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His Expectant Neighbor

SUSAN MEIER

SILHOUETTE Romance®

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Ben had not intended to get involved with Gwen.

But she was alone and a million and ten things could happen to her and no one would be around to even discover her, let alone rescue her. So if Ben made himself her protector for the next few months, he wasn't doing anything but being a good neighbor. Besides, he was her landlord. He had a responsibility to make sure she was safe while she was on his property.

He just couldn't get too attached to her, which would be the tricky part if he had to spend too much time watching her smile, listening to her soft voice, and enjoying the very fact—so clearly demonstrated by her pregnancy—that she was a woman.

Dear Reader,

Silhouette's 20th anniversary celebration continues this month in Romance, with more not-to-be-missed novels that take you on the romantic journey from courtship to commitment.

First we revisit STORKVILLE, USA, where a jaded Native American rancher seems interested in His Expectant Neighbor. Don't miss this second book in the series by Susan Meier! Next, New York Times bestselling author Kasey Michaels returns to the lineup, launching her new miniseries, THE CHANDLERS REQUEST…One bride, two grooms—who will end up Marrying Maddy? In Daddy in Dress Blues by Cathie

Linz, a Marine embarks on his most terrifying mission—fatherhood!—with the help of a pretty preschool teacher.

Then Valerie Parv whisks us to a faraway kingdom as THE CARRAMER CROWN continues. The Princess's Proposal puts the lovely Adrienne and her American nemesis on a collision course with…love. The ever-delightful Terry Essig tells the tale of a bachelor, his orphaned brood and the woman who sparks A Gleam in His Eye. Shhh…We can't give anything away, but you must learn The Librarian's Secret Wish. Carol Grace knows…and she's anxious to tell you!

Next month, look for another installment of STORKVILLE, USA, and THE CHANDLERS REQUEST…from New York Times bestselling author Kasey Michaels. Plus, Donna Clayton launches her newest miniseries, SINGLE DOCTOR DADS!

Happy Reading!

Mary-Theresa Hussey
Senior Editor

His Expectant Neighbor
Susan Meier

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Books by Susan Meier

Silhouette Romance
Stand-in Mom #1022
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*In Care of the Sheriff #1283
*Guess What? We're Married! #1338
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*The Rancher and the Heiress #1374
†The Baby Bequest #1420
†Bringing Up Babies #1427
†Oh, Babies! #1433
His Expectant Neighbor #1468
Silhouette Desire
Take the Risk #567

SUSAN MEIER

has written category romances for Silhouette Romance and Silhouette Desire. A full-time writer, Susan has also been an employee of a major defense contractor, a columnist for a small newspaper and a division manager of a charitable organization. But her greatest joy in life has always been her children, who constantly surprise and amaze her. Married for twenty years to her wonderful, understanding and gorgeous husband, Michael, Susan cherishes her role as a mother, wife, sister and friend, believing them to be life's real treasures. She not only cherishes those roles as gifts, she tries to convey the beauty and importance of loving relationships in her books.

Storkville folks hardly remember the day the town bore another name—because the residents keep bearing bundles of joy! No longer known for its safe neighborhoods and idyllic landscape, Storkville is baby-bootie capital of the world! We even have a legend for the explosion of "uplets"— "When the stork visits, he bestows many bouncing bundles on those whose

love is boundless!" Of course, some—Gertie Anderson—still insist a certain lemonade recipe, which is "guaranteed" to help along prospective mothers, is the real stork! But whether the little darlings come from the cabbage patch or the delivery room, Storkville folks never underestimate the beauty of holding a child—or the enchantment of first love and the wonder of second chance….

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Chapter One

"Aw, damn!" Sioux rancher Ben Crowe brought his truck to a screeching halt on the old dirt road that led to his home. He shoved open the door and jumped out, nine-year-old Nathan Eastman on his heels. "I knew something like this was going to happen!"

Ben was a tall man, at least six foot. When he reached very pregnant Gwenyth Parker, who was dragging a huge box up the steps of the cottage he'd rented to her only two days before, he towered over her. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

Because he was angry, and his voice dripped with it, he was surprised when she looked up and smiled. "I bought a walker for the baby," she said simply, her hazel eyes sparkling with joy.

Ben had heard all about the glow of pregnant women, but he had to admit this was the first time he'd actually seen it. Her eyes were so bright and her face was so radiant she could have lit the darkest night.

"No kidding," Ben said, then scooped the unwieldy cardboard box out of her arms and carried it up the steps. "Don't you know you're not supposed to be lifting heavy things?"

"It's not heavy," Gwen replied, her smile in place, her beautiful blond hair reflecting the rays of the early September sun. "Who's your friend?"

"That's Nathan," Ben said, unlocking her front door because

as her landlord he had a key. “Don’t change the subject. I rented this property to you on the condition that you’d be a good tenant.”

“I am a good tenant,” she said, right behind him as he set the big box on the floor beside her kitchen table. When he turned around, she was directly in front of him.

Dressed in simple jeans, maternity T-shirt and a bright blue sweater coat that wasn’t designed for a woman in her seventh month and didn’t button over her tummy, with her wind-blown, shoulder-length hair tucked behind her ears, Gwenyth Parker was still impossibly beautiful, and Ben realized he could have stared at her lovely face all day.

It had been a long time since a woman stirred his senses. Because Gwen did, he took a step back, then shifted around her to go outside.

“Are there any more boxes in your car?”

She shrugged. “A few. But really, Mr. Crowe, I didn’t buy anything I couldn’t carry myself.”

He grunted an unintelligible response to that, then hurried out the door and down the steps to her car.

He didn’t know much about the newest resident of Storkville, Nebraska, except that she was pregnant and she had divorced her husband, the baby’s father, before she moved here. That was the first reason he’d been reluctant to rent the roadside cottage to her. He couldn’t understand or condone a woman raising a baby alone when she had a perfectly good husband. The second reason was that he was afraid he would somehow become responsible

for her. She had assured him he wouldn't, but in less than a week he was already carrying boxes.

"Where do you want these?" he asked, stepping into the kitchen again.

She pointed to the sofa in the small living room off to the right. "In there is good."

He gave her a patient look. "And how do you plan to get these up the stairs?"

Ben saw her pause, taking note of dark-haired Nathan, who still wore his good jeans and T-shirt from school and was behind Ben, more or less peeking around his waist at Gwen.

"Nathan," she said, "why don't you go out to the car and make sure there aren't any packages left?"

From the formal tone of her voice, Ben could tell her good mood was gone. Nathan must have sensed it, too, because he didn't say anything, only grinned and nodded, then darted out of the house.

"Look, Mr. Crowe," she said coolly, her once-smiling face now drawn in anger. "I'm pregnant, not sick. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"I'm sure you are," Ben agreed, not quite understanding how a sweet disposition could go sour in the blink of an eye, but glad to have her mention the issue that troubled him about her. Since she brought up this subject, he felt permitted to pursue it. "Is that why you left your husband? To prove you could take care of yourself? Because if it is, you should be ashamed of yourself.

