



MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

Wedding Rings and Baby Things

TERESA SOUTHWICK

Teresa Southwick

Wedding Rings and Baby Things

Аннотация

I'M YOUR GROOMDEBUT AUTHORBABY ON THE WAYEveryone in town was talking about the pregnant and unmarried teacher. Kelly's condition—not to mention swelling belly—were a source of good gossip and great concern. For her baby's sake, Kelly knew escaping scandal meant finding an instant dad. Mike Cameron was not the father of Kelly's child, though everyone thought he was. So he did the honorable thing and proposed marriage. Now she could have the family she'd always dreamed of. If only their marriage vows of love, honor and cherish were not just for convenience's sake. Five irresistible heroes say "I DO" for a lifetime of love. **I'M YOUR GROOM.**

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***“Kelly, there’s no such
thing as true love...”***

She turned away so that he wouldn’t see her hurt. “I think it exists. I don’t want to settle for less. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a lot to do. Good night, Mike.” She held the door open.

The sight of him walking away, then the sound of the front door closing, were just about the loneliest things Kelly could imagine. Mike Cameron had just asked her to marry him, and he was serious. Not only that, he was angry that she’d refused his proposal.

She was pregnant She was unemployed. She was moving. She was probably crazy. What woman in her right mind would say no to a handsome hunk like Mike? She reminded herself that she was doing this to protect him.

But if she was doing the right thing, why did it feel so wrong and awful?

Dear Reader,

Happy Valentine’s Day! Silhouette Romance’s Valentine to you is our special lineup this month, starting with *Daddy by Decision* by bestselling, award-winning author Lindsay Longford. When rugged cowboy Buck Riley sees his estranged ex with a child who looks just like him, he believes the little boy is his son. True or not, that belief in his heart—and his

love for mother and child—is all he needs to be a FABULOUS FATHER.

And we're celebrating love and marriage with I'M YOUR GROOM, a five-book promotion about five irresistible heroes who say "I do" for a lifetime of love. In Carolyn Zane's *It's Raining Grooms*, a preacher's daughter prays for a husband and suddenly finds herself engaged to her gorgeous childhood nemesis. *To Wed Again?* by DeAnna Talcott tells the story of a divorced couple who are blessed with a second chance at marriage when they become instant parents. Next, in Judith Janeway's *An Accidental Marriage*, the maid of honor and the best man are forced to act like the eloped newly weds when the bride's parents arrive!

Plus, two authors sure to become favorites make their Romance debuts this month. In *Husband Next Door* by Anne Ha, a very confirmed bachelor is reformed into marriage material, and in *Wedding Rings and Baby Things* by Teresa Southwick, an anyminute mom-to-be says "I do" to a marriage of convenience that leads to a lifetime of love....

I hope you enjoy all six of these wonderful books.

Warm wishes,

Melissa Senate,

Senior Editor

Silhouette Books

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Wedding Rings and Baby Things

Teresa Southwick



www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Jim, my big brother and very own legal eagle. Thanks for giving me the words to make Mike a here. For always being there and understanding, you have my everlasting gratitude.

TERESA SOUTHWICK

is a native Californian with ties to each coast, since she was conceived in the East and born in the West. Living with her husband of twenty-five years and two handsome sons, she is surrounded by heroes. Reading has been her passion since she was a girl. She couldn't be more delighted that her dream of writing full-time has come true. Her favorite things include: holding a baby, the fragrance of jasmine, walks on the beach, the patter of rain on the roof, and above all—happy endings.

Teresa also writes historical romance novels under the same name.

Chapter One

She'd picked a bad time to swear off men.

Not that it was a permanent situation, Kelly Walker amended. Besides, her condition wasn't exactly conducive to getting involved with men, and that was the way she wanted to keep it

On the other hand, her condition was probably the reason she had been summoned to the administration office in the high school where she taught. She stared at the wavy, light-and-dark wood grain in the door marked Principal. As much as she tried to tell herself differently, it wasn't likely that Mr. Bloomhurst had summoned her here to discuss her interpretation of *Hamlet*. He probably wanted to talk about the fact that she was six months pregnant, not married—and not getting married.

Stevenson High School was located in Newhall, the small California town where she'd grown up. No one knew better than she how people talked, how quickly gossip circulated. She had expected when this news got out it would spread like soft butter on a hot muffin.

Since she hadn't begun to really show until the last week or so, she had been able to keep her condition quiet. Only two people were supposed to know that she was going to have a baby. Susan Wishart, who taught in the classroom next to Kelly's, and Mike Cameron, head of the math department, head football coach and her very best friend in the world. She had made them promise not

to say anything until she could break the news to Mr. Bloomhurst herself. As many times as she'd rehearsed everything in her mind, she still wasn't prepared for this chat with her boss.

She had figured on telling him at the end of the school year when the next term assignments were given out. It was now the beginning of May. In the Arizona school where she'd taught before, teachers didn't find out until the last week before summer, vacation what they would be teaching in the fall. She was just finishing up her second year at Stevenson and was still getting used to how things were done here.

She had thought she'd been able to camouflage her swelling body with loose clothes, but she had been getting some long, curious looks. First the eyebrows went up when someone's eyes dropped to her midsection. Then the gaze lifted to see if her face had gotten rounder. Then the examination dropped below her belly to her legs to determine if she had put on weight everywhere. After all of this, which took about a second and a half, the person pretended she hadn't noticed a thing. So far everyone who was perceptive enough to give her the ritual once-over hadn't said anything.

Everyone, that is, except Elizabeth McCutcheon. Earlier today, she had asked Kelly point-blank if she was going to have a baby. Kelly had said yes. Mrs. McCutcheon hadn't let it drop there. She said she hadn't heard that Kelly had gotten married. Kelly told her she hadn't. Even in this small town, the majority of people wouldn't have pushed the issue, but Mrs. McCutcheon

happened to be the president of the district's Parent Advisory Committee.

Hence Kelly's summons to Mr. Bloomhurst after school.

She took a deep breath and knocked.

"Come in," a voice called out.

She opened the door and walked inside.

Cliff Bloomhurst glanced up from the paperwork on his desk.

"Hi, Kelly."

"Mr. Bloomhurst."

