



The Colton Ransom (The Coltons of Wyoming Book 1)

By Marie Ferrarella



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Double Crime at Dead River Ranch

Former cop Trevor Garth left the line of duty, but his expert instincts are sharper than ever when crime strikes the Colton ranch. As ranch security, he has to step in—yet this time getting justice is personal. Mistaken for a Colton heiress and stolen from her crib, his daughter's in the hands of a killer out for ransom. Desperate for an ally, he must rely on the woman determined to help him.

Gabriella Colton doesn't think twice about joining Trevor's search for his daughter. Beneath his world-weary exterior is a passionate man in need of someone to trust—with his baby and his heart. Now, when every second counts, their dangerous investigation draws them closer to each other...and their darkest threat.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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

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"You see all this, Cheyenne?" Gabriella Colton said to the three-month-old baby girl she was holding up in her arms.

Gabby moved slowly around in a complete circle, intentionally giving her niece a complete panoramic view of the outdoor area where she was standing. There was nothing but breathtaking scenery as far as the eye could see.

While almost her entire family—as well as most of the staff who worked to keep her father's Wyoming ranch, whimsically christened Dead River Ranch, running smoothly—were presently at the rodeo, Gabby had elected to remain behind and babysit her oldest sister's, Amanda's, daughter.

Staying home hadn't been a hardship for Gabby, really. She loved children, loved caring for Cheyenne, and she had no great love for rodeos the way the rest of her family did. Attending one would only bring back bad memories that were better left buried. Her first love, Kyle, had thrown her over to join the rodeo circuit as a bronco buster. She had believed him when he'd told her he loved her, discovering that he said the word *love* as frequently as he said "hi." At least he meant the latter, she thought ruefully.

But Gabby didn't want anything bringing her down on this absolutely gorgeous July afternoon, so she'd volunteered to remain at Dead River while everyone else had gone to see wranglers pitting themselves against four-footed competitors.

"Isn't it beautiful, darlin'? This is your grandpa's ranch, and someday, years from now, you'll have a part of it. It's a little quiet now, but that's because everyone's gone to the rodeo. But we don't mind the quiet, do we?" she asked the infant. Cheyenne stared up at her with huge eyes, as if her niece understood every word she said. Gabby liked to think that she did. "When it's quiet like this, we can appreciate how really beautiful this part of the country is."

As Gabby moved from the sprawling courtyard toward the stables, the tranquillity of the afternoon was suddenly shattered with the sound of absolutely heart-wrenching, plaintive wails.

"Uh-oh, looks like I spoke too soon about it being so quiet. Want to go investigate?" she asked the baby. Pretending to receive an affirmative answer, Gabby nodded and said, "That's what I thought. Okay, let's go see what this is all about."

Gabby had taken only a few more steps toward the distressed cries when the source of all that crying became all too apparent.

Trevor Garth, the tall, ruggedly handsome and incredibly silent head of her father's security, came walking

out of the small petting zoo, which was being added to the ranch's landscape. As of yet, the zoo was still in the process of being constructed. It was something the ranch hands had begun to put together with the idea that it would be a place for Cheyenne and her little friends to play when she became older.

Trevor's ordinarily somber face sported a pronounced scowl, and it was a toss-up who looked more unhappy, he or the squalling infant in his arms.

When his job didn't force him to interact with someone on the ranch, the dark-haired ex-cop from Cheyenne kept mostly to himself, obviously preferring his own company to that of others. He'd been at Dead River for five years now and had, until just recently, been more or less of a stranger as far as Gabby and the others were concerned.

What had changed in this past month was his status. With one very short but eventful delivery, he'd gone from being a loner to a rather unhappy-looking, unwilling father. One glance at his pained expression right now told Gabby that the man did far better as a loner than a father.

The more the baby in his arms cried, the more at a loss and flustered Trevor seemed to grow.

Gabby had never been able to just look away if she encountered someone in obvious distress. It just wasn't in her to stand around, idle, without trying to remedy the situation. She just wasn't built that way.

"What do you say you and I go rescue Avery's dad?" she asked Cheyenne. The baby gurgled in response and Gabby laughed. "My sentiments exactly. He looks *just* like a fish out of water," she agreed. "But it would be cruel of us just to watch him flounder like that, wouldn't it?" she asked Cheyenne even as she made her way over to the far-from-happy man.

As a man who made it his business to be perpetually aware of his surroundings, Trevor caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and looked in that direction. He was surprised to see his boss's youngest daughter heading his way.

Great, he thought darkly, just what he needed. Little Miss Sunshine to add her voice to the cacophony coming out of his daughter's rosebud mouth.