Babies need two parents."

He hadn't expected her angry face to fall in dismay, but it did. He'd driven her from unreasonably happy, to angry, to sad so rapidly Ben immediately knew dealing with pregnant women wasn't his forte. He also knew he'd made a big mistake.

Quiet, stricken, Gwen said, "I think babies need two parents, too, but it wasn't my decision to get a divorce. It was my ex-husband's. If the choice had been mine, I would have raised my child with its father." With that she walked to the door. "If you don't mind, I have to put all this stuff away," she said, more than hinting that Ben should leave.

Confused because he was now more curious about her than before, but equally embarrassed because he'd upset her, he ran his hand across the back of his neck. Having been raised in foster homes, he understood his urge to confront her about not putting the welfare of her child first. But normally he had enough sense to stop himself from butting in if a problem wasn't any of his business. And since her marriage, her ex-husband and even this baby weren't any of his business, it puzzled him that he hadn't thought this the whole way through before he opened his big mouth.

"I'm sorry," he apologized contritely. "I didn't mean to be so blunt, but when it comes to kids I know I'm overly protective since my own parents abandoned me."

With a brief nod, she more or less conceded that she understood what he'd said, but Ben knew it was too late. Not only

had he stuck his foot in his mouth, but he'd also hurt her.

Walking to his truck, he felt like a real idiot. A blockhead, too stupid to tread lightly with a woman who had enough to deal with without having to listen to his criticism. He shouldn't have challenged her the way he had, but he quickly forgave himself because he truly was a person who cared about kids. Asking her that question, no matter how inappropriate, was second nature to him. So that took care of forgiving himself. Now all he had to do was figure out how he could get her to forgive him.

Though he was a loner, who didn't really have a lot of contact with people and who definitely didn't care what people thought of him, Ben recognized this situation was different. He'd made a mistake, and he needed to fix it. But even before he reached his truck he knew that asking her forgiveness would be awkward and complicated and much more intimate than he intended to get with this woman. Which precluded making another apology, but, still, he wanted to do something. There had to be a way to make this up to her.

He opened his truck door and called to Nathan. "Come on, Nate. It's getting late and we've got to get going."

As Nathan almost tumbled down the steps of the cottage, having delivered the last of Gwen's packages, Ben realized that the perfect way to handle things without getting involved was right before his eyes. Because Nathan was too young to get a job and too energetic to stay in the house, his older foster parents encouraged him to leave the reservation and spend all his free

time tagging along with Ben. Though Ben considered himself to be somewhat boring, particularly to a nine-year-old boy, Nathan never complained, confirming for Ben that he was incredibly lonely. Gwen needed someone, too, if only because she was by herself outside of town and no one would know if she got sick or hurt. She and the boy were a match made in heaven.

"Hey, Nate, how would you like to earn ten dollars a day?"

Climbing into the truck cab, Nathan turned his big brown eyes on Ben. "You know I would!"

Ben immediately reached into his wallet and pulled out a ten dollar bill. "All you have to do is stay with Mrs. Parker, help with errands and make sure she doesn't do anything too difficult."

"Today?" Nate asked, confused.

"Every day. Ten dollars a day, every day," Ben said, exaggerating the word so Nate would see the significance. "When I get home, I'll put this on the mantel in the den," he said, showing Nathan the ten dollars. "I'll put ten dollars on the mantel every time you spend the day with her. Then at the end of a week, if you go to her house five days, you'll have fifty dollars. But if you can go all seven days, spend a few hours after school every day and stop by on weekends, you'll have seventy dollars."

From the way Nathan's eyes grew wide with every word Ben spoke, it was obvious he couldn't believe his good fortune. As if he wasn't going to miss this opportunity by reacting too slowly, the very second Ben was done making his proposition, Nathan yelped, "All right! Seventy bucks!" then shoved open the truck

door and scrambled out.

But Ben stopped him by catching his forearm. “You can’t tell Mrs. Parker I’m paying you to stay with her and help her.”

Nathan blinked at him. “Why not?”

“She won’t like that,” Ben explained. “She’s proud.”

“Oh,” Nathan said, nodding his understanding.

“So tell her that you were curious about her and her baby and that’s why you’re back. We’ll think up another story for tomorrow and the next day until eventually she’ll just get used to having you around and she won’t question you anymore.”

Recognizing that was what had happened when Nathan starting hanging around with Ben, Nathan grinned his agreement.

“But no matter what happens,” Ben said, “you are not to tell Mrs. Parker that I’m paying you to help her. In fact, don’t tell her you’re there to help at all. Just let her think you’re curious about the baby and that you’d like to be her friend.”

Looking like a boy who was confident he could do this job, Nathan nodded, slammed the truck door and ran across the short front lawn to Gwen’s porch.

Ben started his truck and quickly eased it onto the road, knowing it would ruin everything if Gwen saw him and that Nathan had enough common sense to return to the ranch if Gwen refused his offer. But he didn’t think she would. He hadn’t met a woman yet who didn’t melt at Nathan’s smile.

Driving home, Ben felt as if he was the smartest man on the face of the earth. If this worked, orphaned Nathan would

be busy and happy, with a caring adult, as had been his foster parents' intent when they sent him to Ben, and Gwen would have company. In case she fell or became ill, Nathan would know to contact Ben. And Ben didn't have to feel guilty anymore. He was a genius.

Because Nathan didn't return to the ranch, for exactly one afternoon Ben felt he had the world by the tail. He was even whistling when he jogged up the porch steps of Gwen's cottage to retrieve Nathan and take him home, but when smiling Gwen opened her door to him and Ben felt an unexpected jolt of happiness seeing her, he started to reconsider everything.

"Hi," she greeted, obviously not holding a grudge for his mistake that afternoon.

"Hi," he said. An odd sense of something tingled through him. His first instinct was to think he was getting a crush on her, but that had to be wrong. Sure, Gwen was a beautiful woman. Actually, she was gorgeous. But she was also pregnant with another man's child. Now that he knew the real story, he had to suspect that Gwen hadn't yet had time to get over her ex—especially if she hadn't wanted the divorce.

Besides, he'd seen her often enough when he showed her the cottage and they negotiated her lease that if he were really getting a crush on her he would have felt it sooner, right? Right. If he were experiencing anything more than a reaction to her good looks, he would have felt it before this.

"I'm here for Nathan."

“Oh, yes,” Gwen said, flustered. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Ben said, stepping into her kitchen for the second time that day, but this time he noticed that her curtains were sunny yellow. She had a white lace tablecloth on the table and a bouquet of brown-eyed Susans. “I’m not in any hurry.”

At that she turned. “Really? Because if you have time I made a casserole for dinner. There’s plenty.”

