



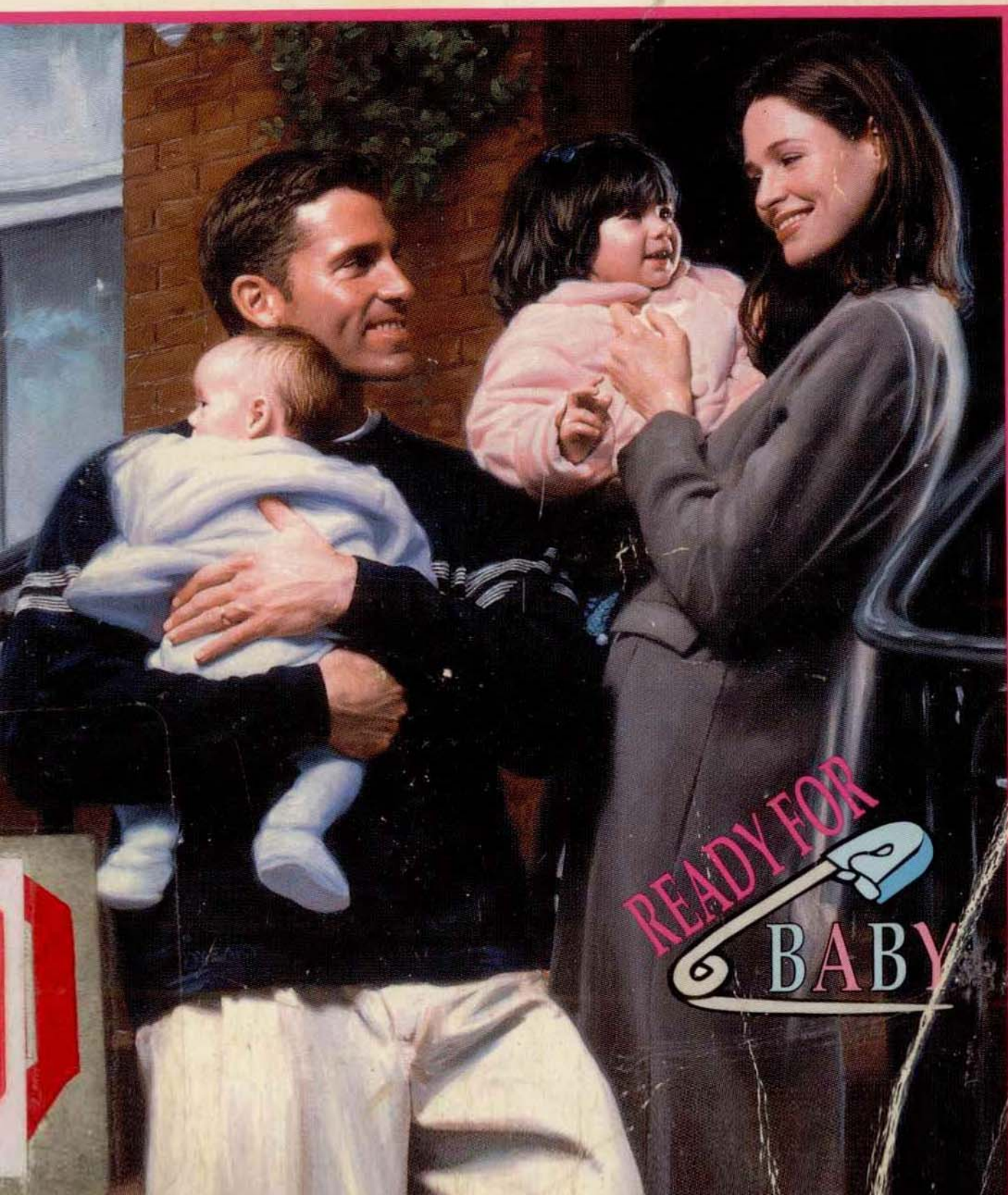
HARLEQUIN®

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Harlequin Romance®

**DELIVERED:
ONE FAMILY**

Caroline Anderson



READY FOR
BABY

"You had a life before we arrived."

"Yes—a lonely, empty life with nothing in it but work. I like having you here, Liv. Believe me."

"You are sweet to us."

He made a disgusted noise, and she smiled sadly.