It wasn't that he actually disliked Gabby Colton. To be honest, he didn't know her well enough to dislike her. Granted, the vibrant redhead was more than a little attractive, but she was also naively optimistic. His opinion was based on the fact that she wholeheartedly wanted to build a center for troubled kids smack-dab in the middle of the ranch, using an empty barn as her starting point.

As if one act of kindness would somehow instantly transform hardened, cynical street kids into reformed angels.

Ain't gonna happen, he thought sarcastically.

She was still heading toward him. Damn. The last thing he needed was to have the boss's daughter clucking over his so-called daughter, making insipid comments and giving him worse-than-useless advice. He had a feeling that she probably knew even less than he did about child rearing. She seemed like the type that was just interested in spoiling a kid rotten, then later was shocked when that kid turned out to be a self-centered brat.

Oh, hell, what did he know? He supposed that it wasn't quite fair for him to assume something like that. She had to know more than he did.

When she finally reached him, Trevor tipped his black Stetson at her, murmured "Ms. Gabby" politely enough and continued walking.

It took Gabby a moment to summon her courage—there was something really intimidating about the tall, muscular former lawenforcement officer. But his wailing daughter made her forget about her own discomfort, leaving her no choice.

"Trevor, wait," Gabby called out, hurrying to catch up to him. The man had one hell of a lengthy stride, especially when he walked quickly.

It irked Trevor that because he was an employee at the ranch, he had to stop the moment he heard her calling to him. But he was mindful of his position, so he stopped, using up the last of his patience in an effort not to snap out "Yes, ma'am" at the twenty-four-year-old.

"She's really crying up a storm, isn't she?" Gabby said as she caught up to him.

Nothing he found more irritating than someone stating the obvious.

"Certainly sounds that way," Trevor replied, managing to take the edge out of his voice at the last possible moment.

"Do you know why she's crying?" she asked him.

"If I knew why, Ms. Gabby, I'd know how to get her to stop," he answered, measuring out each word carefully and counting the seconds until the young woman left him alone.

"Most likely she's crying because she's cranky and needs a nap."

Avery wasn't the only one. "You think that's it?" he asked out loud. Trevor felt completely wiped out. Being on all-night stakeouts had been far easier than what he'd been going through each night lately. Becoming a father literally overnight and putting up with the exhausting demands of a wailing infant these past two weeks had all but completely drained him to the point that most of the time now, he felt punchy. His last decent night's sleep had occurred *before* she'd been thrust into his arms—literally and figuratively.

"I'm fairly certain," Gabby replied. And then she grinned broadly as an idea hit her. "I tell you what, you hold Cheyenne here and I'll take your daughter and put her down for a nap. Might perk her right up," she predicted. "How's that?" she asked, her grin widening to the point that he thought he was going to fall in.

He inclined his head, ready to agree to anything that would give him even a few minutes' respite. "I'd be in your debt, ma'am."

She rolled her eyes at the salutation he used. "Oh, please. Having you call me 'Ms. Gabby' is bad enough. Please don't call me 'ma'am.' It makes me feel absolutely ancient."

Trevor laughed shortly at the assessment. "Well, if it's one thing you're not, it's ancient," he told her. To him, especially since he had ten years on her, Gabriella Colton was barely older than a child.

Gabby, however, took his response to be on the flirtatious side. Consequently, a slight blush crept up her cheeks. Dusting them with a pink hue.

Clearing her throat, she tried to draw attention away from the momentary infusion of color. "Okay, give me Avery, and you hold Cheyenne for a few minutes."

The shift took a little maneuvering to accomplish since there was nowhere to put either infant down to achieve the swap smoothly.

As he handed over his daughter and took hold of Gabby's tranquil niece, Trevor felt his knuckles brush against something soft.

By the expression on the young woman's face—first startled, then embarrassed—he realized that he'd unwittingly brushed his knuckles against her breasts. That had *not* been his intention.

"Sorry," Trevor mumbled awkwardly.

Gabby murmured a perfunctory "It's okay," deliberately avoiding making any eye contact. She drew his daughter against her, focusing on the infant's wails of distress. "It's okay, sweetheart. We're going to take you inside and make sure you take a nice, peaceful nap. Everything'll be all better when you wake up again. I promise."

The instant his daughter left his arms, Trevor felt relief washing over him. Just to be rid of his wailing burden for even a few minutes felt like a much-longed-for blessing.

Trevor took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He looked up into Gabby's bright green eyes. "Thanks," he told her dutifully.

Patting the baby's bottom and cooing to her, Gabby glanced over to Avery's father and smiled serenely. "Don't mention it."

She sounded as if she meant it. Obviously crying babies didn't seem to have any effect on her *or* her nerves. That put her one up on him, Trevor couldn't help thinking.