Ben grinned sheepishly. “I don’t have that much time.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Gwen said, appearing flustered again.

Ben almost groaned at his stupidity. He knew he’d screwed up everything that afternoon by forgetting that pregnant women were emotional. Yet, he continued to hit all the wrong buttons with Gwen. Being too blunt. Speaking too soon. Not showing a little kindness.

“I’ll just go upstairs and get him.”

She turned to run up the steps, but Ben put his hand atop hers on the banister. Unfortunately, even though she stopped as he wanted her to, Ben also stopped. His heart stopped. His breathing stopped. And he was fairly certain all his brain cells stopped functioning.

The back of her hand was like satin. Smooth, warm satin.

Positive he must be getting sick or something, he cleared his throat. “Take your time,” he said, and when his voice came out hoarse and whispery, he had to stifle a grimace.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Gwen disappeared up the steps, and as Ben waited for her

return he oriented himself back to sanity. But when she walked down the stairs, the fading rays of the late-afternoon sun framed her in a yellow glow. Spontaneously, he wished he had a picture of her like that, and he knew sanity was nowhere around.

"Nathan was a very good boy today," she said, and Nathan beamed with pride.

"Well, that's good," Ben said, wanting only to get the heck out of this house before he said or did something else foolish. "When he said he was curious about you and the baby, I didn't think you would mind if he spent some time with you."

"Oh, I didn't," Gwen quickly said. "I loved the company."

"Good," Ben said.

Nathan tugged on his shirtsleeve. "She said I can come over anytime I want."

Ben risked a peek at her. "Is that so?"

Gwen shrugged and smiled. "I like the company."

That seemed to be all there was to say, but Ben didn't want to accidentally insult her again by jumping to the conclusion that the conversation was over if she didn't think it was, because he didn't want to feel any more responsible for her than he already felt. When he realized things had grown so quiet he could hear the tick of the clock, he also realized he'd been standing by her front door like an idiot for at least a minute. Almost as if he didn't want to leave.

"Well, Nate, let's go," he said, reaching for the door-knob. Nathan scrambled around him and wiggled his way between Ben

and the opening. “He’s got a lot of energy,” Ben said, making excuses for Nathan’s need to get outside. He certainly couldn’t tell her the kid was anxious to get to Ben’s home and see his ten dollars on the mantel.

“He does have a lot of energy,” Gwen agreed with a laugh. “I can’t tell you what a relief it was to have him around all afternoon. He did tons of little things for me. I didn’t realize I had so many chores I was putting off until I could bend a little easier.”

Though Ben would have happily scooted off her porch only three seconds before, for this he turned and faced her. He had no doubt Nathan would keep Gwen company, but he wanted to confirm Nathan was doing what he was being paid to do. “He helped you?”

“A great deal,” Gwen assured Ben with a nod. “And he’s a wonderful boy.”

Her words were like a soothing balm, a confirmation for Ben that he’d really done right by her. No guessing. No assumptions. His smile was quick and genuine. “Yes, he is.”

“I hope my child is as happy and energetic as he is.”

Hearing the sweet, wishful, motherly tone of her voice, Ben realized why he suddenly felt differently around her than he had before. He’d lost his wall of protection. He’d already admitted to himself that Gwen was a beautiful woman. He’d admitted to himself that he found her attractive. But he’d always had the protection of thinking she must not be a good person to have yanked her child away from its natural father. Now that he had

accepted that Gwen herself was abandoned, a good and decent person trying to do the best she could, it seemed his fortress against her appeal was gone. And all the rules had changed.

"Well, I'll see you around," he said gruffly, and bounded outside, not wasting another second.

Not only was he attracted to her, but with the knowledge that she was as blameless as she was beautiful, the door was open for him to pursue her…and he wanted to. That was what kept throwing off his concentration and his ability to reason. He really wanted to get to know her. She was pretty, sweet and delightfully charming. What man wouldn't want to spend time with her?

But there was one little problem.

He had no intention of settling down. None. Never. And a woman with a child on the way needed a commitment. Since Ben was not the kind of man who could make a commitment, he had to stay the hell away from her.

Chapter Two

Gwen didn't know why she hid her stash of shortbread cookies on the top shelf of her last cabinet behind the old dishes she never used. She didn't live with anyone, so no one would find her precious treat. And she knew where the darned cookies were. It wasn't as if she prevented herself from discovering them. She wasn't fooling anybody or accomplishing anything, only delaying the inevitable.

Thinking that her purpose must be to give herself time to change her mind about eating a hundred buttery calories for every cookie, she dragged a chair to the cupboards and climbed onto the seat. Then she took a minute to catch her breath because she was huffing and puffing from the slight exertion. Twenty pounds didn't seem like a lot, but when gained in seven months and distributed entirely to her middle, those twenty pounds had really thrown a monkey wrench into physical activity—not to mention her shape and mobility.

Since she wasn't concealing the cookies from intruders and since she obviously wasn't deterring herself, she declared herself officially too clumsy to continue this little game at the same moment that someone knocked on her front door.

She groaned. Now she remembered why she hid these things. It was to keep them out of sight of visitors who would take one look at her bulging tummy and one look at the cookies and

recognize she had absolutely no will-power.

"I'm coming," she called, when her guest knocked again. She lumbered off the chair and walked to her front door, realizing that in the city she might have worried about being so casual with unexpected visitors. But here in Storkville, Nebraska, she never gave callers a second thought. She hadn't met anyone who wasn't pleasant, and most people went out of their way to be kind and considerate…except for Ben Crowe, she thought with an involuntary sigh. When she had met the Sioux rancher she'd immediately thought he was the most handsome man in Cedar County, with his nearly black eyes and short, shiny black hair. But as they negotiated the deal for his cottage, it didn't take her long to realize he was also the most bossy, irritating chauvinist she'd come across in a long, long time. Every time she had contact with him his gruffness managed to confirm that opinion, but his behavior the day before had etched it in stone.

When she opened the door and saw Nathan, her bad mood disappeared. "Hey, Nathan!" she said, stooping down so they were eye level.

"Hi, Mrs. Parker," he said, his gaze dropping shyly.

"None of that Mrs. Parker stuff," Gwen said, then ruffled his smooth dark hair. "Didn't I tell you yesterday to call me Gwen?"

He nodded.

"Okay, then," she said, and attempted to rise, but couldn't. "Drat!"

"What's the matter?" Nathan asked, alarmed. "Nothing,"

Gwen said. “I just need something to hold on to.”

“Here,” Nathan said, catching her arm. “I’ll help.”

Gwen knew Nathan’s enthusiastic heart was in the right place, but she also knew his slight body could not support her weight. Still, not wanting to insult him, she allowed him to hold her left arm while she actually levered herself up by angling her right hand on the door frame.

“That’s better,” she said, then blew her breath out on a long sigh. “So how come you’re here?”