He smiled, looking at her over the half glasses he needed only for reading and now had balanced on the tip of his nose. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to the elbow, and his red-and-blue-striped tie was loosened just enough to release the button at his neck. His thinning brown hair was peppered with gray and there was genuine warmth in his light blue eyes. She liked him a lot. He was a nice man.

"Come on in. And shut the door, please." His voice was a sort of down-home drawl that normally put her completely at ease. But not today.

Kelly did as he asked, then perched on the edge of one of the green plastic chairs in front of his desk. Nervously she rested her elbows on the metal armrests and laced her fingers together.

"I know what this is about," she said. "Let's cut to the chase. I'm going to have a baby."

"So I heard."

"I planned to tell you soon. The baby is due at the end of July

or the beginning of August. I will be here on the first day of school in September.”

“I wish I didn’t have to ask, but...are you planning to marry the baby’s father?”

“No.”

Even if Doug Hammond had proposed instead of telling her not to expect any support, she wouldn’t tie herself to a man who was so underhanded and untrust-worthy. She was sorry she hadn’t seen sooner what a jerk Doug was. After that conversation, she hadn’t expected to hear from him again. But in the last couple weeks, he had left messages on her answering machine. She hadn’t returned them and hoped he would get the hint that she wanted him out of her life forever. She couldn’t stand the sight of the man, but she would never be sorry about the baby she now carried.

Mr. Bloomhurst looked genuinely sympathetic. “Then my hands are tied, Kelly. Liz McCutcheon went to the school board after she spoke to you today. They called me with a decision. You won’t be back in September.”

Kelly’s heart sank. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re a fine teacher. No one knows that or appreciates the job you do more than me. But the school board won’t permit a pregnant, unmarried teacher in the classroom. They’re concerned about the example it sets for the students.”

“But this is the nineties, Mr. Bloomhurst.”

He nodded grimly. “I know. But this is Newhall, California,

Small Town, U.S.A. It's a nice place to live. But that can be a double-edged sword."

"I won't be pregnant in September."

"Are you planning to keep the child?"

"Of course!" Kelly was shocked that he would even ask. It would never occur to her to give away her child.

"You won't be married, either, and you'll still have a child out of wedlock. I did my best to change their minds, but they were adamant."

Kelly was numb. She knew that was a good thing. She didn't want to go hysterical in front of this man. "I suppose there's nothing I can do?"

He shook his head. "If you had tenure, you could probably fight the ruling."

She stood up and gripped the back of the chair so tightly her knuckles turned white. "Do you want me. to finish out the last four weeks?"

"I'd appreciate it"

"But I'm still pregnant. What about Mrs. McCutcheon?"

"I'll handle Liz." He looked down for a moment, then back up at her. "I know this is hypocritical, but I'd like to keep the news quiet and have you finish up. with your classes until the end of the year. It would be disruptive to the students to bring in a substitute now."

She nodded. "I wouldn't do anything to hurt the kids. Some of them need these grades for college."

"I appreciate that, Kelly." He folded his hands and looked at her a little uncomfortably. "May I ask you a personal question? You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I have nothing to hide."

"There's a rumor..." He cleared his throat. "Is Mike the baby's father?"

"No!" Mike Cameron? The idea shocked her. Then she almost laughed out loud. She'd known Mike since she was a kid. Once she'd had a crush on him, but she'd gotten over that years ago. "We're good friends, nothing more. I rent his guest house—" Aha, that was probably why someone, probably Mrs. Busybody McCutcheon, had jumped to some wild conclusions.

"I'm sorry. I had to ask. It was a stupid question. If he was the father we wouldn't be having this discussion." Mr. Bloomhurst took off his glasses. He stood up and held out his hand. "If there's anything I can ever do, just let me know."

"I will," Kelly said, putting her fingers in his palm. She knew he truly meant what he said, but she couldn't help being angry and upset. As nice as he was, he was still a man. As much as she needed one right now, *a.* he was already married, and *b.* she had sworn off men...maybe forever.

Kelly drove into Mike's driveway, past his large Spanish-style home, then braked in front of the smaller guest house. She leaned to the left and pulled the lever to pop the trunk on her four-door car before getting out to remove the empty cardboard boxes. As she moved purposefully up the curved, brick walkway to her front

porch, she tried to shake the fear she was feeling about finding a new job and a place to live.

After unlocking the heavy oak door, she clicked on the front porch light and tossed the boxes inside, then retrieved the rest from the car. When she was finished, she slung her purse on the parsons bench just beside the door of her two-bedroom apartment. With the flick of a switch on the wall, brass lamps illuminated the interior of her comfortable living room with the floral sofa and matching love seat. Oak tables sat on either end of the sofa with a coffee table in front. Her lowwheeled shoes sank in the thick hunter green carpet. All the emotions she had been fending off all day gathered into a lump in her throat. How she was going to miss this place.

She recalled when Mike had insisted that her mother pick out the color of the rug, just before they'd moved in. Ill as she was, Margaret Walker had perked up visibly at the excitement of redecorating. Kelly would always be grateful for Mike's kindness to her mother.

That's why she had to protect him now.

It was evening, after seven. She hadn't eaten, but she wasn't hungry. She had spent the time since leaving Mr. Bloomhurst making decisions about what to do. The first one was to move.

After kicking off her shoes, she took a box into the kitchen and started removing things that she hardly ever used from the topmost shelves of her cupboards.

The clatter she made nearly drowned out the doorbell, and she

wasn't sure she'd actually heard it. But a second later an insistent ringing told her loud and clear that pregnancy had not affected her ears.

In her bare feet she padded to the front door and opened it.

"Where the hell have you been?" Mike Cameron glared at her and barged through the doorway.

"Hi, Mike. I'm fine, thanks. How are you? Come on in," she said, closing the door. Turning her back on him, she headed through the dining room back to the kitchen. She squatted down and started putting dish towels and odds and ends into a box.

Mike was hot on her heels. She heard his athletic shoes squeak on the tile floor as he stopped short behind her. "I was worried. When you didn't show up to tutor Jake, I was about to call the cops."

Kelly groaned and stood up. "I'm sorry, Mike. I completely forgot."

"What's wrong?" he asked. His dark, almost black, eyes bored into her as if he could see every single secret she had.

"What makes you think there's something wrong?"

