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## **Vintage** *Cherish*

# **A Triple Threat to Bachelorhood**

**MARIE FERRARELLA**

Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish

Marie Ferrarella

**A Triple Threat to Bachelorhood**

«HarperCollins»

## **Ferrarella M.**

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— (Mills & Boon Vintage Cherish)

HE WAS LONG AND LEAN AND WORE A STAR  
And to Melinda  
Morrow's triplets, he was a wonderful pal. But to Melinda herself, well that  
was a different story! Sure, deputy sheriff Carl Cutler's calm strength made  
her feel safe—but it also made her remember she was a woman. Something she  
swore she never wanted to feel again. Carl, on the other hand, very much enjoyed  
making Melinda shiver! He loved spending time with Melinda and her kids—and  
then going home. Until this dyed-in-the-wool bachelor began making excuses to  
hang around the rambunctious tots—and their lovely mother. And suddenly marriage  
wasn't the scariest thought he'd ever had....

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**Praise for national bestselling author  
MARIE FERRARELLA**

“...a charming storyteller who  
will steal your heart away.”  
—Romantic Times Magazine

**In a single heartbeat,  
she was eighteen again,**

looking up at a young man she trusted more than she trusted anyone else in the world.

It took Melinda a moment to focus back on the present. On the three children clustered around her like chicks around a hen, and on the man standing on her doorstep.

He'd filled out, she thought. A lot. And gotten taller, too. There seemed to be almost a foot difference between them. The thin shoulders were broad now, and the forearms she saw peering out from beneath the rolled-up sleeves were strong and muscular.

It couldn't be him. And yet, it had to be.

# **A Triple Threat to Bachelorhood**

## **Marie Ferrarella**

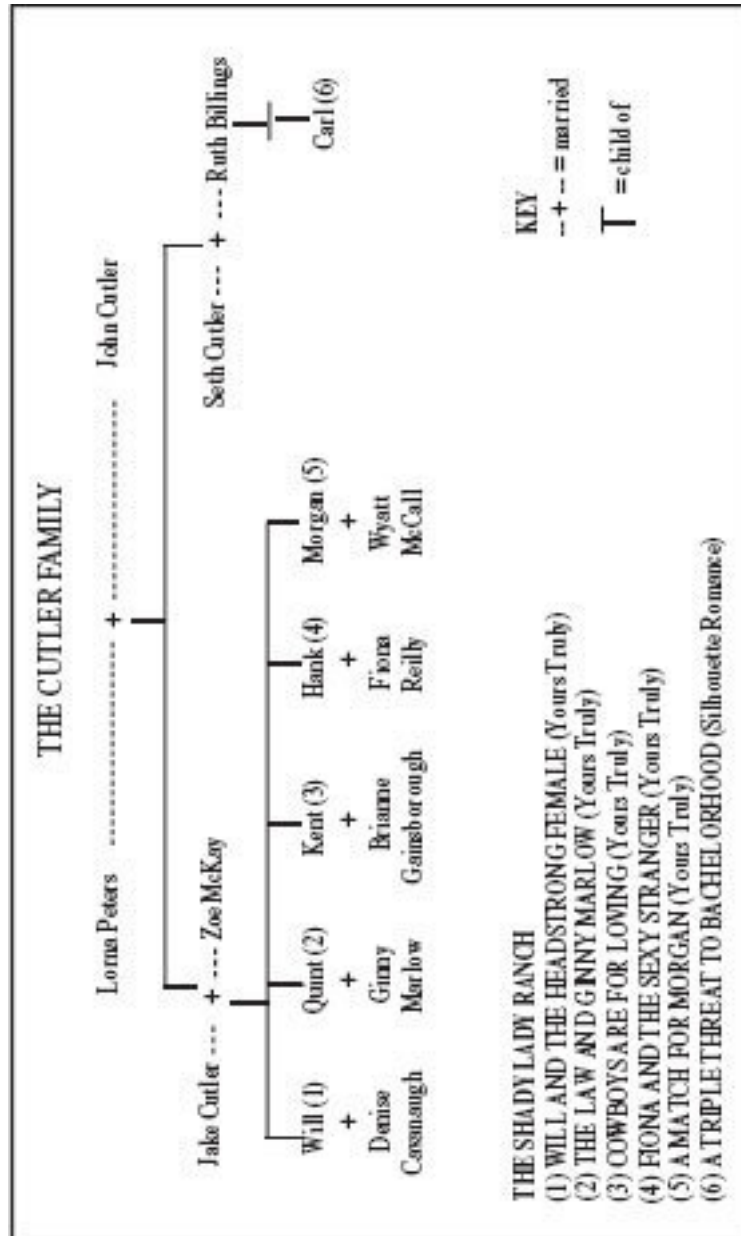


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To all the readers who enjoyed the Cutlers, This is Carly's story

## MARIE FERRARELLA

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



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## Chapter One

“So, how long are you going to pretend you don’t know she’s back?”

Carl Cutler looked up from the fresh batch of wanted posters he was tacking up on the bulletin board and fixed the man who was both his boss and his cousin, as well as the sheriff of the thriving though undersize town of Serendipity, Montana, with what he figured was a vague look.

“Who?”