He shrugged. “I don’t got nowhere else to go. I got no parents. And you said yesterday I could visit anytime I wanted.”

“That’s right,” Gwen said, directing Nathan to follow her into the kitchen, though she had the distinct impression she was being conned. She’d spent an entire afternoon with this kid yesterday and his grammar was perfectly fine. Now suddenly he was talking like a five-year-old.

“I live with foster parents on the reservation,” he continued, as he sat on one of the captain’s chairs by her round kitchen table. His dark hair was bright and shiny, but his dark eyes were dull with concern, as if he was afraid she didn’t believe him. “They’re nice, but they’re old, and they don’t like to play.”

He’d told her as much the day before, but today there was an odd quality to his voice, almost a quiver. If he was duping her, it was only because he wanted company.

Come to think of it, so did she. She was lonely. He was lonely. There was no harm in letting him hang around for a while. In

fact, she decided to share her cookies with him and made her way over to the cupboard.

"Do your foster parents know where you are?" she asked as she climbed on the chair again.

He nodded. "I called from Ben's."

Ben's. Great. Did everything in this town revolve around Ben Crowe? "What did they say?"

"They said that I could come over as long as I didn't annoy you. And Ben said he'd pick me up later to take me back to the reservation."

That stopped her. She could see the surly rancher letting his little friend use the phone. She could even see him letting this boy follow on his heels because that might feed his ego. But to volunteer to go out of his way to take him back to the reservation? That made him seem almost—well, nice. "He did?"

"Yeah," Nathan said.

Hearing the obvious affection in Nathan's voice, Gwen turned around and looked down at him. "You really like that guy, don't you?"

"He's my friend."

The simple statement told Gwen many things, not the least of which was that Nathan didn't consider himself to have too many friends. Again, her opinion of Ben Crowe rose several notches.

Not wanting to go any further with this conversation, she put her attention on opening her cupboard door, but when she reached for the cookies, she felt off balance and stopped mid-

stretch.

"What are you doing?" Nathan asked, sounding as if he felt she was crazy.

She cleared her throat. "Getting cookies."

"All right!" he said, apparently pleased at the prospect of a snack. In two shakes, he was beside her chair. "Let me do this."

"Nathan, you're shorter than I am. If I can't reach them, you can't reach them," she protested, but before the words were completely out of her mouth, Nathan had hoisted himself onto the countertop. He swiveled around, shifted to his feet and had her cookies in his hand before she could make another sound.

"Here," he said, giving the cookies to her and jumping to the floor.

It wasn't the neatest way to go about it, and it certainly wasn't the most sanitary thing in the world to have someone stand on your countertop, but it worked.

"Thanks," she said, carefully getting off the chair. And it wasn't entirely safe for her to be climbing chairs anymore, either. Or carrying heavy packages, she conceded in her thoughts, though she still didn't like Ben's attitude when he stopped to help her the day before, because she wasn't an invalid. But she also had to admit that it had been good having Nathan here yesterday when she needed somebody to bend and stretch.

As she thought the last, an idea formed. She wasn't an invalid who couldn't do things for herself, but it certainly wouldn't hurt to have another person around the house to help her. At the same

time, Nathan needed company, and he also was a nice little boy who could use a break from life.

"Nathan, how would you like to earn twenty dollars a week?"

His eyes widened comically and he gasped. "What?"

Proud of herself for coming up with such a good plan, Gwen smiled and sat at the table across from Nathan. "You saw how easily you got those cookies for me?"

He nodded.

"That showed me that I could really use some help around here. So, I'd be willing to pay you twenty dollars a week, if you would come over every day after school and just hang around in case I need something from a cupboard."

Big-eyed, Nathan said nothing, only licked his lips. Then he pulled his bottom lip between his teeth as if dismayed.

Baffled, Gwen wondered why he would hesitate to take her money, then she realized she might have insulted him. Or made him feel like a charity case. She hadn't been in Storkville long, but she knew the Sioux were a proud, strong people.

"I really need the help," she said, because she truly did. If his stay with her the day before hadn't proved it, her inability to reach those darned cookies had. She could lower everything to be within reaching distance, but what if she fell? When she chose to rent Ben Crowe's cottage on the edge of his property, she had gotten all the privacy she craved for both the baby and to be able to do her illustrations peacefully at home, but she had also isolated herself. With Nathan arriving every afternoon at three,

she would at least know someone would find her if something happened.

More convinced than ever that she needed this child's assistance, Gwen said, "Please?"

He sighed.

"Pretty please?" she said, knowing he was weakening.

Nathan shook his head as if deliberating, though she couldn't think of a reason he would be reluctant to accept her offer. But suddenly he grinned broadly and tossed his hands in defeat. "Okay," he said, sounding unsure but committed.

Gwen said, "Great!" Each ate two cookies, then Gwen sent Nathan on his first assignment. "There's a freezer in the basement," she said. "Would you please go down there and take out a package of hamburger?"

Nodding energetically, Nathan bounced off his chair and ran to her basement.

Gwen's chest puffed out with pride. Not only had she solved a problem for a sweet little boy, but she now had company for dinner. Unfortunately, because she felt she had to find some work for them to do to make Nathan feel his position was legitimate, she and Nathan got involved in organizing her closet and before she knew it it was after six o'clock. She wouldn't have glanced at the clock even then, except for the second time that day someone was knocking on her door.

"That's probably Ben," Nathan said authoritatively as he helped her maneuver herself out of the jumbled mess of clothes,

shoes and boxes.

"Already?" Gwen said, dispirited. All afternoon she'd been looking forward to having company for dinner, and because she'd lost track of time she wouldn't have any. The disappointment that settled over her was acute and severe. Which caused her to realize she was much lonelier than she was letting everyone—even herself—believe and convinced her that she had made a very wise choice in hiring Nathan to be with her every afternoon.

But that didn't get her someone to share dinner with tonight.

"I told him I would call him when I wanted to go home, but he must have thought I forgot," Nathan said, following Gwen down the steps to her front door.

Expecting to see Ben, Gwen's mouth nonetheless fell open in surprise when she opened the door and he stood before her. Not because it was him, but because he looked absolutely magnificent. Dressed in a dark suit, complete with white shirt and raspberry-colored tie, Ben took her breath away. His short, neatly styled black hair accented a face that was all clean angles and smooth planes. His dark eyes pierced her with his usual no-nonsense stare. His munificent mouth never smiled.

"Hi," she said, then mentally chastised herself for the quiver in her voice. Yes, the man was attractive, but she was twenty-eight, not a schoolgirl. And he wasn't her type. After her disastrous marriage, Gwen had vowed to shift her choice of men from cool and demanding, to sweet and mellow. This guy was not mellow.

"Hi," he said distantly, his tone relaxing Gwen somewhat.

Having reminded herself of what she wanted in a husband, she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she didn't have to worry about her attraction to this grumpy man. She wouldn't marry another difficult man on a lost bet.

