Where do you get this stuff? It’s chipped.”

“I liked it.” She wasn’t about to confess to buying it for fifty

cents at a yard sale last summer. The blue and white bowl had flaws, but it held the exact amount of popcorn made from a microwave packet. “And it matches the tile.”

Kate turned and opened the refrigerator. “Do you still have that pineapple salsa I brought last week?”

“It’s in there, behind the milk.”

“I see it.”

Kim took her drink and the bowl of chips across the room to the small white couch and set everything in the middle of her coffee table, a mahogany relic leftover from their parents’ house. She’d painted it white and placed a piece of vintage fabric on top. The blue and pink rose material covered up most of the flaws and blended with the raggedy quilt folded along the back of the couch. The one-bedroom apartment she called home took up the second floor of the house that held their photography business, but it had grown obvious to both women that they needed the space to expand. The business they’d inherited from their father couldn’t keep growing unless they had more studio space in which to work.

Once Kate settled herself on the opposite chair, she kicked off her black mules and eyed her sister. “Tell me about him.”

“Who?”

“Your doctor.”

“He’s not my—” she began, but there was no point in disguising the truth. Her sister knew damn well that Stuart Thorpe had, at one time many years ago, been the man of Kim’s

childish dreams.

“Did he say anything to you?”

“Just that it was good to see me.” Kate looked so disappointed that Kim almost laughed.

“He’s still one of the best looking men I’ve ever seen in my life,” she admitted.

“Call him. A weekend with a sexy doctor might do you a world of good.” Then she stopped, stricken. “I’m sorry,” Kate murmured, the smile gone from her face. “I shouldn’t tease, especially about this weekend.”

“It was a long time ago. And I can deal with it, honest.” She really, really hoped Kate wasn’t going to cry.

“Jeff was a real SOB.” Now her twin looked as if she was trying to blink back tears.

“Kate—”

“Mom and Dad wanted you to come to Florida this weekend. They wanted to spoil you and show you all the sights.”

“I know. Mom’s called every night this week hoping I’d change my mind.”

“She sent a ticket for you. It’s in my purse.”

It was silly to feel trapped by one’s own family, but Kim felt suffocated by their concern. She didn’t want her parents to worry; she dreaded hearing the concern in their voices when they called her to hint about taking a vacation right now.

And all because of Jeff, whom she thought was a good and decent man, had asked her to marry him. Two years ago she’d

planned to get married this Memorial Day weekend. They'd set their wedding date, had a celebration dinner with their families gathered together at Jeff's favorite steakhouse, and then four months later he'd confessed he'd thought it over and changed his mind. He was too young to settle down, he'd said. And then he'd run off with his nineteen-year-old office assistant, rumored to be pregnant with his child.

"I'd rather stay home," she said, hoping Kate would understand. Kate usually did, despite their different personalities.

"Not all by yourself?"

"No. With a male stripper who's going to fulfill my every fantasy."

"You wish." But Kate smiled. "But there's always the good doctor. You could call him and tell him you've changed your mind."

"Don't make more of it than it was. It's not as if I ever really went out with him, except for that one blind date. In a group from the apartment house on Wickenden Street, remember? You said he was nice enough."

"It was strictly platonic, though I think he might have kissed me good-night." Kate frowned. "I didn't know you liked him or I wouldn't have gone out with him at all," she said. "Rules are rules."

"It didn't matter." She took another cautious sip of the drink. "He never gave me a second look."

"Because you probably never said one word to him. Even now

you could pick up the phone and ask him out to dinner.”

“You could do that. I can’t imagine it.” Stuart Thorpe was out of her league. Period.

“I don’t know why we’re so different.”

“We drove Mom crazy.” Kate was the demanding one, Kim the quiet one. Kate talked first, but Kim learned to read at age five. Kate talked to strangers while Kim hung back, waiting for her twin to assure her that everything was fine.

“I think we still do.” Kate wiggled her painted toenails and stretched her legs. “Are you sure you won’t go out with me tonight? There are going to be lots of wonderful men there. Friday night is always good and it will keep your mind off Jeff and that whole mess.”

“No, thanks. I’m not brooding or feeling sorry for myself, Kate. Honest.”

“Will you call the doctor?”

And say what?

“No. And not in a million years, no matter how much advice you give me.”

“Ah, I see. He’s the one who got away,” Kate said, taking another sip of her drink.

“No.” Kim tucked her feet underneath her and remembered her senior year at Rhode Island School of Design, the well-known art school. “He’s the one who never came near me at all.”

3

SHE WOULDN'T STOP CRYING. No matter what he did, how he held her, what songs he sang or how many bottles he fixed, Brianne would not stop screaming. As far as Stuart was concerned, it was the Friday night from hell.

He prayed Payne wouldn't call and ask how her baby was doing. She'd called twice already, the last time to remind him once again of the photography session.

"Bree, baby, you have to stop," Stuart crooned, a plea that did absolutely no good. He half expected the police to knock on his door and arrest him for violating the local sound ordinance.

"You're hurting Uncle Stuart's ears," he said, holding her against his chest as he patted her back. He'd checked her ears, attempted to look down her throat when she screamed, listened to her heart and caught a glimpse of swollen gums when he'd held her near the reading light by his sofa. Brianne was quite possibly teething, not that he knew anything about babies and teeth.

Not that he knew anything about babies at all.

So he called Brianne's pediatrician and got his answering service, making certain he identified himself as a fellow doctor, and then received a callback from the woman herself.

"Sounds like teething," she said, after asking a few pointed questions. "I usually tell the parents to use baby Tylenol and one of the over-the-counter gum medications made especially for

this. And she's not running a fever?"

He didn't think so.

"I'm only the uncle," he tried to explain. "I need help."