"Because you're the most responsible, organized, punctual person I know."

"Watch it. You'll turn my head with flattery like that."

"Cut it out, Kelly. What's going on? Where were you? It's not like you to forget about one of your students."

"I had a bad day. I'll call Jake right now and see if he's available."

She started for the phone, which was right next to where Mike stood in the doorway. When she caught a glimpse of his face, she stopped. Every once in a while she was taken aback by his athletic good looks. His dark hair was cut short, and more often than not he wore a baseball cap that said Stevenson Football on it. He was thirty-five years old, but still boyish looking in spite of the shadow of beard that darkened his jaw. She studied him critically and realized he appeared boyish only when he was smiling, which he was definitely not doing now. At the moment he glowered at her, and his eyes smoldered with anger.

That surprised her. She felt badly that she had missed her appointment, but she had a sneaking suspicion Jake Saterfield was relieved that she hadn't shown up. Mike's star running back put English composition in the same category that the average person put a root canal.

Mike seemed to fill the doorway of her kitchen. "Don't bother calling him. He went to his girlfriend's house to study."

"Jessica is an honors student. If they actually get some work done, he'll do fine on his test in Susan's class tomorrow."

"The hell with his test tomorrow."

"I thought you were concerned about his grade and his eligibility to play in September."

"I am. But right now I'm more concerned about you. I asked you where you were. Hey, what are you doing with these boxes?"

"I'm packing."

"I can see that. Why are you packing? You shouldn't be doing

that kind of stuff. You're pregnant, for God's sake." He crossed his arms over his chest and she couldn't help noticing how his red T-shirt pulled tight around his powerful bicep. He was in tiptop physical shape, and reminded Kelly just how ungainly she looked right now. His black shorts showed off his athletic build, right down to his narrow waist and muscular, well-formed thighs. Mike was enough to make a woman's heart beat double-time. If that woman hadn't sworn off men, of course.

Kelly had always thought Mike was a hunk in stretch cotton, since the very first time she'd seen him when her older brother Jim had brought him home after football practice. But there had never been anything of a romantic nature in her relationship with Mike. He had always treated her like a younger sister, and that had killed her crush pretty quickly. But that didn't mean she was deaf, dumb and blind. He was a good-looking man, too sexy for his own good, a fact proven by a string of broken female hearts over the years.

"Since when has pregnancy been a debilitating disease?" she asked snappishly.

Mike's eyebrows lifted at her tone, even though she hadn't meant to be sharp. Without a word, he walked over to her and gently held her upper arms, squeezing them reassuringly. As he scanned her face, concern replaced irritation.

"Kelly, something's happened. Tell me what's wrong."

She fixed her gaze on the tab collar of his shirt, dismayed that she felt very close to tears. That hadn't happened to her since

getting the news. Why now, in front of Mike?

“I’ve been fired.”

He frowned. “Fired?”

“Yes, as in canned, sacked and let go. As of the end of the school year.”

“But you’re one of the best teachers Cliff has. I don’t understand.”

“Don’t blame Mr. Bloomhurst. He didn’t want to do it. The school board made the decision. It’s because of the baby,” she said, placing one hand protectively on her abdomen. “Actually, that’s not entirely true. It’s because I’m not married to the baby’s father.”

“Any woman who marries that jerk should have her head examined.”

“Don’t start, Mike, or I’ll be forced to bring up Bambi.”

“Her name was not Bambi. It was Jennifer.”

“Same thing,” Kelly said. Suddenly she was exhausted. “I’m going to sit down. If you can be supportive and appropriately sympathetic, you’re welcome to join me in the living room. If not, go away.”

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand and leading her to the sofa in front of the red brick fireplace.

Mike sat down beside her. He had been relieved when he heard Kelly’s car come up the drive and saw the lights go on in the guest house. As far as he knew, she hadn’t missed an appointment for anything since he and her brother, Jim, had kidnapped her

for breakfast on her eighteenth birthday and she hadn't shown up to get her hair cut

Mike half turned so he could see Kelly's face, just as she tucked a dark strand of hair behind her ear. Over the years, he'd seen her with long and short styles, but he decided he liked this sophisticated, page boy look best. Her thick mahogany hair hit her just about chin length and drew his attention to her face. Purple smudges darkened her skin, just below her green eyes. She looked delicate and fragile. He hated that she was losing her job, because she was a fine teacher, and she had a lot to offer her students. Mostly he hated it because of what it was doing to her.

He knew Kelly, and he would bet there was more to the story. She still hadn't explained to him about the boxes.

"Why are you packing?" he asked.

"That's usually what you do before you move."

His gut tightened. Move? Why? Especially now. "Just a damn minute. Bloomhurst might be able to can you, which is an issue I'll get to in a minute, but he can't run you out of town."

"Who said anything about leaving town? I'm taking an apartment on Walnut Street," she said, looking down. She folded her hands in her lap.

The movement pulled her oversized navy blue top across her gently curved abdomen. She had no business moving in her condition.

"I want the whole story, Kelly. This isn't like you. You're not exactly a spontaneous person."

“There you go with the flattery again—”

“Don’t change the subject. Spit it out.”

“You won’t like it,” she said, glancing at him.

“I already don’t. How much worse can it get?”

“There’s a rumor that you’re the baby’s father.”

“What?” He sat forward. “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard. We’re just friends.”

She nodded. “I said you wouldn’t like it. I’m pretty sure Liz McCutcheon mentioned it to Mr. Bloomhurst, but I can’t say I wouldn’t jump to the same conclusion myself. After all, I live a stone’s throw from your front door.”

“But we’re just friends.”

“You said that already.” She sighed. “I know it and you know it, but think how the arrangement must look to everyone else. That’s why I have to move.”

“No, you don’t.” Mike was surprised at how angry he was; he didn’t want Kelly to move. Not because she was pregnant and it would be hard on her and the baby, and not because he hated knuckling under to gossipmongers, but because he liked having her across the driveway from him.