"I'm here for Nathan."

"Actually, he's not ready yet," Gwen said, an idea forming in her head. "I promised him supper." She flashed Ben a winning smile. Her attraction to him no longer a consideration, she had no compunction about pulling out all the stops to retain her companionship for dinner. Besides, if she looked at this logically, all she was doing was being nice to her neighbor, her landlord. Certainly that couldn't hurt. "It's only hamburgers, but there's plenty if you'd like to join us."

She put her hand on Nathan's slender shoulder at the same time Nathan looked up at Ben and grinned. "Please," he said sweetly, and Gwen almost laughed. They couldn't have done that better if they'd rehearsed it.

From the expression on Ben's face Gwen could tell that he'd been all set to refuse her as he had the night before, until he looked down at Nathan's smile. The kid was good. Very good. No adult with an ounce of compassion could look at that angelic face and refuse him anything.

"All right," Ben said, but he sighed.

Gwen decided she couldn't even give him two minutes to debate this or he would change his mind. "Come on, Nathan, let's get the hamburgers on the grill."

“You can’t grill. It’s getting dark,” Ben protested, but Gwen turned and smiled charmingly.

“It won’t be dark for another hour, but the grill is on the deck and the deck has a light. If it gets dark, we’ll turn it on.” She smiled again. “Would you like a short-bread cookie while you wait?”

That seemed to confuse him. “Before dinner?” he asked incredulously.

Her smile became a grin. “I’m pregnant. I eat what I want, when I want. It’s the only perk.”

Though she thought he might have criticized her for that, Ben Crowe actually laughed, and a strange bubble of delight rose in Gwen’s stomach. She told herself to ignore it, but it was hard not to be proud of yourself when you made such a surly man laugh. When he joined them in the kitchen and quietly, almost formally asked if he could assist with the dinner preparations, making him laugh again started to feel like a goal.

So she faced him and gave him her most genuine smile. “Do you like lettuce and tomato on your hamburger?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, there’s a tomato in the refrigerator and a head of lettuce. You could wash those,” she said, then shifted her tone until it was serious, almost melodramatic. “But you would have to take off your jacket. Maybe even your tie.”

It was the first time in her life Gwen had ever seen a man blush, and though she found his embarrassment endearing, it

also puzzled her. Either he didn't know how to handle someone teasing him, or he was so unfamiliar with cooking that he didn't realize he needed to remove his coat.

"But Nathan and I can do that," she said quickly, hoping to make up for embarrassing him so he wouldn't get uncomfortable and change his mind about staying.

He shook his head and shrugged out of the black suit coat. "I'll do it," he said firmly.

Gwen decided to let the subject drop and went out to the deck to check on the hamburgers. "How's it going out here?" she asked Nathan.

Spatula in hand, he grinned up at her. "Really good."

Seeing how happy he was, Gwen ruffled his hair. "We should make a standing arrangement that you'll eat dinner with me every day so that I'll have help with the dishes."

Nathan nodded.

Gwen felt her bubble of excitement again, then Ben appeared at the sliding glass door leading to the deck. With his jacket gone and the sleeves of his white shirt rolled to his elbows, he added a dimension to his good looks that Gwen had all but forgotten existed. Sex appeal. Her merry bubble of excitement instantly transformed into a shiver of awareness.

"You cold?" Nathan asked.

Ben only continued to look at her, and she dropped the oven mitt she had just used to open the grill lid.

This was not good.

“Should I turn them over?” Nathan asked, still trying to get her attention.

But Gwen was lost. It occurred to her that maybe Ben Crowe wasn’t as angry and intense as she thought. No one else in the town had a problem with him. Everybody else let him keep to himself without question or qualm. Yet she nitpicked at everything he did. With him standing on the other side of her sliding glass doors, holding a plate of sliced tomatoes, staring at her as if he couldn’t get himself to stop, Gwen suddenly knew why they didn’t seem to get along and she squeezed her eyes shut.

He found her as attractive as she found him.

And he was fighting it every bit as hard as she was fighting it.

If it hadn’t been for Nathan, dinner might have been eaten in complete silence. Luckily, neither Gwen nor Ben had trouble talking to Nathan. Luckily, Nathan didn’t seem to notice that the adults were so uncomfortable with each other they were using him to pass the salt so they didn’t have to speak directly to each other.

Being a gentleman, Ben helped with the dishes. The gesture reinforced that Ben Crowe was a very good man, but, unfortunately, it also reaffirmed the sexual attraction Gwen felt sizzling between them. She couldn’t stop noticing that he wasn’t merely a handsome man, he was a well-built man. She’d never seen him in a dress shirt and trousers, only a work shirt, vest and jeans. As he walked around her kitchen, putting away dishes and storing leftover food, his lighter weight apparel showed off his

broad shoulders and his back which tapered into a trim waist. When Gwen realized that, she recognized her eyes were moving toward territory that was definitely off limits, and she refused to let herself even glance in his direction anymore.

When he shipped Nathan upstairs to get his jacket, Gwen also deduced that Ben had offered to help with the dishes so they would be too busy to be awkward around each other. Without the distraction of Nathan or the dishes, a thick silence stretched between them. Both tried to talk, neither could think of anything to say, and the peeks they stole at each other were so obvious and so telling, Gwen wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out.

She nearly breathed a sigh of relief when Nathan jogged down the steps. "I'm ready," he called, darting toward the door.

Obviously grateful, Ben followed him, and, relieved to have them going, Gwen followed Ben. But when the energetic nine-year-old slipped beneath Ben's arm and out the door, suddenly Ben and Gwen found themselves face-to-face and alone again.

"Thank you for staying," Gwen said, and made the mistake of looking up into his eyes. Lord, he had gorgeous eyes. Nearly black and as bright as stars, they looked down at her, pinning her into immobility.

"I appreciated dinner," he said quietly. "And also appreciated your being so good to Nathan."

"He's a wonderful boy," she agreed softly.

Ben's gaze fell to her mouth, then returned to her eyes, and Gwen watched him swallow hard. For a fleeting second she

feared that he would kiss her, then realized she wished that he would. What would it feel like to have that beautiful mouth pressed to hers?

Ben cleared his throat. “I’ve sort of taken him under my wing, so if he gives you trouble, call me.”

Gwen shook her head. “He’s no trouble,” she said. But you are, she thought, then realized that wasn’t true. This man couldn’t hurt her if she didn’t let him. If she got control of these odd, runaway feelings right now, there would be no problem between them. She took a step back, away from him, clearly telling him she didn’t want to be kissed.

He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. “Thank you for dinner,” he said, being formal again. “Make sure your door is locked,” he added before he walked outside. He closed her door with a secure tug, and then the only sound Gwen heard was silence.