"You are. Don't be macho and funny about it. You've been really kind, Ben, and it's not right to take advantage any more."

"You're not taking advantage."

"Yes, we are."

"No. Okay, I'll admit as a housekeeper you aren't able to give it your best shot because of the kids, but there are other ways in which you more than earn your keep. Just having someone to come home to—someone who knows me, who can understand my sense of humor, knows my likes and dislikes. Someone who smiles and says, 'How was your day?' when I come in."

"That's not a housekeeper, Ben—that's a wife," she said wistfully.

He looked up, his eyes unreadable. "So marry me."

What happens when you suddenly discover your happy twosome is about to be turned into a...*family*?

Do you panic?

Do you laugh?

Do you cry?

Or...do you get married?

The answer is all of the above—and plenty more!

Share the laughter and the tears as these unsuspecting couples are plunged into parenthood! Whether it's a baby on the way, or the creation of a brand-new instant family, these men and women have no choice but to be



When parenthood takes you by surprise!

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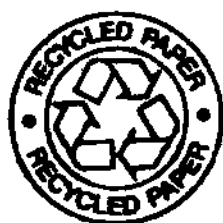
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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS a big front door. Big and solid and made of oak, a sturdy door that Liv leant on for a moment while she conjured up the courage to ring the bell.

It was four in the morning, and she was probably the last person Ben wanted to see, but she wasn't in a position to be considerate—not then, with all that had happened. She'd apologise later—if he was still speaking to her! There was no guarantee he would be.

The doorbell echoed eerily through the silent house, and Liv pulled her coat round her and shivered. She wasn't sure if it was cold or shock. Probably both. All she knew was that Ben had to come to the door. He had to be at home—there was nowhere else for her to go.

Because, with this last reckless and impulsive act, Olivia Kensington had come to the end of the line.

'All right, all right,' Ben muttered. 'Hang on, I'm coming.' He ran downstairs, belting his dressing gown securely and flicking on the lights as he reached the darkened hallway.

He turned the key, yanked the door open and blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light.

'Liv?'

She looked up at him, her eyes indistinct, shimmering pools of green and gold in the too bright light of the porch. Her dark hair was artfully rumped, and her smile was as bright as the light. She was clearly

oblivious of the hour and the fact that he had been fast asleep, and Ben was tempted to strangle her.

He was always tempted to strangle her. Instead he propped himself against the door jamb and folded his arms across his chest with a resigned sigh. 'What on earth are you doing here at this time of night?' he asked with the last shred of his usually endless patience. 'You aren't locked out, you're too far from home—so what is it, Liv? Staying with someone locally and the party ended too soon? You got bored? You're lost?'

She shook her head.

'No? OK, I give up. To what do I owe the singular honour of your company at—' he checked his watch '—stupid o'clock in the morning?'

The smile widened, became wry. 'Sorry, it is a bit late. It's just—you know you rang me a few weeks ago to ask if I knew anyone who was looking for a housekeeper's job?'

'Housekeeper?' He went still, anticipating trouble and knowing he wouldn't be disappointed. Not with Liv. 'Yes?' he said cautiously, trying to see into the taxi behind her. Had she dragged some prospective candidate along? At whatever time it was? Only Liv—

'I'd like to apply—if it's still free.'

'You?' For a moment he didn't move, and then he shrugged himself away from the frame and peered down at her more closely. That was when he noticed the smudge of mascara round her eyes, the brittleness of the smile, the slight tremor running through her frame.

'For God's sake, Liv, what's happened?' he said

softly, stepping down into the porch and putting an arm round her.

She dragged in a huge breath and smiled gamely up at him, lifting her shoulders in a devil-may-care shrug, but the smile shattered and her mouth firmed into a grim line. 'He threw me out—Oscar. He said—you don't want to know what he said.' She shuddered. 'Anyway, he threw us out of the door and slammed it—I tried to ring you but my mobile phone doesn't work any more. The bastard must have had it disconnected instantly—he's probably reported it stolen.'

The bitterness and shock in her voice brought a murderous rage boiling to the surface in Ben. He looked past her again to the taxi sitting on his drive with its engine running. The driver cut the engine, and in the silence he could hear the insistent wailing of a tiny baby.

'You've got the children?'

She nodded, and he raked his hands through his close-cropped hair and released a sigh of relief. 'Come in, Liv—all of you, come in,' he said gently.