Kelly and her mother had moved in about six weeks before Mrs. Walker had died of cancer. Several years before the woman he thought of as a second mother had refused Mike’s offer of a loan to help her son, Jim, establish his accounting business in Phoenix. She had -mortgaged her home instead. When she had become ill, she hadn’t wanted Kelly and Jim to have to deal with

a large payment, and had sold her property. Kelly had moved back from Arizona to take care of her mother, and Mike had insisted the two of them live in his empty guest house. They had agreed, but only if he would let them pay rent. After her mother had passed away, Kelly stayed. She didn't know the money went into a bank account for her. If he couldn't talk her out of moving, she might need it sooner than he'd expected.

"Don't you see, Mike? I won't let any of this hurt you. If I move, the rumors will go away."

"If people already think I'm the father, your moving won't change anything." Mike stood up and started pacing. "I'm going to see Cliff in the morning and set him straight. I'm going to get your job back and raise so much hell an 8.0 earthquake will look like a walk in the park."

"Don't, Mike. First of all, Mr. Bloomhurst was told to fire me, and it was his job to do it. Besides, he didn't start the rumor. Second, his hands are tied and he doesn't deserve to have you come down on him. I'd prefer to go quietly."

Mike saw the slight tremble of her lip, just before she caught it between her teeth. Then he saw red.

"I may not be able to do any good, but he's sure as hell going to know how I feel," he said.

"And what good will that do? What if you get fired, too?"

"I made enough money playing pro ball. I don't need their job. And I sure as hell don't need an ulcer. Someone needs to tell that uptight McCutcheon that she can't mess with people's lives."

“She can and she did. But that’s my problem. If you get fired, what’s going to happen to your football team in the fall? You’ve been teaching and training your senior players since they were freshmen. That was your first year here. They have a chance at the league title for the first time in years. You can’t abandon them.”

“And you’re not abandoning your students?”

“I don’t have a choice. You do.”

“You’re a gifted teacher, Kelly. You can’t let a narrow-minded group of people run you off without a fight. The kids will be the real losers.”

“I haven’t got tenure. I have no weapons to fight with. And you’re right about the kids being the losers. The football program brings in a lot of revenue. Just think what would happen if you give the community a championship.”

As much as he hated to admit it, she was right. He had some talented young men who he had taken as skinny fourteen-year-olds and molded into fine players. If he left now and had to be replaced, this year’s football program would be sacked big-time. It could scrap the season for these guys, and more important than that, it would affect their chances to be looked at by colleges for athletic scholarships.

“Okay, you’ve got a point. I won’t give McCutcheon a piece of my mind.” He stopped pacing and pointed at her. “Don’t you dare tell me I can’t spare any to give her.”

“Everyone knows jocks have more muscles than brains.”

For the first time since she'd let him in, Kelly laughed. The worry and frown lines were gone for a moment and it was like the sun had come out after a storm. Mike found that he wanted to chase away her clouds so she would always look sunny.

He wouldn't go to the school board, but he would find a way to help her somehow. He hated seeing her lose her job. He knew how much she wanted the baby. There must be a way she could have both. And he had to convince her that she didn't have to protect him. He didn't give a damn what people said.

She sighed. "If only I had tenure, it wouldn't be so easy to get rid of me."

"What did Cliff say to you?"

"That the school board could not allow a woman in the classroom who was pregnant and unmarried."

Mike continued to pace in front of the fireplace. "So the *M* word is the key factor here. How did you find out that people think I'm junior's father?"

"Mr. Bloomhurst told me, then came right out and asked. After that he said it was a stupid question."

"Why?"

"He said if you were the baby's father, he and I wouldn't be having the discussion at all. What do you suppose he meant by that?"

Mike knew exactly what Cliff had meant. He was surprised he hadn't thought of it himself. He came to a halt and looked at her. It was brilliant. He liked her; she liked him; they both liked kids.

Why not?

“Mike, you have a strange look on your face. What are you thinking about?”

“I have it, Kelly. The perfect solution to our problem.”

“It’s not *our* problem. It’s my problem and I’d appreciate it if you would—”

“I’d appreciate it if you would be quiet and listen to my ingenious solution.”

“All right. What is the magic answer?”

“Marry me.”

Chapter Two

Kelly's eyes widened. "Marry you?"

"Yes."

"This is not a joking matter, Mike. Like I said before, if you can't be supportive, then go away."

"I'm not kidding."

"Then you've been tackled one too many times without a helmet."

"There's nothing wrong with my head, Kelly. This is the right thing to do."

"Right for whom? I don't need a man to rescue me."

"You need to be married. And how you're going to do that without a man is beyond me." Mike started pacing again.

"I've sworn off men."

"Have you sworn off friends, too, Kelly?" He stopped and folded his arms over his chest. "I want to help."

"I appreciate that, Mike. But marriage?" She looked at him helplessly. "Friends change your flat tire. They loan you five dollars to tide you over until payday. They tell you when there's lipstick on your teeth. They don't marry you because you're going to have a baby."

"Why not?" The way he was looking at her, Kelly could swear he was dead serious.

She was truly touched by Mike's gesture, but it was out of the

question. “Before I try to beat some sense into you, I have a *why* of my own.”

“Shoot,” he said, and braced himself.

“Why would you want to get married again? Since your divorce you’ve been swearing that no woman would drag you down ball-and-chain lane again. So why would you do this?”

“Why should I marry thee, let me count the whys.”

“You’re not a poet, Mike. And you’re not funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny.” He put his hands on his hips. “I’ve got a proposition for you.”

“Is this one going to be more outrageous than the last one?” She rolled her eyes, but couldn’t help laughing.

“I’m going to ignore your sarcasm, Ms. Walker. How about this? If I can come up with ten good reasons why we should get married, you’ll say yes to my proposal.”

Kelly had him now. There was no way he could come up with one really good reason, let alone ten. “All right. You’re on. Is there a time limit?”

He looked offended. “This isn’t ‘Jeopardy.’”

“That all depends on your point of view.” She settled herself comfortably against the cushions of the couch and looked at him, waiting for him to start. “Any time you’re ready. Reason number one.”

He leaned a shoulder against the oak mantel and thought for a minute. “You don’t hate football. My first wife couldn’t stand it, except for the so-called celebrity perks.”

“Remember, these have to be good reasons.”

“What’s better than football? But if you don’t think that’s good enough, I’ve got nine more.” He started walking back and forth in front of her. Then he stopped and said, “Okay, I’ve got it. If I’m married, women will leave me alone, and I won’t have to beat them off with a stick. And we could use two-for-one coupons at restaurants.”