She listened to the engine of his truck start, listened as the noise spiraled into nothing as he drove away, then squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. What the hell was happening to her? How could she have been so stupid as to stare in his eyes like a lovesick puppy?

For heaven’s sake, how could she even be looking at another man when she wasn’t over the last one yet?

Besides, she was pregnant. She was fat. She didn’t even really walk anymore, she waddled. Just like with the cookies, the only person she was fooling was herself if she thought a gorgeous man

like Ben Crowe would find her attractive in this condition!

Ben couldn't have disagreed more. Driving Nathan home that night he realized that the thing that struck him about her was how happy she was. She seemed to blossom around Nathan, which proved she would be a wonderful mother. But even before Nathan entered the picture Ben had noticed that Gwen…well, glowed. Yesterday it was so obvious he couldn't miss it. And tonight she virtually radiated light and energy.

He would have berated himself for staring at her all evening like some lovesick teenager, except when he saw her staring at him through the sliding glass doors, he realized she found him attractive, too. At first that had been nothing but good for his ego, then Ben reminded himself of his thoughts from the day before. Being attracted to an already pregnant woman wasn't something to play around with.

The next morning, bundled in denim and shielding his eyes from the sun with a Stetson as he rode the fence to spend some time outdoors—since he'd wasted the previous day in offices with lawyers, accountants and brokers—Ben decided that Gwen's pregnancy was the bottom line to everything. Since he hadn't been overwhelmingly attracted to a woman like this in years, and the biggest difference between Gwen and all the other women he met was her pregnancy, he figured that silly glow of hers was the real culprit, not an actual attraction.

He even felt fortified enough to knock on her door and walk right into her house that evening when he arrived to pick up

Nathan. But when he saw her lying on the sofa, looking exhausted—completely without glow—and still thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world, he knew he was going to have to rethink this whole deal.

"What's up?" he asked, sitting on the edge of the sofa beside her tummy, so he could get a better look at her face.

"I'm fine," she said, obviously exasperated. "I told you before, I'm pregnant, not sick."

"Where's Nathan?"

"He's making dinner."

"He is?" Ben asked, his voice resonating with fear at the combination of a nine-year-old, boiling water and fire.

"Relax," she said. "It's only cold cereal from a box, but at this point that's all I have the energy to eat. He told me he can get something at home with his foster parents."

"I'll see that he gets dinner," Ben said, then rose from the couch. "And you're eating something more than cold cereal."

"Cold cereal is fine."

He snorted a laugh. "Not hardly. Have you ever read one of those labels? You're eating sugarcoated sugar."

The words were barely out of Ben's mouth before Gwen gasped as if in pain. He fell to the sofa again. "What's wrong?" he asked urgently.

She gritted her teeth from the discomfort, but said, "It's nothing."

"Oh, yeah, right," Ben said, rising from the couch. "Nathan,

give me a hand here. I'm taking Mrs. Parker to the doctor."

With surprising strength, Gwen caught his hand and tugged him down to the sofa again. "You are not taking me to the doctor."

Leaning over so that he nearly pressed his nose to her nose, he disagreed. "Guess again."

"The baby is moving. That's all. Sometimes when he does it I get heartburn. Other times, like now, it just hurts like the dickens. It all depends on what he sits on."

She said the words quietly, softly, and very, very slowly and with every puff of breath that came from her mouth he realized how close they were. If he thought he'd been on the verge of kissing her the night before, he was in even worse shape tonight. First, she looked tired and alone. That right there deserved a kiss. Add her natural beauty to that and Ben found himself losing the battle.

"I still think I should take you to the doctor," he whispered, his voice shivery and hoarse because he realized he was bending closer and closer, so near her mouth now that his lips were almost touching hers.

He'd never felt so drawn to kiss anyone. Not because she was attractive, not because he was attracted to her, but because it felt right. She wasn't merely beautiful, she was sweet, and he wanted to taste some of that sweetness. He could feel himself being pulled toward her, confirmation, almost, that this was something he couldn't control.

But in the last second before their mouths would have touched, she said, “No.”

Chapter Three

"No."

"No?" He didn't know if she'd said no to the kiss or no to going to the doctor. But he did know that he couldn't remember the last time anyone argued with him, and he nearly tripped himself when he bounced off the couch. "What do you mean, no?"

"Ben," she said patiently. "I gained twenty pounds in seven months…actually more like five months because I didn't gain anything the first two months. Picture my small frame suddenly getting twenty pounds, most of it in my middle."

He could. Clearly. He could see her standing in front of a mirror, wearing something soft and filmy, looking feminine and motherly and absolutely gorgeous. That's what bothered him. He could easily envision how she would do anything, from the simple to the sublime, as if he'd known her for years instead of weeks.

"I'm not sick. I'm tired. I do not need to see a doctor. I need a few minutes of rest, that's all."

When she put it like that, Ben believed her. But she wasn't completely out of the woods with him yet. "All right, you're not sick," he conceded gruffly, trying like hell to stifle the image she'd unwittingly forced him to create in his head. "But what you told me proves you need a good dinner."

She sighed. "I'm too tired to make a good dinner."

"No problem. Nathan and I will make one for you," he said,

and turned toward her kitchen. “What would you like?”

“Steak and french fries,” she said with a laugh. “But you don’t have to make me dinner.”

Walking to the door, he said, “You’re not eating cold cereal. If you want steak, I’ll make steak.”

“I was teasing,” she called after him. “If you insist on cooking, you don’t have to go to that much trouble.”

He stopped, faced her and skewered her with a look. “Let’s get one thing straight. I never do anything I don’t want to do, so if I volunteer to do something it’s not trouble.”

With that he left the living room, crossed the small entryway at the foot of the steps and went into her kitchen. “Nate, we need to make steak and french fries for supper. Do you have any idea where we can find those things?”

He nodded eagerly. “Sure, there’s a freezer in the basement. She even has frozen fries.”

“Great. You go get those and I’ll start the grill.”

With Nate’s help dinner was ready in a little over half an hour. Just as Ben was preparing to put a tray together for Gwen, she entered the kitchen.

“This smells wonderful,” she said.

Ben studied her critically. Her cheeks had color. Her energy appeared to have returned. She was smiling. “I knew a good meal would revive you. Just smelling it put color back in your face.”

“I was tired,” Gwen said. “It’s not a crime. I’ll bet even you get tired, Ben Crowe.”

He shrugged. “I remember one time, when I was younger, I did get a little tired,” he teased. “But the next day I came down with the flu, so we never really knew if I was tired or if that fluke day was actually just the beginning of my illness.”

“Oh, yeah, right,” Gwen said, sitting at one of the place settings Nathan had arranged at the table.

“Seriously,” Ben said as he served the steak, “you do look much better, and I’m sure you’ll feel better once you eat.”

“Yeah,” Nathan agreed, climbing onto the chair beside her. “You look better.”