It wasn’t like Carl to be devious, Quint thought. But his young cousin’s demeanor had definitely changed in the last two weeks. It was time to stop standing on the sidelines, waiting for nature to take its course and to give nature—and his surprisingly stubborn deputy sheriff—a little shake.

“Melinda Morrow,” Quint said.

Carl picked up another poster and four thumbtacks. He did his best to sound totally uninterested. “It’s Greenwood now, isn’t it?”

“Was.” It was hard gauging a man’s response when all you had to look at was the back of his blond head. Quint shifted in his chair, trying to get a glimpse of Carl’s face. “She dropped it when she dropped that loser who took her away from here.”

Carl shrugged, pretending that Melinda Morrow hadn’t dwelled on his mind, at least fleetingly, every day for the last seven years. Ever since she’d left town for what she was certain was a far more exciting, wonderful life with Steven Greenwood elsewhere. Elsewhere being anywhere but Serendipity.

It’s too homespun for me, too predictable. I want to feel alive, Carly. Haven’t you ever wanted to feel alive?

He couldn’t tell her when she’d asked then that he felt alive every time she was anywhere nearby. That she was the one who made him feel alive. They weren’t his words to say. Melinda had thought of him as her best friend, her confidant. Someone to tell her secrets to. Like that she was in love with Steve Greenwood and that the two of them were going to “reach for the moon together.” Which meant getting out of Serendipity.

But not out of his heart.

Carl’d tried to shut her out, to forget about her. He’d tried to shed memories of Melinda just as he had shed the last letter of his name. To everyone in Serendipity, he was Carl now, a name he felt was far more befitting a deputy sheriff.

But while the letter was easy enough to leave by the wayside—after reminding everyone in town half a dozen times or so to call him Carl—memories of Melinda were not. They came with the haze that was tucked around his brain when he first woke up each day and snuck back just as he drifted off to sleep each night, giving him no rest.

Damn, but a man shouldn’t be making a fool of himself over a woman he hadn’t even kissed, Carl had upbraided himself more than once. But it never did any good. Because each time he thought he was over Melinda, something would happen to trigger a relapse and he’d have to start all over again, trying to root her out of his life.

He’d allowed himself to be set up with other women by his well-meaning extended family, hoping that something would click, that he’d feel that surge of elusive chemistry that had ambushed each one of his five cousins, bringing them all to the altar in quick succession.

But it never happened. No chemistry, no spark. Just a series of nice, meaningless dates with attractive women that led nowhere.

And now Melinda was back. Back with her children, three adorable kids he’d heard, two girls and a boy, each a carbon copy of the other. Triplets. And they all looked almost exactly like tiny, blond miniatures of Melinda, to hear Wylie Pruitt tell it. The old man was almost a fixture in front of the general store and most of Serendipity passed his way sooner or later. He was better than a

newspaper, and more animated. Wylie had given him vivid descriptions of all four of them. It made Carl ache, but that was neither here nor there.

He studied two posters before him, not seeing either. "I know she's back, Quint."

"You haven't said anything."

Carl looked up sharply. It wasn't like Quint to prod this way. "Like what?"

Ordinarily Quint could wait almost anything out with the patience of Job, but he sighed now and shook his head. Of his three brothers and one sister, he was the only one Carl had ever confided in about the feelings he had for Melinda. Carl wouldn't have said anything to him, either, except that Quint had learned how to read him like a book and guessed at the extent of his feelings. It had never been in Carl to lie.

Carl had always been the open one, the one who took an interest in everyone. It wasn't like him to hold back this way.

"Like you're going to go over and see her to say hello," Quint prodded.

Irritation flared, surprising Carl. He didn't usually get annoyed with anyone, least of all Quint. Banking the foreign feeling, he kept his voice mild.

"Melinda doesn't need me saying that. Plenty of people in Serendipity can say that word to her. And lots of others besides."

"Don't pretend to be thick, Carl, you know what I mean. The way I see it," Quint said easily, "she needs a friend."

There was a time when he would have wanted to be everything to Melinda, she'd only have to say the word, Carl thought. But that time was gone. A man had to look out for himself once in a while.

Quint closed the box of thumbtacks, forcing Carl to look at him.

"If she needs a friend, that would be Morgan," Carl told him, naming his youngest cousin. "They were pretty close once."

"That would be you," Quint corrected. "You were closer to her."

Carl closed the empty folder that had housed the posters, dropping it on his desk. "Not close enough. Otherwise..."

He let the word stretch out before he dropped it. There was no sense in saying that Melinda hadn't shared her plans about leaving with him until almost the day of her departure. That he had hoped, prayed really, that she would see the light and decide to stay. With him. He'd always thought of Steve as being too superficial, too interested in himself to be any good for Melinda.

God knew the man was good-looking enough to get fan mail from roses, but his heart was another matter. There'd only been room enough in Steven Greenwood's heart for his own selfish interests.

Carl had wrapped up his courage into a ball and told Melinda that. And she had turned her back on him, said he was like her father, wanting to keep her in a two-bit town forever.

It was the last time he saw her.

The next thing he knew, he'd overheard Morgan telling her mother, his aunt Zoe, that that Melinda was gone. Melinda's father had been angry, saying he'd been expecting it, that she was just like her mother, running off with some man.

Except that Melinda hadn't left behind a husband and little girl the way her mother had, Carl thought.