Her shoulders straightened, pride yanking her upright. 'Ben, I wonder if I could ask a favour? I can't pay the taxi—I cleared out my handbag this morning and I must have forgotten to put my credit card folder back in, and I don't have any cash—' She broke off, biting her lip, and Ben guessed she was at the end of her tether.

'Sure. I'll deal with it. Come in before you freeze.' With a deep sigh he led her inside, sat her down before she fell and went out to the taxi driver.

'What do I owe you?' he asked, and winced at the reply. 'OK. I'll just take the children inside. Could you bring the luggage?'

'No luggage, mate,' the taxi driver told him. 'Just her and the screaming kids. One of them's got a real fruity nappy, as well. Don't envy whoever changes that one!' He chuckled, and Ben opened the back door and reached in, lifting the tiny squalling baby off the broad seat and tucking it carefully into his arms. Poor little beast, he was only about four weeks old—maybe less. Ben couldn't remember exactly.

A toddler with Liv's tumbling dark curls was slumped in the corner, thumb hanging from her lip, fast asleep. The aroma seemed to be coming from her. He carried the baby in to Liv, handed it to her, found the money for the taxi in his wallet and went back for the other child.

She woke, stared at him for a second then started to cry.

'Come on, sweetheart. Mummy's inside,' he reassured her, and held out his hand. She wouldn't trust him that far, but she squirmed off the seat and stumbled to the door. He helped her out of the cab and watched it peel away, stripping his gravel in a way that made him wince.

Oh, well. The little girl was heading determinedly for the front door, leaving a trail of nappy-flavoured fog behind her. Ben followed, shutting the front door and leaning on it, looking down at Liv, seeing her clearly for the first time.

She was exhausted. There were bags under her eyes that were weeks old, her face was drawn, her eyes were bleak and hopeless now she'd stopped pretending, and the despair in them made him want to kill Oscar.

Slowly.

Inch by despicable inch.

He crouched down beside Liv and squeezed her leg. 'Your daughter needs a new nappy.'

She found a smile from somewhere, and his heart turned over. 'I know. I noticed. I don't have one.'

The baby started to cry again, and Ben looked at it thoughtfully.

'Can I help you give him a bottle? Or are you breastfeeding?'

She looked suddenly even sadder, if that were possible. 'I was—Oscar didn't like it. He was jealous. He said it didn't do my figure any good, but I didn't think that was why we'd had children—' She broke off, biting her lip, then looked up at him with eyes that tore his heart. 'Ben, I don't have anything—not for any of us. No bottles, no nappies—nothing. I'm sorry to land on you like this, but I didn't know where else to go—'

She broke off again, hanging on to her control by a thread, and Ben squeezed her knee again and stood up. 'I'll find you some little towels you can use as nappies as a stop-gap, and you can help yourself to anything you need in the kitchen while I go to the shops. There's an all-night supermarket—I can pick up some emergency supplies.'

He ran upstairs, threw on his clothes and ran down again, a handful of little towels at the ready. She was still sitting there without moving, the screaming baby nuzzling at her jumper and the toddler lying against her leg, whining with exhaustion.

'Come on,' he said gently, and helped Liv up and led her through to the kitchen. Then he passed her the towels, took the crying baby and left her to make the best she could of the new makeshift nappies. She took the little girl out to the cloakroom, following his

directions, and he could hear them talking in the lulls between the baby's screams.

'Poor little tyke,' he murmured, rocking it gently. 'Do you have a name? Probably something stupid like Hannibal, knowing Oscar.'

'He's called Christopher, after my father. Oscar wasn't interested in his name. I call him Kit for short.'

Ben looked up at her, holding her daughter in her arms, and wondered what else Oscar hadn't been interested in. He hadn't even cared enough to give this brave and lovely girl his name.

'Does he always cry like this?' he asked as Kit struck up again.

'Only when he's hungry, but I haven't got anything to feed him—'

'When did you stop feeding him yourself?' he asked.

'Last week. Why?'

'Because you could try. He might not get much food, but he'd get comfort, surely? Just until I can get to the shops? The supermarket down the road is open twenty-four hours. I can be back in half an hour with some formula and bottles.'