"I'll be right back," Gabby promised, turning on her heel and walking toward the entrance to the main wing of the house. The wing where the Coltons—she, her two older sisters, Amanda and Catherine, and her father—all lived. There was another wing for the staff and wranglers as well as a wing at the very farthest end of the mansion where her father's ex-wife—his third—lived with her two adult children from a previous marriage, Tawny and Trip.

It made for crowded living conditions at times, but on days like today, when everyone was gone, it felt as if she had an entire castle at her disposal.

Gabby smiled to herself as she entered the house.

Trevor gazed down warily at the infant in his arms. Part of him was waiting for the tiny female to burst into tears. But Cheyenne Colton remained quiet, staring up at him as if he were the newest wonder to come into her world.

"I guess all babies don't cry all the time," Trevor theorized out loud.

Gabby Colton's niece was almost exactly the same age as his newly discovered daughter. But that was where, in his mind, the similarity ended. To his recollection, the infant he was currently holding hardly even whimpered, much less cried.

On the other hand, it seemed as if Avery had done nothing *but* cry in the time she'd been with him. She'd worn away just about all of his nerves—not that he'd had all that many available to begin with.

"Maybe she's just grumpy—like her old man," he guessed out loud.

When he realized that he was actually talking to an infant, he abruptly stopped, feeling somewhat chagrined and annoyed with himself.

Cheyenne looked up at him and gurgled as if to tell him that it was all right.

"You're not really a crybaby, are you?" Gabby said soothingly to the infant she was taking upstairs with her. "It's all just new and scary to you, isn't it? Not that I can actually blame you.

"Your daddy's a really handsome man," Gabby went on. "And he'd look even more so if he just learned to smile once in a while. That scowl of his, though, I've got to admit *is* pretty scary," she said, as if agreeing with something the infant in her arms had just told her. "Don't worry. He'll come around," Gabby promised the baby with certainty. "He'll see what a sweet little thing you can really be once you get used to everything, and his heart can't help but melt then."

Coming to the landing, Gabby made an impulsive decision. "Tell you what, since Cheyenne's already had her nap for the afternoon, why don't we put you in *her* room so you can have a nice roomy crib to sleep in?"

She shifted the infant so that she could look down into the small, round face, as if she were actually gauging the baby's reaction.

"Would you like that, sugar? Sure you would," she told the child. "She's got a room—and a crib—that are really pretty. They're both fit for a little princess. I don't mind telling you that her aunt Catherine and I had a hand in that," Gabby went on proudly, sharing a confidence. "Catherine and I decided that her mommy needed something to cheer her up and get her mind off Cheyenne's daddy taking off before she was even born. He didn't even wait to find out if she was okay," Gabby added sadly. She couldn't understand someone behaving that way and felt that both Amanda and Cheyenne were better off without that man in their lives.

"So we went all out and decorated the nursery as if Cheyenne were really a little princess. Today, *you* get to be that little princess for the afternoon," she told Avery in a purposely breathless voice. The baby's eyes were widening, as if she were literally digesting every word. "How about that, baby girl?" she asked, her smile now spreading from ear to ear.

Gabby's smile grew even wider since the baby had stopped crying and actually seemed to be listening to the sound of her soothing, upbeat cadence.

That was what the baby needed, Gabby decided. To have someone talk to her as if she were a person, not just this—this *thing* to be saddled with, she concluded for lack of a better description.

The only problem was, Gabby thought, how did she go about saying that to Trevor? She knew that the man probably wouldn't take kindly to being told how to act toward his daughter. She doubted if Trevor was the kind to be open to *any* advice at all, constructive or not.

Still, she did have his best interests at heart. His and Avery's. All she wanted to do was just help both of them.

"Maybe he'll feel better after you wake up all rested and happy from your nap. You think so?" she asked. The baby made a noise that sounded a little like a squeak. "No, me neither. But we can always hope for the best, can't we?" she asked.

Leaning against the door, Gabby maneuvered the door lever with her elbow, managing to open it. She then pushed the door open with her back, angling her way into the large, airy bedroom.

The nursery was decorated in all soft pinks and whites. All in all, it did indeed look like a bedroom fit for a princess, right down to the canopied white crib with its delicate musical mobile depicting fairies floating above her.

"Well, here it is, your very own princesslike crib for the afternoon," Gabby declared.

After laying the infant gently down on her back, Gabby began to rub the baby's tummy in slow, concentric circles. It was meant to soothe Avery and help the little girl fall asleep.

Within a few minutes, the soothing, rhythmic motion worked wonders in calming the infant down. Just as she'd hoped.

A couple of whimpers and one near sob later, the little girl's eyes began to flutter shut.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Greta Harty:

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Daniel Cadena:

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