All she'd left behind was him. And she probably hadn't a clue about that, anyway.

Quint leaned back in his chair, his clear blue eyes squinting as if that could somehow help him delve into his cousin's mind. "Never knew you to carry a grudge before, Carl."

"It's not a grudge." The retort came out a bit too quickly, he calculated. Carl tempered his voice before continuing. "It's been seven years. What am I supposed to say to her?"

"Like I said, 'hello.'" Disgusted, Carl waved a hand at Quint. The latter tried another angle. "All right, how about, 'welcome back'? Or, 'nice to see you'?"

There was no point in going around and around about this. Carl had no intention of seeking Melinda out like some lovesick puppy from the past. If they had any business together, she could come to see him. Otherwise, it was best, as the old adage said, just to let sleeping dogs lie.

“Yeah, maybe,” Carl murmured, looking through the middle drawer of his desk for a report he could have sworn he’d placed there. But it wasn’t there. Annoyed, he shut the drawer a little too hard and stood up again. “If I’m not too busy.”

Rising, Quint crossed to Carl and laid a hand over the man’s shoulders. They’d broadened considerably since he’d first taken over as big brother for his only cousin, but the feeling was still the same. He was the older one and that meant comforting Carl as best he could whenever the need arose.

When they’d been growing up, he’d felt Carl needed someone because his cousin’s parents were so aloof, so distant. Just the way Wyatt McCall’s had been. But, at the time, his future brother-in-law had been a close friend while Carl was blood. And as such, Quint felt his own duty was clear. He had to take Carl under his wing, make him feel part of something.

It had worked like a charm. The Cutlers had swallowed Carl up lock, stock and barrel, caring about him as if he’d been born to them directly instead of via Quint’s uncle, his father’s brother.

Quint felt Carl’s shoulders stiffen the second he put his arm around them. This, too, wasn’t like him. The man, Quint thought, had it bad—and he wasn’t even admitting it to himself, which just made it worse.

“We all appreciate you helping out at the house now that we’ve all left the roost, so to speak, but Carl, you’ve got to take some time for yourself, do something for yourself once in a while.” His mother had told him that Carl turned up almost every evening for dinner and to do whatever needed doing around the ranch house.

“I do. I am. I like being there for Uncle Jake and Aunt Zoe. With all of you married, they miss having someone around to fuss over. And I don’t mind the fussing. Besides, nobody’s ever been kinder to me than your parents have been.”

That wasn’t the whole story, and they both knew it, but Quint turned it to his advantage.

“Then you know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of kindness,” Quint said slowly. “Maybe you’d like a shot at making someone else feel that way.”

Carl frowned. He knew exactly where this was going. “What makes you think Melinda needs kindness?”

That was a no-brainer. “She’s back with three kids, no husband and is living with her father. What would you say she needs?”

“A huge loan from the bank,” Carl quipped.

Quint surprised him by saying, “She’s already put in for one of those.”

He’d only meant it as a joke. The concern was immediate. “Why? Steve leave her with a lot of debts to pay?”

Quint shook his head. Crossing to the coffee machine, he poured himself a mug of extra-black coffee. The aroma wafted between them. “She’s trying to start a day-care center. Put her education to use while taking care of her three kids.”

A day-care center. Morgan had mentioned something once about Melinda writing that she was going to become a teacher. That was when she’d first left Serendipity, before communication had completely stopped.

Why wasn’t she trying to get a job at the local school?

Carl looked at his cousin. “You seem to know an awful lot about her business.”

Quint spread his hands. “Hey, I’m the sheriff here. I’m supposed to know things about the people in my town.” His eyes narrowed just a bit. “And as my deputy, you’re supposed to know a few things, too.”

He knew things all right, Carl thought. More than a few things. Like how Melinda’s hair smelled with the spring breeze playing through it, tantalizing him because she was always just beyond his

reach. Or the way her smile seemed to light up the darkest evening, sending sparks out through the blackened sky.

Oh, he knew things all right. He knew too much for his own damn good.

“Isn’t that a redundancy?” Carl asked him, a poker expression firmly painted on his face as he turned toward Quint.

Quint laughed softly. “Boy, send a guy off to earn a couple of college credits and suddenly he thinks he’s Aristotle. You’re squirming around, avoiding the issue, you know.”

“There is no issue, Quint,” Carl insisted. “What I told you seven years ago is just that, seven years old. In the past. Dead.”

The phone rang just then and Carl took it to be a reprieve.

Since Tracy, the woman who doubled as their secretary and dispatcher, was out to lunch, Quint picked up the receiver himself. “Sheriff’s office.”

This, Carl decided, would be a good time to go out to lunch himself. Maybe once he was back, Quint would have allowed the subject of Melinda’s return to die a natural death.

Mildly curious about the call, Carl found himself at the door, listening as Quint said, “Uh-huh,” “Hmm,” and “I see.”

He hung up just as Carl put his hand on the door-knob. “Hold up, Carl.” Carl turned to see Quint writing something on a piece of paper. “This one’s for you.”

This was nothing out of the ordinary. Unless it was something major, they took turns checking things out. “Domestic dispute?”

Quint finished writing and placed his pen down. “Nope.”