Ben was abundantly relieved Nathan had taken the seat beside Gwen until he realized that sitting across from her would put them face-to-face. But as they ate, and as he watched her become more animated and more energetic, Ben was glad he could see her. He believed her when she said she was tired. He also believed that having a baby move inside you could cause pain. Still, it was good to have all that confirmed by the return of her high spirits and stamina.

As she and Nathan washed the dishes, Ben cleared the table, continuing to covertly watch her. Seeing her stretching to put the first glass on the appropriate shelf, he said, “Stack those below the cupboard and I’ll store them.”

“Nonsense,” she said with a laugh. “I can reach.”

“I know,” Ben agreed, finally comprehending that the way to get this woman’s cooperation wasn’t through quibbling. If you argued with her, she tried to prove you wrong. So the best thing

to do was to pretend to agree, then point her in the right direction. “It’s faster if you make a stack to put away all at once, because you eliminate steps.”

“What are you? Some kind of efficiency expert?”

“What’s an efficiency expert?” Nathan asked.

“Someone who tells other people what to do,” Gwen said curtly.

“Someone who finds a better way to do things,” Ben contradicted, but he laughed. Because laughter was another way to reach this woman. After spending two days with her, he recognized she liked to laugh, and she liked seeing other people laugh. So if that’s what it took to swing her thinking around in the way he wanted it to go, that’s what he would do.

She turned to place a dish in the cupboard, but as she reached up he caught the plate. He didn’t take it out of her hand, just guided it to the countertop, and when she released it, he directed her hand to get the next one.

She gave him a curious look, but he didn’t stop long enough for her to realize he was monitoring her every move. He walked to the stove to wipe it clean, surreptitiously observing her from his peripheral vision. When she started to put another plate into the cupboard out of habit, he simply stepped beside her, seized the plate and guided it to the stack beside the dish drainer.

“Are you this annoying with everyone?” she asked, her eyes narrowing as she glared at him.

“Absolutely,” he said, but again he didn’t linger. Since the

plate was on the pile and she was reaching for another dish, he walked away, busying himself with straightening her tablecloth. Once she and Nathan had finished washing and drying the few dishes and utensils used for their dinner, but before she got the chance to hoist them to the shelves above her, Ben shifted her attention to the table.

"Would you arrange those flowers?" he asked. "I think I messed them up when I returned the centerpiece to its place."

Though he thought she might have questioned that, she looked at the centerpiece, giving Ben enough time to quickly stash her stacks of dishes and glasses into the cupboard. By the time she turned and said, "How can you mess up a bunch of wildflowers?" he had everything put away.

"My mistake," he said. "Come on, Nathan, let's go."

Because she hadn't noticed that he had more or less manipulated her out of disagreeing about who would do what in the kitchen, Ben knew he had been successful. He also knew that dinner and company had boosted her spirits. He had not intended to get involved with her, but, really, somebody had to. Not because she was an invalid, but because she was alone. A million and ten things could happen to her and no one would be around to even discover her, let alone rescue her. So if Ben made himself and Nathan her protectors for the next few months, he wasn't doing anything but being a good neighbor. Besides, he was her landlord. He had a responsibility to make sure she was safe while she was on his property.

"I'll bring Nathan around at eight tomorrow morning," he announced as he grabbed his coat from a peg by the door and urged Nathan to do the same.

Gwen gasped. "No, you won't! It's one thing to have him come over after school, but a boy needs his Saturday to play. He doesn't need to be baby-sitting me. I told you. I'm perfectly fine."

Ben knew he could have found a way to contradict that without insulting her so Nathan would have the chance to earn his ten dollars, but he didn't have to because Nathan said, "But I like coming here. I'd rather be with you."

Instantly, he saw that the innocent tone of Nathan's voice, coupled with the sincerity of his words, hit Gwen right in the heart. She swallowed hard. "I like having you here."

"Then it's settled," Ben said. Not giving anyone a chance to think about it too much for fear of a change of opinion, he reached for the doorknob.

"But I'm not an invalid," Gwen said, the defensive comment pulling Ben's hand away from the door and causing him to face her again.

"I just like company."

"Right," he concurred guilelessly. He already knew that arguing with her only made her want to prove her points, so no matter what she said, he would agree.

"Right," Nathan said, too, apparently catching on to the same things Ben had.

"You're not sick. You just want company," Ben repeated to

be sure she knew they understood her. Because, he supposed, in a way they did. She wasn't ill. But she also shouldn't be alone. They all agreed on that.

He just couldn't get too attached to her, which would be the tricky part if he had to spend too much time watching her smile, listening to her soft voice and enjoying the very fact—so clearly demonstrated by her pregnancy—that she was a woman.

The next morning, Gwen awoke bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. She felt wonderful, refreshed, alive, and she was waiting with French toast and tea when Ben dropped off Nathan.

The little boy entered the unlocked front door without knocking. "Hi."

"Hi," Gwen said. "Where's Ben?"

"He can't come in. He's got work to do."

When disappointment swamped her, Gwen wondered if her good mood hadn't been caused by knowing she would be seeing Ben that morning. But she told herself she couldn't let that be true. She wasn't in the market for another man. She couldn't be. The ink was hardly dry on her divorce papers. Getting involved with another man should be the last thing she wanted to do.

But as she served breakfast, she couldn't stop the small debate going on in her head about why Ben might have chosen not to come in with Nathan. While she and Nathan ate their French toast and drank their tea, she considered that he really might have work to do. But she countered that by speculating that she might have repulsed him by being so grouchy the night before. The

debate went around and around until Gwen knew the only way she would stop the madness would be to take her mind off things with work. A few hours of occupying herself with earning a living were exactly what she needed. But since she felt duty-bound to entertain Nathan, she didn't see how she could do that.

After doing the dishes and enduring the internal argument about Ben for another fifteen minutes, Gwen knew she didn't have a choice. She had to work.

"Come on, Nathan," she said, directing him to the sun-room at the back of the cottage, the space she used for an office.

As they entered the cluttered area, Nathan glanced around in awe. "Wow!" he said, fingering her drafting table as if it were solid gold.

"You like to draw?" she asked.

"Do I ever!" he said, and turned those big brown eyes on her again.

"Good." She reached for some older chalk, colored pencils and a new tablet. "I can teach you anything you want to know. But first, this morning, we'll let you draw as many pictures as you want, the way you want to draw them, and we'll see what you need to learn. And we'll also see where your natural talents lie."

He looked at the art supplies she was handing him and blinked up at her. "All this is mine?"

"Sure. But you have to keep them at my house. Because this is where you'll be doing your lessons."

He nodded, reverently glanced at the supplies, then peered up

at her as if stunned by her generosity. “Thanks.”