“Will you stop being ridiculous? Marriage is not a prerequisite for a dinner date. And don’t forget I live across the driveway. I haven’t seen more than a babe or two beating a path to your door. That doesn’t seem like a problem that requires this drastic a solution.” She folded her arms and looked at him sternly. “I need serious, personal reasons.”

“All right. What about repaying your family for taking me in as a kid when I needed discipline and guidance? What about the fact that the night before she died, I promised your mother I’d look out for you? And the fact that I didn’t keep that promise or you wouldn’t be in this situation now?”

His commitment to that vow touched her deeply. He was a wonderful guy and it was comforting to know she had someone like him in her corner. But she had to convince him that he wasn’t to blame for everything that happened to her.

“My parents wanted you to live with us because they cared about kids and you were in trouble. They knew you’d turn out all right, all you needed was a firm hand. They were absolutely right.” She placed her palm on her stomach. “My mother didn’t

expect you to be my keeper. I'm not your responsibility, Mike."

"Yeah? Then why do I still feel responsible? You called me the night after the funeral, right after your brother went back to Phoenix. I wasn't here."

"And I called Doug because I needed someone to talk to. What I didn't know was that he didn't have talking in mind when he came over."

"I'd still like to break his neck for taking advantage of you the way he did." Mike looked angry, furious in fact. She was surprised that he still felt that strongly after all these months.

What would he do if he knew Doug was trying to get in touch with her? He'd left messages at school and on the answering machine at home, but she hadn't returned any of his calls. For Mike's sake she decided it would be best not to tell him.

"Guilt is not a good reason to marry, Mike. Let's go at this from a different angle. What would *I* get from marrying you? Besides the obvious reason," she said looking at her stomach.

He thought for a minute. "Joint tax return. You could be the official team tutor."

"I'm that, anyway. Why would anything change?"

"Then what about a name for the baby?" he asked.

"I'll pick out names. I don't need help for that."

"No. I mean a last name."

Kelly's gaze met his, and she knew what he was thinking. Mike's mother had never married his father. In school he had gotten into fights because of what the kids had called him.

“Bastard.” A dirty, filthy name. All the more hurtful because it was true. He was politely telling her that if she wasn’t married when her baby was born, the child would be a bastard. She felt a tightness in her chest, a small pain around her heart

“That was hitting below the belt, Mike.”

“You don’t have a belt anymore, Kel.”

She blinked and looked away. “You’ve gone from ridiculous to the Dark Ages. This is the nineties. A lot of women are choosing single parenthood.”

“I may be old, but I can still remember how it feels to be different from the other kids. That hasn’t changed.”

“I don’t want to play this game anymore.” Kelly stood up and started toward the kitchen.

Mike took her arm to stop her, then turned her to him. “I’m not trying to hurt you, but there are some things you should think about. I’ve given you a lot of outstanding reasons why marriage is a practical solution to your situation.”

“You haven’t given me one that’s good for you. And don’t tell me about running interference for Bambi and Fawn, or the guilt factor or football. Why in the world would you want to get married?”

He sighed and dropped his hand from her arm. “As you pointed out, I’m old. Old men get tired of living alone.”

Mr. Bachelor Mike Cameron tired of living alone? For just an instant she saw a trace of loneliness on his face. She’d never seen him this way and it warmed her heart that he would share

that with her.

“I didn’t say you were old. I said you were living in the Dark Ages.”

“Means the same thing.”

“All right, you’re ancient and you want someone to share the rocking chair with. Why me, Mike? I’m going to have a baby. Doesn’t that make you want to kick that rocker into high gear and run the other way?”

“No. You want to know why?” He looked into her eyes and she nodded. His expression told her he was being completely serious now, and that got her attention in a big way.

“We’re friends, Kelly. The best. That’s more than most people ever have. You know what else?” She shook her head. “It’s all. I ever expect to have. So that makes it pretty good.”

“But it’s not all I ever expect to have.”

“You said you’ve sworn off men.”

“Not forever. Someday I want to find real love, romantic love.” She walked back into the kitchen to continue dismantling her personal possessions. She climbed onto a chair and reached for her cow picture with the words Feeding Time.

“What are you doing on that chair?” Mike took her elbow and helped her down. “Don’t ever do that again. I’ll get that stuff for you.”

He reached the things she couldn’t—the clock her mother had made, the brass plaque that said, “On this spot in 1897, nothing happened,” and the picture of her newest words to live

by, "Success is the intelligent use of mistakes."

"You're holding out for something that doesn't exist, Kelly. There's no such thing as true love."

Her eyes filled and she turned away so that he wouldn't see. "I think it exists. My parents had it. I don't want to settle for less. Thank you, Mike. Someday I'll probably kick myself for being a stupid fool. But I have to say no to your proposal."

He let out a long breath. "If you change your mind, the offer's open."

"I can't think of anything that would make me change my mind. But I appreciate it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a lot to do. The apartment management company is going to check out my application and let me know in a day or two if I have the apartment."

He stacked the things he'd taken down. "You're determined to move out?"

"I think it's for the best."

He shook his head, and she expected an argument. But all he said was, "See you later, Kel."

"Good night, Mike."

The sight of him walking away, then the sound of the front door closing behind him were just about the loneliest things Kelly could imagine. She slumped into a chair and stared at nothing in particular. Mike Cameron had just asked her to marry him, and he was serious. Not only that, he was angry that she'd refused his proposal. His kindness made her heart ache. A tangle of emotion

tightened her chest and clogged her throat.

She was pregnant. She was unemployed. She was moving. She was probably crazy to boot. What woman in her right mind would say no to a hunky, handsome sweetheart like Mike? Tears gathered in her eyes and she sniffled. She reminded herself that she was doing this to protect him. But she couldn't stop the single teardrop that slipped from the corner of her eye, rolled down her cheek and plopped on her chest.

If she was doing the right thing, why did it feel so wrong and so awful?

Mike was in a bad mood the next day. At football practice the players couldn't do anything right. In his office afterward, he sat behind his desk and tried to figure out why. It didn't take him long to realize that it was him, not them. He was tired. Thanks to Kelly he hadn't slept well. She had made him mad as hell. Partly because she was moving out, but mostly because she had refused to marry him.