“Not a robbery, is it?” Though he liked Serendipity the way it was, there were times when Carl did want a little excitement that went beyond Sally McCormick’s grandfather Axel walking down Main Street wearing his rain boots and nothing else. “We haven’t had one of those since Billy Wesson took his old man’s car out for a joyride and the old man pressed charges.”

Quint allowed a slight smile to find a home on his face. “Nope.”

Carl’s wheat-colored brows drew together. Quint was playing this one very close to the chest. “Do I get a hint?”

“Think ‘cat,’” was all Quint said as he held out the piece of paper with an address on it.

Carl frowned as he took the paper from Quint. He scanned the address quickly. Recognition washed over him like a breath-sucking wave. He placed the paper back on the desk. “You go.”

Leaning back in his chair, Quint rested his feet on top of his desk. The personification of the immovable object. “Can’t.”

Where had this temper come from, Carl wondered as he struggled to keep it in check. He never used to be like this. “Why?”

Quint raised and lowered his shoulders. “I’m busy.”

Damn it, he was too old to be playing games like this. “Doing what?”

Quint’s grin grew wider. He wasn’t given to premonitions as a rule, but this time he had a hunch that things might actually work out for his cousin. If Carl didn’t suddenly turn mulish on him.

“Delegating.”

“Well, the guy you’re delegating to doesn’t want to take this call. You take it, I’ll take the next one. The next two,” he threw in obstinately.

But Quint shook his head as he tapped his badge. “No dice. This gives me the authority to tell you to take this call—unless you want off the force.”

He didn’t want off the force. Carl loved being a deputy, loved being there for the people, especially the children who seemed to take to him as if he was the embodiment of every single hero they had ever fantasized about. And he liked being that for them. Being the one who made them feel safe because he was around.

He stared down at the address on the paper. The place he'd been to too many times to count as a kid, then as a teen.

Her house.

Carl raised his eyes to Quint's. "You know what this is, don't you? It's dirty pool."

"No, it's a cat in a tree." Quint laced his fingers behind his head and rocked back in his chair. "And the cat is all yours. Mr. Whiskers, if you want to address him by his given name."

Carl opened the door. Sheriff or no sheriff, he gave Quint a dirty look. "I'd like to address you by a name, but it wouldn't be your given one. At least, not the one that was initially given."

Quint laughed, the office absorbing the resonant sound. "I'll tell Ma on you."

His own parents were gone now. It concerned Carl every so often that the fact didn't bother him, that their absence was nothing more than a vague notation on his brain. But his uncle and aunt, well, that was another story. Especially Aunt Zoe. All his fond memories of childhood centered around her and the long, wide kitchen table where everyone would gather—to do homework, to talk and, at times, to dream.

And now he was heading out to retrieve his dream's cat. The world, he decided, was sometimes a very strange place.

Carl doubled back to get his hat. "If you talk to Aunt Zoe before I do, tell her that I'm really sorry her second-oldest son turned out to be such a sadist."

"I kind of think she'd approve—if she knew," Quint added before Carl had a chance to ask. What he'd been told was in confidence and Quint saw no reason, though they were all close, to share it with the others. If Carl wanted to share his feelings—as he clearly didn't now—then it was up to Carl, not him, to say something. "Be gentle with the cat. It's a Turkish Angora."

"Right."

A Turkish Angora cat. What the hell kind of cat was that, anyway? He wasn't up on his cats, or most other creatures for that matter, either. To him, the animal species, other than horses, of course, because ranching was in everyone's blood here, were divided into categories that bore just their names. Dog, cat, bird. He didn't pay much attention to subvarieties. It was people, not animals, who had always caught his attention.

When he was younger, he'd liked hanging back and observing. Hanging back had always been safer in those days. Opinions, whenever he'd voice them, would like as not get him a wallop from a father who knew sobriety only fleetingly. It taught a guy to be closemouthed for reasons of self-preservation.

Melinda Morrow felt overwhelmed.

She was trying, she really was. But there was just so much to do, so many details to attend to when it came to starting a new life from scratch that, at times, she couldn't even catch her breath.

Well, not scratch exactly, she amended silently a second later. Starting from scratch would mean that she was alone and she wasn't. She had Mollie, Matthew and Maggie and that was far from being alone or starting from scratch. That was starting with a full house, she thought. A fun house like the ones in the carnivals that used to come through Serendipity when she was a child.

There was no doubt about it. Her triplets kept her hopping.

They also kept her hopeful, she thought, grounding her in reality while holding out the promise of a wonderful tomorrow. She hadn't known she was capable of loving as much, as strongly, as she found herself loving these three little half-orphans. Half-orphans because the man she had given her heart to in an almost-rebellious act of defiance wanted no part of the small beings he'd had a hand in creating. They were "all hers," as Steve had said when he finally called it quits.

That was the humiliation of it, she thought, circling the giant oak tree again, looking for a path Mr. Whiskers could take down. She'd told everyone that it had been her idea to leave, that Steve had refused to grow up—and that much was true—but in truth it had been his idea to leave their marriage.

She would have stuck it out, hoping that he was a late bloomer and would eventually catch up to her. That fatherhood would finally sink in instead of sinking what they had between them.

But it turned out that what they'd had between them were good times and a future that promised more of the same. Their life together wasn't real. It was a fairy tale into which true responsibility was not allowed access. And, as it turned out, a fairy tale where the prince and princess had no place for children in them.