Gwen was struck again by the way this little boy appreciated everything she did for him. Because she had spoken with his foster mother to let her know that she had invited Nathan to visit her every day, she knew the woman genuinely cared for him, but she could also hear the age in his caretaker’s voice. An energetic, intelligent boy like Nathan needed to be challenged. And though Gwen wouldn’t take anything away from his foster parents, knowing that they cared for him and were doing the best they could, she vowed to continue providing as many opportunities for Nathan as possible without overstepping her boundaries.

As if he understood that Gwen couldn’t be disturbed while she finished her projects, and also having accepted the task of providing samples of his abilities for her inspection, Nathan worked quietly. His presence was not the distraction Gwen feared it might be, but more than that, she soon found that having him in the room with her was a comfort of sorts. Like Nathan, she labored industriously and without a break until her back began to ache.

She recognized she’d worked too long at the same moment that she heard Ben’s truck pull into her gravel lane. Looking at the clock and seeing that it was past noon, she groaned.

“Oh, Nathan, I’m sorry.”

He peeked up. “What?”

“I keep losing track of time, and one of these days I’m going to starve you to death. It’s already past lunch, and we haven’t had

a break." Another thought struck and she groaned again. "And I don't have anything out of the freezer to make, either."

"That's okay," Nathan said, kneeling on the ledge built in front of the wall of glass to create something of a window seat. "Ben's bringing big bags of stuff."

"He's brought lunch?" she asked, peering over Nathan's head so she could see.

"Looks like," Nathan said.

They scrambled out of the sunroom to the front room to get the door for Ben because he had his hands full. As he stepped inside, Gwen saw the yellow bread wrapper hooked over the rim of the top of the brown paper bag.

"You didn't have to do this," she said immediately.

"What did I tell you yesterday?" Ben asked, depositing his packages on her table. "I don't do anything I don't want to do. So if I do something it's because I wanted to."

"Right," she said, though she still felt uncomfortable.

"Okay," Ben said. "I brought salami and Swiss cheese, bologna and roast beef. Which do you want?"

"Roast beef," Gwen said, unconsciously sitting down as Ben pulled his purchases from the brown bags. "I think that's probably the only one of those I can eat without getting heartburn."

"I'll make a note of that," Ben said, arranging the cold cuts and bread on the table in front of him. Then he removed a bag of cookies.

"Oh, chocolate twirls," Gwen said, her mouth watering. "I love

those."

"Good," Ben said. "Nathan, how about checking the refrigerator for mustard."

"Bottom shelf," Gwen said, hardly realizing the men were waiting on her, though she did notice that it didn't seem as if there was anything for her to do.

"What do you like on your sandwich?" Ben asked.

She shrugged. "I can make my own sandwich."

"I already have the bread on a plate," he said, displaying the paper plate holding two slices of bread. "I know you want roast beef, but do you want anything else?"

"Put a piece of cheese on," Gwen said. However, the minute the words were out of her mouth, she recognized she was letting him make her sandwich. "I can do that."

"Done," Ben said, and handed her the paper plate.

"Thanks," Gwen said, but she started to rise. "I'll make coffee."

"I brought cola," Ben countered, producing it from a bag on the chair beside him. "You get glasses, Nate."

Nodding vigorously, the little boy jumped from his seat, opened the cupboard and was back at the table with glasses in seconds.

Gwen started to sit again, but seeing Ben open the mustard, she changed directions. "You'll need a knife for that."

He eased her back down. "Nate can get that. Right, Nate?"

"Right," Nate said, then ran to her silverware drawer. He

extracted a knife and presented it to Ben.

"What kind of sandwich would you like?" Ben asked Nathan.

"Bologna," he said with a grin.

"Just bologna? Nothing else?"

"Just bologna."

All in all, making the sandwiches, distributing potato chips, pouring the cola and settling everyone into a seat took less than ten minutes. But Gwen wasn't oblivious to the fact that she'd done nothing to put this little impromptu lunch together.

Which, as hostess, made it all the more important that she come up with some good mealtime conversation. "So what did you do this morning?" she asked Ben, then mentally chastised herself because that hardly sounded interesting, let alone stimulating.

"I'm having trouble with my accountant," he said simply, then downed half a glass of cola. "But it's not a big deal. If he's messing up, I can fire him and replace him in a minute. I just don't like to get rid of somebody who doesn't deserve to be let go. I like to be sure."

"Good idea," Gwen agreed. "I've never been on the firing side of being an employer, but I'll bet it's no picnic."

"It doesn't have to be a disaster, either," Ben said. "The only real problem I ever had was firing someone unfairly. That will keep you up at nights and make you just plain miserable. I'll never do it again."

Though she didn't know Ben very well, certain things about his

character were obvious. “I can’t imagine you letting somebody go without good reason.”

“Oh, I did,” Ben assured her. “I found out too late I’d gotten bad information from someone who had a grudge against the guy.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah, you’ve got to be really careful about who you trust,” Ben agreed. “Anyway, I had to hunt the man down and bring him back with a raise. But in the end my conscience was clear.”

Ben’s comment about trust didn’t escape Gwen’s notice. If she’d been romantically interested in him, she would have taken it as something of a warning. Since she wasn’t romantically interested in him—couldn’t be—she focused on the fact that Ben’s generosity was only outdone by his integrity. Then she glanced at Nathan, saw he had finished his sandwich and was just about to ask him if he wanted another, when Ben beat her to it.

“All done, Nate? Or would you like something else?”

“More chips,” he said, and Ben promptly complied with the request.

Gwen stifled a laugh. The way they interacted was cute, but more than that it was now obvious that they were deliberately keeping her from doing anything. Which was kind of sweet, though very impractical. She doubted they would stop if she told them she’d caught on, but she wasn’t so stupid that she couldn’t beat them at their own game.

“What are you doing this afternoon?” she asked slyly.

“I’m going south to look at some horses.”

“Long trip?”

“It depends. If I find what I want at the first stop, I could be back before dinner.”

“Good. I’ll be sure to make something that won’t get cold or ruin if it sits while we wait for you.”

Ben’s eyes narrowed as if he’d finally figured out she had tripped him up. She smiled ingeniously at him. His eyes narrowed another notch.

Deciding it best to change the subject as quickly as possible, Gwen said, “Nathan and I started art lessons this morning.”

Ben shot Nathan a look, and though the little boy’s eyes widened, he said nothing. Ben continued to peer at Nathan, but his question was obviously addressed to Gwen. “You didn’t do anything too strenuous, did you?”

“Even though I’m pregnant, I can still draw. Besides, I do it every day. Drawing textbook illustrations is how I make a living.”

Seemingly content with the answer, Ben glanced at her. “Can’t Nathan help you?”

“Not really. But even if he could, Nathan is busy with his own projects.”

This time the look Ben shot Nathan was openly questioning.

“I’m making pictures,” Nathan said apologetically.

“And I’m going to examine them so I can see what Nathan knows naturally and what he needs to be taught. I don’t want to disturb his talent, but I do want to correct what he’s doing wrong.”

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