Once the idea had taken hold, he'd really warmed to it. He wasn't quite sure why he wanted it so much until he glanced around his office. Everywhere he looked were reminders that without the Walker family, he wouldn't be where he was today. In the glass trophy case across from the door were high school, college and professional awards. There was a photograph of the football banquet during his senior year in high school when Frank Walker had insisted on giving Mike the most valuable player award. Even though the man had suffered a heart attack shortly

after that night, Mike had tried never to let Frank Walker down. That had to be the reason why he wanted to marry Kelly and why he was so ticked off that she wouldn't.

Maybe his ego was bruised. But he had thought about that and was pretty sure that wasn't the case. Glancing at the wall again, he spotted a picture of him after college graduation. Kelly had talked him into attending the ceremony which he had thought a waste of time. Kelly had asked him why he didn't want to show off how smart he was. She had blitzed his cockiness when she had told him she couldn't stand guys whose IQ matched the circumference of their biceps. He respected her for that. Unfortunately he had married a woman who wasn't so discriminating.

The elbow injury that had ended his football career ended his marriage, too. The saying that things come in threes had never been more true. For him it was surprises. The first was that he hadn't really missed Carol after she left. The second was the realization that he was happier without her. The third that he hadn't liked her much.

That wasn't the case with Kelly.

He knew he would miss her if she moved. He liked having her around. He just plain liked her. The more he had thought about it the more he was convinced that marrying her would be good for both of them. He just didn't think he could make Kelly see that. A knock on his office door interrupted his thoughts.

"It's open," he said.

Jake Saterfield, a blond, blue-eyed, husky seventeen-year-old, walked in. He handed Mike a piece of paper. "There was only one message in your box in the office, Coach." The look on his face said he expected to be chewed out for that fact. Mike felt bad about taking out his problems on the players.

"Thanks for picking this up, Jake." The boy nodded and started to turn away. "That was a good run you had today. Keep it up and you've got a shot at breaking the school record for yards rushing."

Jake grinned. "You got it, Coach."

"How'd English go today?"

"Mrs. Wishart said she'd let me know my test grade, first, thing tomorrow."

"How do you think you did?"

He shrugged. "I knew most of the answers."

"Good. Hey, see you tomorrow."

"Right"

After the boy had gone, Mike checked the message. It was from the Southern California Real Estate Management Co.

He dialed the number and a woman's voice came on the line. "Miss Anderson."

He leaned back in his chair. "This is Mike Cameron. You left a message for me. I'm assuming this is about my tenant Kelly Walker?"

"That's right, Mr. Cameron. She listed you as a reference on her application for an apartment."

Mike wasn't quite sure when the idea hit him, he only knew that it seemed like a good one. If Kelly didn't have a place to go, she couldn't move.

"How long has Miss Walker been a tenant of yours, Mr. Cameron?"

"Not long." He put just a hint of disapproval in his voice.

"Oh?" He heard a hundred questions in that one syllable.

"I guess you'd like me to be specific. She's rented from me for just under eight months."

"And you've had problems with her?" The tone was definitely suspicious.

Mike reminded himself that he owed it to her family to watch out for her. He could do that better if she stayed in the guest house. He propped his feet up on his desk. He didn't like doing this to Kelly, but there were times when she was too stubborn for her own good. "I wouldn't say problems," he said, putting just a hint of hesitation in his voice. "Did you know she's pregnant?"

"Yes, she gave us that information. The building accepts children, so that's not an obstacle. Is there anything else we should know about Miss Walker?"

Mike winced, but he had to do it. "She's unemployed."

"She put on her application that she's a teacher with the Newhall High School District"

"She is, but just until the end of the school year."

"Does she have another position lined up?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Is there anything else that you think I should know?" she asked.

"No. I think I've said enough."

"Yes, I think you have Mr. Cameron. I appreciate your candor."

"Glad to help, Miss Anderson."

Mike hung up the phone and couldn't help feeling like he'd drop-kicked a kitten. It had been a splitsecond decision. He hadn't said anything that wasn't the truth. She didn't need to move out; he was doing this for her. His mouth pulled tight as he shook his head. No matter how he tried to whitewash it, he was a little surprised at how low he'd sunk. Still, a little guilt was a small price to pay. He wasn't sorry he'd sabotaged her.

Kelly carried another batch of boxes from her car into her bedroom, then went to the kitchen. The red light on her answering machine blinked twice. She pushed the button and after rewinding, a male voice came on. "Kelly? If you're there, pick up the phone. It's Doug. Either you're not there, or you're not talking to me. Probably the latter. I don't blame you, but I need to speak with you. Since you won't return my calls, I'm going to drop by. See you later."

Kelly groaned. "Great. What else could go wrong?"

Then she heard the second message. "Miss Walker, this is Leigh Anderson. I wanted to let you know the apartment you looked at has been rented, and I'm sorry to say there are no other vacancies. Give me a call if you have any questions."

The machine clicked off and Kelly slapped the ceramic tile counter. Double whammy.

Now she would have to hunt for another apartment. That would set her back, and she didn't have time to waste. She had to move, unpack and settle, and get a nursery ready for the baby before she was too far along in her pregnancy to do it.

And as for Doug—she did *not* want to see him, later or ever again in her lifetime.

She looked at her kitchen, the boxes stacked up and empty walls where her pictures had been. “What am I going to do?” she asked.

The answer came instantly. She would do what she always did. She would go talk to Mike. He was her friend, and no matter what he thought about her decisions, he would always stand by her.

That was what she would miss most when she moved.. She liked being able to talk to him. With a face like he had, what was not to like? But there was more to him than that or he wouldn't be her friend.

She slipped on her sneakers and walked across the driveway to his house. It was six o'clock and still light out, but there was a chill in the evening air. In another month, it would be hot, and the baby would be bigger. Everyone said summer was the worst time to give birth. As far as she was concerned, her timing on that was the only thing that had gone right. School was out and she could resume teaching in September. She was sorry she wouldn't be at Stevenson, but she thought maybe a private school would

hire her. She planned to submit applications in the next day or so.

She stood on Mike's brick porch and rang the bell. While she waited for him to answer, she straightened her floral maternity top over the matching stretch pants.

