

An Excerpt from *The Changed Man*, by Cat Treadgold

Joe and Ali were clearly destined to be together, everyone said. Jake the cynic didn't buy it. Lust, maybe. Instant "love" was a myth.

Or was it? His gaze lit upon a stunning woman who stood apart, an outsider like him. There was something about her that hit him straight between the eyes. She was doing her best to hide her light under a bushel, but *wowee*.

When David introduced her, she looked up shyly from playing with a young, redheaded boy. *Hold the phone* ... David had a *son*? The kid was his spitting image. Why would their mother fail to mention something so earth-shattering as an illegitimate grandson? No wonder she'd clung to him like a life preserver.

The woman's glasses had slipped down her nose to reveal wide, long-lashed eyes—hazel, maybe. Creamy, flawless skin. Very little, if any, cosmetics. Rich brown hair pulled into a tight bun. Full breasts not quite concealed by her loose shirt-waist dress. He'd love to help her remove her protective shell. Outfitting women was one of his greatest pleasures. *Shit*. Was she Lorenzo's mother? If so, why was David marrying Maddie, who was shaking Jake's hand?

Okay, he saw Maddie's appeal. With her large, brilliant green eyes and short, curly blonde hair, she was a Margaret Keane portrait come to life. Nothing childlike about those dangerous curves. She and David made an odd couple. She had to be a foot shorter.

This other woman, Chiara ... did he detect a light Italian accent? All she'd said was "I'm so happy to meet you" in a thrilling, lilting voice. When he shook her hand, he caught a whiff of floral perfume. He wanted to glom onto her—get a better handle on that accent and fragrance—but he was still making the rounds. Then David read his mind, or at least the question there. "Chiara is Lorenzo's guardian, along with her husband Arnold. His mother is Chiara's sister Sylvia, an ER doctor in Chicago." Jake heard the hostility in David's tone when he mentioned Sylvia. So, this Sylvia was giving him a hard time. The O'Connell men did like their women docile—not imperious, like their mother. Chiara cowered a little, ill at ease with being the center of attention. A beauty accustomed to being overlooked in favor of her sister? *Damn*. Was she really married?

"The pleasure is mine, Chiara," he said, her name rolling off his tongue a little too fondly.

Rory reasserted himself. "Have I taught you nothing? It's a bad marriage, but *you* should stay out of it."

Jake ignored him.

The twins were Ali clones—only with Joe's wavy hair and a dimple in their chins that hinted at a

future cleft—bouncing around in their playpen like puppies. They were doing a half walk/half crawl thing with an occasional roll. He caught the words “May-May” and “Mama,” not much else. The rest nonsensical burbling. Little beauties. He pitied their future victims.

Teresa looked surprisingly un-Teresa-like. “Wow,” he said when she hugged him. “You look ... different.” She wasn’t as painfully thin as he remembered.

“She’s got a bun in the oven, you goof,” Rory said.

Startled, Jake cast about to see if anyone had overheard. “You look amazing, actually,” he amended. “Sorry, it’s a shock, that’s all.”

“JB, if you’re not already checked into a hotel, why don’t you stay with Liam and me while you’re here?” Teresa said, pulling on his arm like she had when they were children. “We have a Victorian in town. It’s a work in progress, but it has a decent guestroom.”