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The Bachelor and the Babies

HEATHER MACALLISTER

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Аннотация

BACHELOR TERRITORY Daddy in training! When Harrison Rothwell is left to look after his two tiny nephews he decides to demonstrate that his rules of business management can be applied to any situation. Trouble is, the boys are messy, disorganized and won't stick to their diaper roster! In short, Harrison soon realizes that bachelors and babies don't mix! Which is where Carrie Brent comes in. His cute next-door neighbor may be totally disorganized but, when it comes to rug rats, she's a natural! Worse, Harrison can feel himself falling for Carrie's haphazard charms. And that will never do—because there's nothing remotely disorganized about falling in love! Heather MacAllister is the author of more than ten Harlequin Romance® novels written as Heather Allison. There are two sides to every story... and now it's his turn!

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“Nathan, want juice?” Harrison asked warily

“No!”

“Banana?”

“No!”

“Sesame Street?” he offered recklessly.

“No!”

“A fully funded college account?”

“No! ”

“Bad decision, kid. I’m a man of my word.”

Harrison stepped over a diaper box, detoured around his rearranged furniture and surveyed the remnants of his living room. So this was the way parents lived. If he could bring order into the chaotic lives of parents, he was a sure candidate for a Nobel prize. Possibly two. They’d make a movie of his life. They’d erect statues in his honor. Children would be named after him. Political parties would court him. There would be Harrison Rothwell action figures.

Yes, life would be sweet—once he had it organized.

Dear Reader,

I had fun remembering my two sons as babies when I wrote

The Bachelor and the Babies. I have firsthand experience with most of Harrison's adventures, from the teething to the ominous cleanup announcements over the grocery store intercoms. And they say plastic mustard containers are unbreakable—ha! But stores love me now. The boys are teenagers and they still eat every two hours!

I hope you enjoy reading about mothering—from a man's point of view!

Best wishes,

Heather MacAllister

The Bachelor and the Babies

Heather MacAllister



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To Sandy Weider,
in gratitude for coming to so many autographings
over the years, and for carpooling to the meetings.
Now whose turn is it to drive?

CHAPTER ONE

“BUT I have to see Harrison Rothwell. Now’s a good time for me. It’ll just take a minute.”

The insistent female voice vibrating through the closed door to Harrison’s office sounded vaguely familiar, but not familiar enough for him to break off his telephone call.

Renewing his concentration, he closed his eyes and swiveled his office chair so that he faced the windows overlooking the flat

vista of Houston, Texas.

“Now, Harrison, if we do take your Rules of Time Management back for a fifth printing, we’d like to tell marketing that a sequel is in the works.”

“Felicia, I said all I have to say about corporate time management in that book. I already tweaked the chapter on fax machines and cellular phones and until we get widespread video phones, there’s nothing further to add.”

“Then how about something different?”

“What have you got in mind?”

His publisher drew a breath and Harrison visualized her gearing up for her sales pitch.

“Three words—domestic time management.” Felicia waited, obviously expecting a reaction.

Yes. Harrison had already toyed with the idea of expanding into the domestic market. Even now, clones of his time-management programs were cutting into his company’s seminar and training business, however, it strengthened his negotiating position if Felicia thought he was reluctant. He waited, letting the silence work for him.

“I can’t make an appointment for later. I’ll be sleeping later,” sounded clearly outside his door. “Our schedules aren’t meshing, here.”

So much for working the silence. Harrison winced and covered the telephone mouthpiece hoping that Felicia hadn’t heard.

What was that woman still doing out in his reception area? He was surprised that his assistant hadn't been able to evict the unwanted visitor. Sharon was usually very efficient in guarding Harrison's time from salespeople and the like. This person didn't have an appointment, Harrison knew, because he'd allocated ten more minutes to his current phone call, fifteen minutes to return more calls, then ten minutes to review notes before the Friday staff meeting. No appointments until after lunch.

"Don't you have anything to say?" Felicia prompted.

"Domestic time management?" he repeated, trying to ignore the arguing going on outside his door.

"Yes," she insisted. "You've helped corporations desperate to increase efficiency with fewer personnel. How about some help on the home front? People are horribly overscheduled. Stress is king. Everyone is doing more and enjoying it less. They need downtime, Harrison. And you're the man to help them get it."

"It's a very tempting idea," he said slowly, as if he needed more persuasion. "Let me draw up some notes and—"

He was interrupted by a. pounding on his door. "Harrison, tell your secretary to let me in!"

"Harrison? Is everything all right?" his publisher asked.

"Ah, let me get back to you, Felicia."

Disconnecting the call, he strode toward the door and flung it open. A woman with dark curls backed against him. He inhaled an unfamiliar perfume mingled with traces of cigarette smoke before setting her on her feet.

She whirled around, her hair flying. "Hey, Harry, how's it going?"

Harrison found himself staring into the defiant brown eyes of Carrie Brent, the nemesis of the White Oak Bayou Condominium Residents' Board—the same board of which he was a member. "What's this all about, Carrie?"

"I want to talk with you."

"Haven't you heard of the telephone?"

"I want to be able to see your face. It's harder to brush off someone when you see them in person. I learned that when I was a psychology major."

Harrison didn't want to hear about it. Psychology was the major Carrie quoted most often in her run-ins with the condo board. "Then you'll have to make an appointment."

"Well, I would if you had any openings when I'm awake."

He blinked. "You're awake now."

"That's what I was telling her." Carrie hooked a thumb over her shoulder, and shot a disgusted look at Harrison's secretary.

"Sharon knows that I have a very tight morning schedule, and you aren't on it, either awake, or asleep."

"This will only take a minute, unless you plan on being pigheaded and unreasonable."

Absolute silence was punctuated by the distant warbling of office telephones. Everyone within earshot of Carrie's voice was ignoring work to stare.