A second before Mike opened the door, a shadow on the beveled glass told her he was there. Then the flesh-and-blood man filled the doorway. Kelly's heart skipped a little at the sight of him. The feeling was happening with more frequency, but she chalked it up to hormones. Pregnancy wreaked havoc on a woman's body. Why couldn't she have a normal, physical reaction to a good-looking man? When her hormones settled down, so would the feeling.

"Kelly, what are you doing here? What's wrong?"

"What makes you think there's something wrong?"

One of Mike's dark eyebrows lifted and there was a strange look on his face. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn he was expecting her.

"You just look funny," he said.

That made sense. She felt funny, too. "I just wanted to talk to you. May I come in?"

"Sure." He opened the door wider and stepped back to allow her inside.

Kelly loved his house. She knew he had hired a decorator, but his touch was there, too. The hardwood floor in the entryway where she stood, the oak-trimmed doorways around the kitchen straight ahead and the beige carpet in the living room to her left,

he had insisted on those touches. There was a masculine air to the place mainly because of the lack of frills, flowers and froo-froo. It had a tangible solidness, like Mike. He was forthright and honest; he would never do anything shady or underhanded.

“Have you eaten dinner yet?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Do you have an extra frozen dinner?”

“Yup. Hungry man size. Think you can handle it?” One corner of his mouth lifted in a smile that was guaranteed to affect female hearts on the spot. Hers was no exception.

“I think so. After all, I’m eating for two.”

She followed him into the kitchen and sat on one of the tall stools at the bar that separated the work area from the breakfast nook behind her.

Mike opened the freezer and pulled out a couple of dinners. “Chicken and mashed potatoes all right?” When she nodded, he read the directions and popped it into the microwave. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“They rented my apartment to someone else.”

“Really?” he said, his back to her.

“Yeah. It’s not the only place in town, but two-bedroom units aren’t that easy to find in a security building that takes children and has an enclosed yard.”

He punched some buttons, and the oven began to hum. He turned around. “You look puzzled.”

“There’s a good reason for that. I don’t understand what happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I looked at the apartment, Miss Anderson acted as if the place was already mine, and the background check was merely a formality. Today her manner was definitely cooler. Did she call you?”

“As a matter of fact, she did,” he admitted.

“What did she say?”

“She asked how long you had been my tenant and I told her. She said she knew about the baby.”

Kelly nodded. “I wanted to be up-front about that. It didn’t seem to be a problem.”

“You’re taking this too personally. They probably had more than one application. I’d bet the other was from dinks.”

She frowned. “That’s not a very nice thing to say.”

“D.I.N.K.—double income no kids.”

“Oh.” She thought about that for a moment. Someone like that would be a better risk than a Q.I.B.O.W. Questionable income, baby on way. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m sure I am. You want something to drink?”

She nodded. “I want a glass of wine.”

He frowned. “No alcohol for pregnant ladies.”

“I know that. I just said I wanted it. What have you got that I can have?”

Mike turned away and looked in the refrigerator. “I have milk, apple juice, soda or water.”

“Juice please,” she said.

Kelly wondered if this was what it would feel like to be married. Eating dinner together, relating the events of the day, not being alone. It was nice. Mike's concern about her condition touched her, too, and a sense of wistfulness washed over her. To have someone to share things with—the baby's movement, the results of her monthly doctor visits, heartburn, her fears about the birth, her fears about a roof over her head. But it was a fantasy.

At least for now. Someday she would find a man who would sweep her off her feet, and she would have all the love she'd dreamed about. That goal was merely delayed, not unobtainable.

Mike set a glass of apple juice in front of her. He leaned his forearms on the cream-colored tiles and met her gaze. "You know, Kel, you don't have to move."

"Yes, I do. It's not fair that you be dragged into this situation."

"Whether you like it or not, I'm in it because I'm your friend."

She put her hand on his arm. The little jolt she got from the contact with his warm skin surprised her. The slight flicker she saw in Mike's eyes made her wonder if he'd felt something, too. She glanced down at her fingers on his forearm. Why had she never noticed before how tan he was compared to her? How wide and strong his wrists were? Must be that hormone thing again. Maybe it made a woman's powers of observation more acute. Whatever the side effects, it would be best to ignore the sensation. She took her hand away and curled her fingers around her glass.

"Mike, I don't want to argue with you. I've made up my mind to move. Can't we just drop it?"

He nodded. "We can if you'll promise not to make a hasty decision. You've got a home as long as you want one. Don't do anything stupid."

"Me?" she said, pressing her palm to her chest in mock amazement. "However can you say that? Just because I'm pregnant—"

"That sorry son of a bitch took advantage of you." Mike stood up straight and his dark eyes smoldered with anger.

"It's not all his fault."

"If he was any kind of man, he would never have pressed you under the circumstances. Good God, you'd just buried your mother."

"Don't forget I called him," she said.

"Why are you defending him?"

"I'm not. I'm trying to be fair." She looked down into the golden liquid in her glass.

"There's something else, isn't there? What is it, Kelly?"

She glanced up quickly. "How do you always know?"

"I've known you a long time. Tell me what's going on."

"Doug's been calling me for the last couple weeks."

Mike tensed. "What does he want?"

"I haven't talked to him. He's just left messages. I got another one today."

"What did he say?"

"He's coming over tonight."

Chapter Three

“For God’s sake, Kelly, why didn’t you say so before?”

The microwave beeped loudly, and Mike took out the dinner. He pulled back the plastic and felt as hot as the steam escaping. He couldn’t believe she had waited this long to tell him that the guy was harassing her.

As his anger grew, adrenaline pumped through him. He hadn’t liked Doug the first time he’d met him. After what he’d done to Kelly, he promised himself if he ever saw the jerk again, he would make him wish he’d never been born.

As if sensing his mood, Kelly shifted on the bar stool. “I didn’t tell you sooner because I hadn’t planned to tell you at all. Forget it I’ll handle Doug.”

“If there’s anything left of him when I get through, you’re welcome to it.”

Kelly’s eyes widened. “When did you develop these Neanderthal tendencies? This is a side of you I’ve never seen before.”

Mike wasn’t sure himself why he felt this way. He hadn’t wanted to deck a guy over a girl since high school. But the fact was Kelly was going through hell because of Doug Hammond and Mike wanted his pound of flesh—or to pound Doug’s flesh. He didn’t much care which. “When will he be here?”