She looked doubtful. 'I could try, but I don't think it'll work. I don't know what else to do, but he's so hungry, I can't bear it.' Tears in her eyes, Liv took him, cradling him tenderly against her shoulder and patting him consolingly, but he didn't want to be consoled. He wanted to be fed, and he was going to scream until it happened.

'I'll put the kettle on for you. Why don't you curl up on those big chairs by the window and settle them down, and I'll nip out? Is there anything you particularly want?'

‘The contents of their nursery?’ she said drily, with a brave attempt at humour.

‘I’ll take my mobile phone. The number’s here, on the wall. Ring me as you think of things. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

He went through to his garage, pressed the remote to open the door and then the gate, and drove up the road towards the supermarket, deep in thought. So Oscar, the scumbag, had thrown them out empty-handed in the middle of the night, had he? On what feeble pretext?

He wasn’t sure he wanted to know. He pulled up at the supermarket, went in and stood staring dumbly at the endless rows of disposable nappies. Some for boys, some for girls, all different sizes and ages, umpteen different makes, with resealable tabs and pretty pictures and a bewildering array of specialist features, each purporting to outdo the other brands.

The formula milk was no better. He stared hopelessly at the different makes and wondered if the wrong one would upset Kit. And what about the girl, Melissa? He couldn’t remember her nickname—Maisie or something. What did she eat?

It was a minefield—and his chances of getting through it without being blown apart were so slight it wasn’t worth considering. Pulling his mobile phone out of his pocket, he punched in his home number and waited.

The phone startled Liv, waking her and Missy who started to whinge again. Kit was asleep at her breast, too exhausted to cry any more. Without moving him she struggled to her feet and picked the phone up cautiously. ‘Hello?’

‘What size and brand of nappies and milk formula?’ Ben asked without preamble.

She told him, and she could hear him muttering to himself as he went up and down the aisle. ‘Got them. How many?’

‘Whatever,’ she said. ‘One packet of each for now. I’ll have to sort something out.’ She paused for a moment, then abandoned diplomacy, because there was no diplomatic way to ask it, and said, ‘I take it you were alone last night? I mean, nobody’s about to come downstairs and ask awkward questions or get embarrassed? I didn’t mess up a hot date or anything, did I?’

He laughed. Well, she thought it was a laugh. It sounded a little stressed, but it was about five in the morning and he probably was a little stressed. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No hot date. Just my beauty sleep.’

‘Ben, I’m sorry,’ she said softly, and he stopped laughing.

‘Liv, it’s OK,’ he promised, and she believed him.

‘Thanks. Don’t forget sterilising stuff for the bottles.’

He muttered something, then cut the connection. Would he manage? It was silly, really, she should have gone with him, but she was so tired, so terribly weary and shocked and disillusioned.

Oddly, she wasn’t hurt. Not deeply hurt, the way she should have been. Not gutted. Just wounded pride more than anything, with the cruel things Oscar had said. And angry. Dear God, was she angry! She started to pace round the kitchen, her fury building, and by the time Ben got back she was ready to kill.

He took one look at her, raised an eyebrow and

unpacked the shopping on to the big island unit. 'Formula. Bottles. Sterilising stuff. Food for Maisie.'

'Missy,' she corrected, and the corner of his mouth tipped.

'Missy,' he agreed. 'Nappies—for little boys and big girls. Pyjamas. A dress. Tights. Vests. A sleepsuit for Kit. And—' he put his hand into the bag and pulled it out '—toffees.'

'I love you,' she said earnestly, and grabbed the bag, ripping it open and peeling one. Bliss. How had he remembered?

'Right, Missy,' she said, her teeth firmly stuck together, 'let's get you ready for bed.' She scooped up the armful of baby clothes and then, suddenly aware yet again of the enormity of their imposition, she looked at Ben. 'Um—I take it-it is OK for us to stay? I mean, just for a while? A few days or so? You will say if it isn't, or whatever—'

'Liv, it's fine; don't stress. I'll come up and give you a hand. What shall I bring?'

She looked at the things, then at Kit finally asleep wedged in cushions on one of the big chairs by the window, and shrugged. 'Nappies—both sorts. Nothing else. They'll sleep once they're in bed—please God.'

'I've got a cot—in case friends stay. It's not made up but it soon can be. Which one do you want to put in it?'