Steve had wanted to palm off the triplets on his parents, or her father, it didn't matter to him who or if there was any love waiting to greet the children. When she'd told him that there was no way she was going to give her children up, even for a little while, Steve had said goodbye.

"And that," she murmured aloud, looking up at the tree where her children's beloved Mr. Whiskers was housed, "was that."

So she'd returned home because she had nowhere else to go and little money to go with. And because of all the towns in the country, Serendipity was the one place where she knew she could safely raise her children. Since they were deprived of their father, she wanted at least that much for them. Melinda wanted them to be safe and feel safe.

The day-care center would be her way of getting back on her feet. If that, too, didn't turn out to be a dream. At the very least, it would be putting her teaching experience to good use.

"Mama, Whiskers, Whiskers," Mollie cried, pointing impatiently up into the oak tree. "Make him come down. Now."

Melinda ruffled the little girl's blond hair. "You have the makings of a first-class dictator, my love," she told the oldest of her triplets. "We'll get him down, sweetie, I promise." Her hands fisted at her waist, she looked up at the tree. I'm just not sure how at the moment, that's all.

Why was it a cat could go up a tree, but couldn't come down?

Chewing on her lower lip, Melinda shoved her hands into her pockets and circled around the tree again slowly, thinking. She'd called the sheriff's office, asking for help, but if no one showed up soon, she was going to climb up into the tree herself.

The way she used to, she thought with a half smile. When she'd been young and fearless and every day had been an adventure. The problem with growing up, she mused, was that you realized the consequences of your actions. If she fell out of the tree, who would take care of her children? Her father had taken them in, but she knew that was only temporary.

When had life gotten so complicated and difficult?

"Tell you what, let's get you and the rest of the motley crew down for your naps and Mr. Whiskers'll be back in the house, looking down his nose at you, by the time you're up."

Hands on the tiny shoulders, she turned her protesting daughter toward the back door and herded her into the house.

Melinda had bought Mr. Whiskers when Maggie and the others had fallen in love with him at the animal shelter, chanting "cat, cat," over and over again until she'd broken down and brought the animal home for her children.

All kids needed a pet, she reasoned. Even a finicky one.

Mr. Whiskers was more Mollie's cat than her siblings', which explained why two-thirds of the triplets were holed up in front of the television set, glued to every word that a big yellow dog was saying.

An advertisement came on for the latest video games, blaring every word at her. Three sets of eyes grew huge as they watched the animation.

She should have gotten them a mechanical cat, Melinda thought belatedly. No kitty litter, no finicky behavior, no trees scaled.

Too late now, she thought.

She shut off the television set to a chorus of groans. "Naptime," she announced. The groans intensified.

Shutting out all feelings except those that belonged to a deputy sheriff sworn to uphold the law, Carl rang the doorbell. He rang it two more times before he decided that the din coming from inside the house was completely drowning out the chimes of the doorbell.

Fisting his hand, he knocked, loud and hard. He wasn't about to back away and leave. That would be cowardly and he'd never been that before. Mentally he called Quint a few choice names.

The front door opened a few seconds later.

It was hard keeping his mind on his role and not on the woman in front of him.

The girl who had left Serendipity at eighteen was beautiful. The woman who had returned at twenty-five was stunning.

Finding his tongue, and the wits that were threatening to scatter from him like so many marbles on a board that had suddenly slanted, Carl said, "I've come about the cat."

## Chapter Two

In a single heartbeat, she was eighteen again, looking up at a young man she trusted more than she trusted anyone else in the world.

It took Melinda a moment to focus back on the present. On the three children clustered around her like chicks around a hen—if chicks could babble incoherently and cling—and on the man standing on her doorstep.

He'd filled out, she thought. A lot. And gotten taller, too. She remembered him a few inches taller than she was, now there seemed to be almost a foot's difference between them. The thin shoulders were broad now, and the forearms she saw peering out from beneath the rolled-up sleeves were strong and muscular.

It couldn't be him. And yet, it had to be. Carly. Carly Cutler.

Melinda realized she was staring and blinked, trying to rouse herself.

"Carly?"

It just didn't seem fair. There should be some kind of law on the books about women who broke your heart getting more beautiful as time went by, Carl thought. It would have helped a little if she'd been tired and at least a tad worn, but she wasn't. She was radiant. Except for her eyes. There was a sadness there, a sadness that wisdom gotten at too great a price brought.

He squelched the impulse to take his hat in his hand. That would have seemed penitent somehow.

Instead he gazed steadily into her eyes, reminding himself not to drown there. It took a bit of effort to succeed.

"It's Carl now."

"Carl." She wrapped her tongue around his new, adult name.

Carl.

No, he wasn't Carly anymore. There was no boyishness about the man who stood before her. The years had hardened his body and made his face leaner, bringing out cheekbones she'd had no idea had been there.

Nostalgia and a dram of sorrow seeped into her for the boy she had once known. She smiled at him, even though there was no smile on his face to greet her.

"No hello?"

"Hello," Carl echoed civilly, then repeated what he'd said previously, as if it were a mantra that could keep him impervious to the light, airy charm that was Melinda Morrow. "I've come about the cat."