He heard her sigh. "Are there any grandmothers nearby who can help you?"

"No." Not bloody likely, he thought, wondering if his mother was still married to husband number four. Or was it five? His father's new lady friend hadn't reached her thirtieth birthday and certainly wasn't the domestic type.

"Well, then, you can always take her into any emergency room, Doctor," she said. "Have her checked out, if you feel the situation warrants it."

The situation warranted a large scotch and a good night's sleep, Stuart figured, but he thanked the woman after she promised he would survive.

Trouble was Stuart didn't dare leave to buy any of that magic stuff, because Temple was supposed to have been here by now. He didn't want her to show up and find him gone. No, his sister could handle this.

"Auntie Temple will be here soon," he chanted, hoping that the sister known as "the wild one" wouldn't stop anywhere on her way from the airport. She should have been in Newport by now; it wouldn't have taken her an hour and a half to get here, even if the traffic was backed up on the bridge.

He grabbed the phone when it rang once. "Temple?"

"Yep, it's me." She also sounded very far away, which was

not a good sign. And then she went on to explain that she hadn't been able to leave Mexico, due to an unexpected strike by airport personnel that was rumored to last at least until Monday. "What's the matter, baby brother? You sound desperate."

"I am." He was facing Memorial Day weekend with Bree? "Our niece won't stop crying."

"Maybe you're not holding her the right way."

"I'm holding her the right way," he insisted. "I called her doctor. She's teething."

"You haven't called Payne, have you?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"She's going to kill me for this." Now Temple was catching on, Stuart thought. "Don't tell her I'm in Mexico."

"She'll find out. You know she'll call."

"Don't answer the phone. I know," she said, sounding brighter. "Drive Bree around in the car. That's what Payne does when nothing else works."

"Drive around when she's screaming at the top of her lungs? How does that make sense?"

"Just try it. I don't suppose you date any divorced mothers?"

"Not if I can help it." He didn't tell her he'd called a couple of his female friends for help, but neither had seemed very interested in discussing infant care.

"Then you're screwed."

"And it's your fault."

"Look, I'm not going to pretend it's any kind of hardship

being stuck in Puerto Vallarta with a gorgeous fireman named Hank who's built like a Greek god and says he hasn't been with a woman in—well, never mind. He's a little rough around the edges, but that's the way I like—”

He closed his eyes. “Please, Temple. For God's sake, no details.”

“Right.” She chuckled. “When did you suddenly turn prudish?”

“Temple, I'm begging you. Get on a plane. Any plane. Come home. Can't you hear your niece screaming for you?” He held the receiver close to Bree's open mouth and let Temple get a blast of the baby's anger.

“Sorry, pal. Circumstances beyond my control and all that. Besides, laying on the guilt doesn't work with me,” was all she said before she hung up.

Brianne looked at him and screamed even louder, if that was possible.

“How do you feel about cars? Drugstores? Tylenol?” he asked, holding her to his shoulder. “What kind of music do you want to listen to? Jazz? Blues? Classical? Or classic rock?”

She continued to scream into her uncle's ear.

And then she messed her pants.

“HELP,” WAS ALL STUART said, standing there on her back doorstep with a sobbing baby on his shoulder. Kim didn't know why she held out her arms, but he looked relieved and handed Brianne to her. The poor little girl was heated and damp,

her face wet with tears as she nestled against Kim's chest.

"What have you done to her?"

"I think," he said. "It's the other way around."

"Is there something wrong with her?" Kim stepped aside and let him into the back foyer of the studio. It was true that he didn't look any better than he had three hours ago. He wore the same stained rumpled clothes and he looked close to exhaustion. But still, of course, tremendously handsome. The "movie star" face and the killer smile were a lethal combination, even when Stuart was grubby and tired.

"She's teething," he said, hoarse. "I talked to her pediatrician, who explained it to me."

Brianne hiccupped and then let out another wail. Kim forgot to ask why he was here or how he'd discovered she lived above the studio or any other questions her more clever twin would have uttered. She snuggled the baby against her and led Stuart upstairs. "Poor baby," she murmured. "She misses her mommy, I'll bet."

"Yeah," Stuart said behind her. "So do I."

"What happened to her aunt? Didn't you say—"

"Airplane strike. She's stuck in Mexico with a fireman—never mind," he said, joining her on the top landing. He followed her through the open door of her apartment. "Trying to explain Temple right now would take too much energy."

"But what are you doing here?" Surely he didn't think she knew anything about teething.

"I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. She liked you this

afternoon,” he said. “She stopped crying when you held her.”

“That’s different.” Kim sat down in the black-painted rocking chair that had belonged to her grandmother and felt the child stiffen in her arms. Once she began to rock, though, Brianne once again relaxed against her. “That was professional.”

“I gave her Tylenol,” Stuart continued, as if he hadn’t heard her. He sat in the middle of the couch and leaned back. “I rubbed her gums with medicine that’s supposed to numb the pain. I changed her diapers a dozen times.”

“But you’re a doctor,” Kim pointed out, still amazed this particular man had ended up in her living room. “You don’t know what to do?”

“I’m a vascular surgeon,” he said. “I haven’t done anything with pediatrics since I was in med school.”

“Did you call her mother?”

“Payne?” He grimaced. “I couldn’t. She’s got enough to handle right now, with her husband away and her in-laws needing her. I don’t think her mother-in-law’s prognosis is very good.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Me, too. I don’t dare give Payne anything else to worry about right now.” His gaze dropped to Brianne. “Thank God she’s stopped crying.”

“The poor thing.” Kim was glad Kate had left a little while ago. While her sister would urge her to go out on a date, she would be suspicious of a man who appeared needing help with a baby. Sucker, Kate would say, shaking her head. You let everyone take

advantage of you.

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