“He didn’t say.” She took a sip of her juice.

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll just hang around and take care of him.”

Kelly put down the glass, and when she looked at him irritation was written all over her face.

“This is my problem, Mike. I appreciate your friendship more than you’ll ever know, but it’s not a license to butt into my life. When he gets here, I’ll listen to what he has to say, then I’ll send him on his way.”

Mike understood her wanting to do this on her own; that was the kind of woman Kelly was. He just couldn’t get over the feeling that it would be like leaving a defenseless lamb to the big bad wolf.

“Can I just be there when you see him?” he asked.

“No.”

“What if I promise not to say anything?”

She snorted. “Fat chance of that.”

“What if—”

“No. You can’t stay. Besides, don’t you have a football meeting tonight?”

He started to shake his head, then stopped when he realized she was right. “Geez, with all this other stuff going on, I forgot. It’s ‘meet the coaches’ night.” He folded his arms across his chest and looked at her. “I’ll just have to miss it.”

“You can’t. This is when you take advantage of parental enthusiasm. Dean can’t pull the volunteers out of the crowd the way you can.”

Dean Thompson, his assistant coach, was a gifted tactician

and terrific with the players. But Kelly was right. When it came to the parents, Mike was better at getting them to become involved. The program depended heavily on that. He couldn't miss the meeting.

"Mike, don't worry about me. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"I don't like it," he grumbled, as he put the other dinner in the microwave. "But I guess there's nothing I can do."

"You're sweet to worry about me."

He turned back to her. "I'll tell you what's sweet. Remember that move Jim and I taught you before your very first date?"

She grinned. "Remember it? I got to use it that night. Do *you* remember who fixed me up with that octopus?"

"Everyone's entitled to a minor error in judgment."

"Minor?"

"He was here for the weekend. He was lonely. It was supposed to be dinner and a movie. How did I know he was going to come on to you?" He looked at her. "Just promise me one thing..."

"What?"

"Before the jerk gets here, practice that move."

"I will," she said, laughing.

The sound surrounded him and he grinned, surprised at how contagious her laughter was. As ticked off as he'd been a minute before, he was sure no one but Kelly could have made him smile.

When Kelly had first found out about the baby, she'd misplaced *her* smile for a while. Recently she'd found it, and if

Hammond did anything, to make her lose it again, Mike would hunt him down and take his pound of flesh. The man would never hurt Kelly again.

Kelly tensed when she heard the car pull up in front of her house. She knew the sound. It brought back painful memories of all the nights she'd expected to hear it, then waited in vain for Doug to show up. She remembered the flimsy excuses she'd believed because she'd desperately wanted to. She would never forget the disillusionment of learning about his lies, his other women, *after* she found out she was going to have a baby.

There was nothing he could tell her now that she wanted to hear. She had nothing to say to him. Period. This should be a very short meeting. But she would feel a lot more confident if she could stop the butterflies in her stomach or the trembling in her hands.

She opened the door as he strode up the walkway. He smiled at her. "Hello, Kelly."

"Doug." She motioned him inside.

He had the lanky good looks of a male model in a pin-striped suit. The red tie he wore was perfectly knotted at the collar of his crisp white shirt. His sandy hair was slightly mussed, and his hazel eyes held an expression that said he was glad to see her. She didn't believe it

She frowned at him. "What do you want?"

"That's pretty cold," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"The last time we spoke, you made it clear that you wanted

nothing to do with the baby or me. I have no reason to think that the situation's changed. So I'd like to know what you want."

Doug looked sheepish. "I'm sorry about that, Kel—"

"Don't call me that," she snapped.

"All right. I just wanted you to know that I'm sorry about the things I said. The situation caught me off guard and I—I suppose I sort of panicked."

"You?" Kelly shook her head at his smoothness. He was as cool as they came. She had found out the hard way how he could lie without batting an eye. "Panicked?"

"Believe it or not," he said in that affable, self-effacing way that had charmed her once. "You don't know what it's like to hear that you're going to be a father."

"That's typical, Doug. It's always about you. Did you stop to think how I felt finding out I was going to be a mother?"

"That's why I'm here now."

Her eyes widened and she wanted to laugh in his face, or slap it. "I'm six months pregnant. Took you long enough." Her chest tightened with anger. "During all that time did you think about what would happen to me? Whether or not this would affect my life, my job?"

"Has it?"

"You bet it has, buster. I don't have a job as of June."

His eyebrows pulled together and, if she didn't know better, she would have thought he was genuinely sorry.

"Then it's fortunate I'm here."

“Why?”

“Kelly, I want you to marry me. I want to be a father to our child.”

Kelly’s jaw dropped. She didn’t know what she had expected him to say, but it certainly wasn’t this.

Her reaction was knee-jerk, and she should have put it exactly where Mike and her brother had taught her. Instead, she clasped her shaking hands together and tried to control her astonishment, then the surge of anger that followed.

“I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man on earth.”

There was no reaction on his face, no indication whether her words had hurt him or not. “Think about this carefully. You just said you’ll be out of a job come June. How are you going to support yourself, let alone a kid?”

A kid? The baby was just an impersonal, nuisance kid as far as he was concerned. She didn’t want him anywhere near her child, not to mention raising him. “I’ll work it out. Alone,” she added firmly.

“If you marry me, I can take care of you both. I’m up for a partnership in the law firm—”

“I smell a rat,” she said, her eyes narrowing. With time and distance, she had realized Doug never did anything for anyone else unless there was something in it for him. Besides, he’d never said a word about loving her. If she hadn’t been so upset, it would have been funny. Two proposals in two days. Must be some kind of record for a pregnant lady. She’d been tempted to take Mike

up on his offer, but Doug's left her cold.

He looked down for a moment, then met her suspicious gaze. "You know the firm is very conservative and traditional. I don't want to say that I'm not concerned about my success. But that's not the reason I asked you—"

"Stuff a sock in it, Doug. Of course that's the reason." She took a deep breath. "Now I want you to listen, because I'm only going to say this once. I should have known that a lawyer who would sleep with his client couldn't be trusted. You're a liar and I'd be a fool to ever trust you again. There's nothing you could say that would persuade me to marry you."

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