Melinda half turned toward the back of the house, as if to look toward the backyard where the tree and the trapped feline existed in discord.

Still partially catapulted into the past, she tried vainly to ignore the urgent tugs on her clothes by the munchkins who surrounded her.

"You? But I called the sheriff's office..." Why had he come in response?

Carly. She'd thought about him a great deal lately, thought about getting in contact with him more than a dozen times since she'd returned to Serendipity. Despite numerous friendships, he'd been the one she could always rely on. She'd even looked up his name in the telephone book to see if he still lived in town. He did and his number hadn't changed.

Apparently, she thought, looking at him again, that was the only thing that hadn't changed.

Every time she'd begun to press his number on the keypad, she'd aborted the call, afraid of what he'd say to her. Afraid that the hard feelings she'd left in her wake would still be there.

And now she stood looking at him like some wide-eyed schoolgirl instead of a woman with a college degree and three children to support.

“And the sheriff sent me,” he told her.

His answers were clipped, his voice almost nothing like she remembered. But then, Melinda supposed she deserved that.

Logic and merit notwithstanding, it still hurt to hear the cool tone. Especially since what she needed right at this minute, she admitted to herself, was a shoulder to lean on for just a moment, until she caught her breath and found her bearings.

Her eyes swept over him. She hadn’t noticed the uniform Carl wore, but now she thought it seemed made for him. “So when did you become a deputy sheriff?”

Before answering, he glanced at the blond trio that had all but sealed themselves to her body. All three sets of blue eyes were looking up at him inquisitively. Damn, but they were adorable.

Kids had always been his undoing. He’d always wanted a tribe of them himself, but without a partner, that didn’t seem as if it was ever going to happen.

Carl curbed the urge to squat down to the triplets’ level and ruffle their hair. Instead he answered their mother’s question.

“When Quint became the sheriff.”

“Quint’s the sheriff?” Melinda’s eyes widened in surprise at the information. She thought she’d vaguely recognized the voice on the phone, but couldn’t place it. Now she knew why. The town bad boy was now the sheriff. Would wonders never cease? “Quint Cutler?”

“That’s the one.”

Carl wanted to cut this short, not knowing how much longer he could just stand here, holding her at arm’s length the way he knew he should, the way she deserved. Wanting nothing more than to take her into his arms. There was always something about Melinda that got to him, making him forgive her unintentional slights, chalking it up to her just being Melinda. But he couldn’t do that now. They weren’t kids anymore.

He nodded toward the rear of the house and the yard beyond. “Is the cat back there?”

Remorse and frustration tugged at Melinda even harder than the children who were twisting their fingers into her long floral shirt. She didn’t want to talk about treed cats, she wanted her friend back. Even if she didn’t deserve him.

“Talk to me, Carly—Carl,” she corrected herself. She bit back the “please” even though it trembled on her lips, trying to get free. If she added the single word and he still looked at her coldly, she didn’t know if she could stand it. Funny, the separation and divorce from Steve had hurt less than being rejected by Carly.

It took effort, but he didn’t allow himself to be pulled in. She was here now, but tomorrow, she could be gone again because someone new had won her heart and written her promises in the sand. Someone she would run off with. He wasn’t about to feel anything for someone who hadn’t so much as sent him a postcard in all the years she’d been gone.

The girl he’d been in love with existed in his past. He was just going to have to learn to deal with that.

“I am talking,” he answered crisply, though he couldn’t resist winking at the little girl closest to him. He raised his eyes to look at Melinda. “So where’s the cat?” he asked for the third time. “You called to say you had a cat stuck in a tree.” He enunciated each word slowly, as if reading it from some giant cue card held just out of sight. “Now where is it?”

It was as if she felt the harsh tone physically and took a step back from him.

“He’s out back.”

Pointing behind her, Melinda turned to lead the way. Progress was impeded by six small feet that didn’t quite make the turn as smoothly. Because they were all clustering so closely, the boy fell down as his sisters huddled again around their mother, hurrying to keep up. Carl was quick to scoop him up as the three-year-old’s sisters giggled, hanging on to either side of their mother.

Carl made an elaborate show of brushing him off. “Gotta watch those turns, fella.” He set the boy back on the floor and was rewarded with a sunny smile that was so much like Melinda’s, it punched him in the gut.

It took Carl a second to catch his breath. “What’s your name?”

The boy shyly popped a finger into his mouth, staring at him with his mother’s eyes.

“That’s Matthew,” Melinda told him. “Matthew Carly Greenwood.”

Carl looked at her sharply.

“I named him after my best friend,” she added quietly. Then recovering, she ushered each giggling little girl forward as she completed the introductions. “This is Mollie Ann and this is Margaret Mae.” She smiled, looking first at the little girl, then at Carl. “Maggie Mae, like the old song.”

He remembered. Melinda had always liked the songs that belonged to another generation. “Maggie Mae” was one of her favorites.

Since the girls were looking up at him, he inclined his head, his features softening. He shook each hand separately. “Nice to meet you, ladies, Matt. Is that your cat up in the tree?”

Blond curls sprang about animatedly as three heads bobbed up and down in syncopated rhythm. Unable to resist, Carl gave in and squatted down to their level.