'Missy,' she said definitely, her mind at rest about the stairs now she knew her little daughter wouldn't be able to fall down them. 'Kit can sleep in a drawer or something.'

'So you can shut it if he screams?' Ben asked

mildly, leading her into a bedroom, the baby in his arms.

Liv laughed, the tension easing a fraction. 'Don't tempt me,' she said.

They went straight to sleep, Missy in the cot and Kit beside her in his makeshift little bed in the huge bottom drawer of a mahogany wardrobe, and Ben led Liv back downstairs, put a mug of tea in her hand and sat down, legs sprawled out under the kitchen table.

'Drink your tea,' he ordered, and she sat and picked up the mug, playing with it while she ran through the night again in her mind.

He said nothing, just watched her, and after a moment Liv stood up, mug in hand, and walked over to the window. It faced the road, beyond the curving drive and the neatly trimmed shrubs and the manicured lawn.

Liv didn't see them. What she saw was Oscar, arrogant, cocky, bored, telling her where he'd been, and who with, in graphic and embarrassing detail.

'Aren't you going to ask?' she said to Ben, an edge in her voice.

'You'll tell me when you're ready,' he said gently.

She put the mug down, hugging her elbows and pacing round the kitchen. 'He's a—a—' she began.

'Bastard?'

'No, thanks to him and his liberated attitude—but yes, he's a bastard in the sense you mean. Oh, yes.'

Ben shrugged. 'He always has been. It's taken you four years to realise it. I don't know why you didn't cotton on sooner.'

'Nobody told me.'

'People tend to be circumspect,' he said, chasing a bubble in the top of his tea. 'Anyway, it was so obvious I couldn't believe you didn't notice.'

'Well, I didn't,' she sighed. 'Besides, he was wonderful to me at first—when I had a figure.'

Ben's mouth tightened and his blue eyes seemed to shoot sparks. She thought inconsequentially that it was just as well Oscar wasn't in the room, because Ben would kill him. It was a tempting thought.

'So what happened tonight?'

She picked her tea up and went over to the table, sitting down again restlessly. There was a bowl of sugar on the table, and she played with it, dribbling the grains off the spoon, watching it intently without seeing it. 'He was late. He came home after midnight—he hadn't said he was going to be late, so I'd waited with supper for him. It was ruined, of course, but he didn't want it. He'd eaten.'

'Alone?'

She snorted and rammed the spoon back in the sugar. 'Yeah, right. Oscar doesn't eat alone. Oscar doesn't do anything alone. No, he was with his mistress. The one he's been keeping for the past six months or so.' She felt bile rise in her throat, and grabbed another toffee, ripping the wrapper off and shoving it in her mouth angrily.

'Six months!' she muttered round the sweet. 'Damn him, he's had her there for six months, cosily installed in the block next to his office so he didn't even have to make the effort of commuting for his sex!'

She bit down on the toffee and growled furiously. 'Do you know what he said to me?' she raged, standing up again and waving her arms wildly. 'He said he wanted a real woman—one who knew how to

please a man. He said he was sick of my baggy stomach and my sagging—'

She broke off and took a deep breath. 'He said I stank of baby sick and he was fed up with falling over toys and nearly breaking his ankles and coming home to screaming kids and a woman who was constantly out of commission—as if I was a dishwasher that was on the blink, for goodness' sake! I'm his wife! Well, no, I'm not, because the toad wouldn't marry me, but you know what I mean.'

'So what happened then?' Ben asked, prompting her gently.

She caught her breath and sighed. 'I said if that was the way he felt, there was no point in putting up with him and his vile temper any longer, and I'd leave in the morning. He said why wait, so I didn't. I got the children out of bed and walked out.'

'Without your credit cards.'

'Without my credit cards,' she said wryly. 'That was a tactical error. Apart from that, it was the best thing I've done in years.'

She looked up at Ben and found him smiling. 'What? What now?' she demanded, sparks flying again.

His smile widened. 'Good girl,' he said warmly. 'Well done. It's been a long time coming, Liv, but well done.'

The tension drained out of her, and she picked up her cup and emptied it. She was starving, she realised. Starving, exhausted and safe. 'I don't suppose you've got such a thing as toast, have you?' she asked, and he chuckled.

'Why not?' he said mildly. 'It's almost breakfast time. We might as well have breakfast.'

* * *