“Which of you chased him up there?” Hesitation was followed by three stubby fingers all pointing at a different culprit. Carl gave them his gravest, most thoughtful deputy sheriff face. “I see, so it was a team effort. Well, let’s see if we can convince him to come down and join us.” He rose and his smile faded as he looked at Melinda. “Show me which tree.”

Damn it, Carly, don’t look at me like that. Like you don’t know me. Like you don’t want to know me. Taking a deep breath, Melinda got her bearings and turned on her heel.

“Right this way.” She did her best to sound breezy, as if she were talking to an amiable stranger instead of someone who had known her since she was almost as young as her triplets. “I don’t know why cats can go up trees, but they can’t come down.”

“Probably impulse makes them run up. They want to see how far they can get, maybe grab themselves something elusive. And they look down and stop to think about what they’ve done and what might happen if they try to get down again.” He slanted a glance at her profile. “Paralyzes them.”

Her eyes met his. “Are you still talking about the cat?”

He shrugged, as innocent as he had once been. “Sure, what would I be talking about?”

She dropped it. There was no point in going on. Melinda opened the back door and stepped out into the yard. “Nothing.” They walked over to the giant oak that stood like an aged companion near the house, its branches almost caressing the rear window that had once belonged to her bedroom. “He’s up there.”

Carl stood back, trying to get a better view of the upper portion of the massive tree. He could remember one summer when Melinda had wanted a tree-house built into its massive branches more than anything in the world. He’d set his mind to building it for her using wood he’d paid for with money he’d earned mowing lawns all summer—until her father forbade it, saying it would damage the tree.

Shading his eyes, he tried to make out the form of a cat and failed.

“You sure he’s there?” Maybe the cat had decided to be courageous after all and come down.

Tilting her head, with the triplets mimicking her every move, Melinda looked for the elusive feline.

“Yes, there he is.” She pointed to a section, then turned Carl’s head with her hands to position him better. “See? That glob of gray and white fur?”

He tried not to allow the touch of her hand take over all his senses. It was futile despite the best of intentions.

With effort, he forced himself to focus on the reason he was here. To rescue a cat, not resuscitate a friendship gone sour. Squinting, he could finally make out the furry form. The cat looked to be at least twenty feet off the ground.

“Yeah,” he snapped the word off, tension dancing through him. “I see him.”

She was having second thoughts about this rescue action. The cat belonged to the children, but she didn’t want to risk having Carl plummet out of a tree just to retrieve him.

“Maybe we’d better forget the whole thing, or call the fire department.” Damn it, she was stumbling over her own tongue, and she knew why. She was letting her guilt overwhelm her.

He waved a dismissive hand at the suggestion. “I’m here now.”

They weren’t kids anymore, shimmying up the tree like monkeys. She glanced at the garage. “Do you want me to get a ladder?”

Not that she knew if her father even had a ladder anymore. He’d long since given up doing chores around the place himself, hiring gardeners and handymen to do them instead.

Carl shook his head at the offer. The next moment he jumped up to grab the lowest branch, then swung himself up into the tree.

Melinda couldn’t help smiling again as another whiff of nostalgia drifted over her. “I forgot how agile you could be.”

He spared her one look before climbing up higher. “Seems to me you forgot a lot of things.”

She had that coming, too, Melinda thought, crossing her arms before her as she saw him make his way up the tree.

“Not really.” He climbed a few more feet up and she watched him, debating. Finally she said, “You know that argument we had? The one just before I left?”

He refused to look down at her, keeping his eyes trained on the cat. But he felt something tighten in his stomach.

“What about it?”

“I’m sorry, Carly—Carl. Damn, but it’s going to be hard to think of you that way after all this time.” She was digressing and she knew it. She forced herself back on the track. Otherwise, the apology wouldn’t count. “You were right, I was wrong.” She’d been wanting to get that off her chest for a very long time. “He wasn’t any good for me.”

She glanced at her children, but they seemed oblivious to what she was saying, which was just what she wanted. She deliberately avoided using Steve’s name. Though the triplets were still very young, she didn’t want to take any chances. She wasn’t going to be one of those divorced mothers who bad-mouthed her children’s father in front of them. Like her father had bad-mouthed her mother for years after her mother had left. Children deserved to hang on to some illusions, at least for a little while. Reality came through fast enough as it was.

This time, Carl did look down at her. Seeing the way the triplets were buffering her on all three sides, his mouth curved.

“Except in one way.”

She shaded her eyes again, trying to make out his face. She couldn’t. “How’s that?”

Holding steady with one hand firmly around a thick branch, he pointed down with the other. “Just look around you.”

Melinda looked down at her children. The children she wouldn’t have had had it not been for her marriage to Steve. They filled up her world and made things special. Carl had a point.

“You’re right. As usual.”

Carl continued to inch his way up. The cat, firmly entrenched amid two branches, looked down at him as if he were a royal being, smirking at the efforts of a mere commoner.

“You’re making it hard to stay angry at you, Melinda.”

“Good,” she called back up to him. “Because I can’t think of anything I hate more than having you angry with me. Especially now that I’ve moved back.”

He tested a branch before attempting to put his full weight on it. “For how long?”

“I’m not sure.” And she wasn’t. She was taking this one day at a time right now. “Maybe forever.”

And maybe not, he thought, taking hold of another branch. Melinda had never wanted to stay pinned down to anything for long. There was a wanderlust in her. He’d seen it in her eyes early on and had fooled himself into thinking that perhaps, once he’d made something of himself and could offer her his heart aloud, she’d change her mind and remain in Serendipity. Remain with him. But those had been the dreams of an eighteen-year-old. He knew better now.

Carl looked at the cat. The cat looked back at him. And moved to a higher branch. “What changed your mind about Serendipity?”

“You just met them,” she said, raising her voice. She didn’t like the way the branch swayed as he reached it. It took very little imagination to envision him toppling down and landing at her feet. The ornery cat wasn’t worth it. “Carl, maybe you should come down. I don’t want you getting hurt on my account.”

Too late, he thought.

“Rounding up cats is just part of the job, ma’am,” he drawled.

Again, Mr. Whiskers was just within reach. And again, as Carl stretched as far as he was able, the animal drew back and moved to an even loftier perch.

Holding his breath, Carl tested the ever-thinning branches as he made his way up to the top of the tree. “You sure Mr. Whiskers isn’t part mountain goat?”

He was rewarded with giggles. Giggles he wished he was on the ground to enjoy.

Melinda realized she was holding her breath as she watched Carl’s slow progress. The next second she caught herself gasping as Carl almost missed his step. “Carl, be careful.”

“I’m trying, Melinda, I surely am trying,” he said, his eyes never leaving the cat.

“Mr. Whiskers, Mr. Whiskers,” Mollie cried, pointing urgently skyward. In less than a beat, she was joined by Matt and Maggie, chanting the cat’s name.

Melinda said nothing, only crossing her fingers. If they ever got that cat down again, she was going to tether it to the kitchen table.

“C’mon, cat,” Carl said in a low, soothing voice as he inched toward the feline. “You don’t want to stay up in this tree for the rest of your nine lives. Let’s get down before you make a wrong move and use them all up,” he coaxed.

Mr. Whiskers responded by daintily moving to a lower branch just as Carl was about to catch him. Carl swallowed a ripe curse he wouldn’t have voiced in front of the children for the world. Drawing back, he missed his footing and nearly fell out of the tree. He grabbed a branch just in time. His heart pounded in his ears, blocking out all other sounds.

Melinda screamed, causing the triplets to freeze, not knowing whether or not this was part of the game or if something was very wrong.

“Mommy?” Maggie said uncertainly.

She hugged the little girl hard, then opened her arms as the other two snuggled in. All the while she never stopped watching Carl. “Carl, you come down here,” she called, her voice throbbing. “Never mind about the cat. I’ll call the fire department.”

He didn’t like not finishing something he’d started. It was the stubborn streak in him, that much more surprising because as a rule, he was very easygoing. But he believed in keeping his word, no matter what. That included retrieving cats out of trees.

“It’s a cat, not a fire.” It was a matter of honor now. He made eye contact with Mr. Whiskers and willed him to be still as he worked his way down to the branch where the cat had ceased his odyssey. “They’ve got better things to do.”

“And you don’t?”

“Apparently not.” Carl reached the branch where the cat was. Barely moving, he gained ground at a painfully slow rate. “Okay, Whiskers, just you and me,” he told the cat in a low, guttural voice.

“Make you a deal. You let me get you and I promise not to skin you for all the trouble you’ve put me through. How about it?”

The animal stared at him, giving every impression that he’d been almost hypnotized by the soft cadence of Carl’s voice.

In one quick motion, Carl secured the animal. But not without consequences. As the triplets let out a lusty cheer, Mr. Whiskers let out a loud cry. The cat’s claws fanned out in four directions as he tried to scramble for freedom.

Carl sucked in his breath as he felt the cat’s nails make contact with his skin. He saw blood immediately fill in the lines where the Angora’s claws had cut him.

“Calm down, cat,” he warned, “or that skinning offer is off the table.”

Mr. Whiskers kept on complaining. Carl did his best to hold the animal against his chest, trying to remember when his last rabies shot had been.

The journey down took forever, but he finally made it. Carl released the cat when he was five feet off the ground. The disgruntled feline flew from the tree and the odious experience as fast as he could. The triplets came to life, chasing after the cat.

Feeling like a pincushion, Carl jumped down to the ground himself.

“Get him into the house,” Melinda called after her children. She turned around to thank Carl and her words melted on her tongue. There were at least four foot-long scratches on Carl’s arm. “My God, he did a number on you.”

Not as bad as you did, Carl thought as he shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

Examining the wounds, Melinda felt terrible. “I’m so sorry. Mr. Whiskers doesn’t like being messed with.”

“Now you tell me,” he deadpanned. “Don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.”

“Nothing my foot.” The next thing he knew, she was taking hold of his other hand and drawing him toward the house. “Let me take a closer look at that.”

He did what he could to resist having her fuss over him, though he had to admit that the scratches stung like crazy. “It’s just a scratch.”

“It’s just several scratches,” she corrected. “And there isn’t any ‘just’ about them. Those look like they could get infected if you don’t treat them and knowing you, you won’t do anything but let them dry. Don’t argue with me, just come inside.”

He opened his mouth to protest again, then thought better of it. She was right, he wouldn’t do anything except dab at them to keep the rest of his uniform from getting blood on it.

With a shrug, he allowed himself to be ushered into her house.

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