How often had Harrison preached keeping business and

personal life separate? And standing in front of him, looking like an escapee from a gypsy camp, was Personal with a capital P.

"If you wish to discuss time-management techniques, then please make an appointment," he enunciated clearly for his employees' benefit. "If you wish to discuss anything not related to my business, then please contact me during evening hours."

"I work during evening hours!"

"And I work during daytime hours. You are interfering with that work." He turned to walk back into his office.

"Then I'll sit right here and wait until you take a break." She sank onto the floor outside his office, her skirt billowing around her.

She was making a scene. Carrie Brent was deliberately making a scene at his place of work.

She was wasting time. His time. His employees' time.

It was obvious that Carrie Brent was not familiar with effective time-management techniques. Harrison pointed to his office.

Carrie got to her feet and sauntered inside.

"Show's over," Harrison announced to the room at large, then firmly shut his office door. "You may have the six minutes left of the phone call you interrupted, which is five more minutes than you deserve," he snapped at her.

"How generous of you." Bracelets clanked as she dug into a shapeless sack that was apparently serving as her purse. She pulled out a crumpled, folded piece of paper. "That's where it went. Receipt," she told Harrison and continued babbling while

she searched. “I bought these great hip-hugger jeans, but I was in a hurry and didn’t try them on. They didn’t fit. I couldn’t believe it. I’ve been a size eight hoping to be a size six for as long as I can remember and the jeans don’t fit! Then I realized they were from the petite department.” She looked up at him. “I was so relieved when I saw the tag, you know?”

No, Harrison didn’t know and he didn’t want to know. He had to restrain himself from yanking the bag from her and dumping the contents on the floor. “You should have made an appointment. I don’t allocate time to deal with disorganized malcontents.”

“But you have time to cite me for—” she whipped out a folded piece of paper “—displaying hanging plants in unapproved containers?”

“Is that what this is about?” He didn’t want to hear it. Carrie lived a lifestyle continually at odds with the conservative community at the condos. He didn’t know why she insisted on living there, but she did, and the result was continual friction. “Make an appointment for an appeal to the board. I do not conduct personal business—”

“You and your appointments!” She waved the citation in front of his face. “By the time the board agrees to listen to me, the plants will be dead from lack of sunlight!”

“Not if you transfer them to approved containers.”

“And approved would be white or green plastic?” She grimaced. “You people would prefer plastic to original pieces of

Mexican pottery? We're talking art here!"

"White and green preserve the integrity of the outside appearance."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Plastic integrity. I knew it."

"Carrie..." Shaking his head, Harrison shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the credenza. "Those are the rules."

"The people who wrote those rules have no soul. I'm trying to...to..." She threw up her hands in frustration.

But Harrison knew exactly what she was trying to say. Carrie had lived in the complex longer than he had. He remembered the first time he'd met her. She'd arrived at his door with a pan of hot, vegetarian lasagna and a bottle of cheap chianti.

Since she lived on a downstairs corner, she'd watched the movers unload the few possessions that had survived the flooding at his former home. When she saw the secondhand couch and chairs, and the water-stained table legs, she'd apparently decided a soul mate was at last moving to White Oak Bayou Condominiums.

Harrison had enjoyed the evening too much to correct her impression.

But she figured out her mistake when Harrison had tried to repay her hospitality by inviting her to dinner after the decorator had finished replacing the furniture and changing the curtains in his new home.

Carrie had stepped inside the door, gazed around the room, then wordlessly stared at him with an expression he interpreted as betrayal. She'd handed him another straw-wrapped bottle, then left.

He'd never opened the wine, but he still had it. He didn't know why. Maybe as emergency fuel if his car ever ran out of gas.

"I didn't think my pots would bother anybody. Nobody can see them from the street."

"They are not approved containers."

"Pottery is better for the plants, anyway. Didn't anyone notice how healthy mine look and how anemic everyone else's look? Wait!" She smacked her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Plastic flowers! Of course. Has the board thought of that?"

"Carrie, this isn't the proper venue for your complaints." How could she think that coming here today and wasting his time would win his sympathies? Again, Harrison wondered why Carrie Brent wanted to live in a place where she so obviously didn't fit in. He made a show of consulting his watch. "Since I can't act without the rest of the board—"

"Can't, or won't?"

"Both."

They locked gazes. "In other words, I'll have to miss work if I want to challenge this citation," she said.

"If you're working at seven o'clock on the third Thursday of the month, then yes."

"And if I don't challenge it, then it goes into my file with all the

other citations, until they reach critical mass, also determined by the board, and I'm evicted. Do I understand the plan correctly?"

Before answering, Harrison drew two deep breaths. It was a technique he found useful to keep from engaging in useless arguments. "I know of no plan to evict you."

Carrie looked at him as though he was as dumb as dirt. "You know..." She held up the citation. "For anybody else, one of you would have knocked on my door, or left me a note telling me to take down the pots. But no. Because it was me, the board issues a formal citation." She jammed it back into her purse.

She was right, he had to admit. The board seemed to enjoy catching her in minor violations, such as when a car with her visitor tags parked in the covered area instead of the visitors' lot.

Or the fact that she'd set her recycling bin out too early because she didn't get home until after the morning pickup. When she'd petitioned the board, they'd refused to consider the fact that Carrie worked nights. Decent women shouldn't work nights unless they were nurses, one woman had said.

Harrison hadn't been on the board then, but they'd told him all about Carrie Brent when he'd been elected earlier this year.

Without Carrie, they probably wouldn't have anything to do, or anyone to discuss.

"Why do you keep fighting? Why not just move?" he asked.

"It's my home," she said simply. "I feel safe there and it's a great location. I used to live in a unit like yours with a roommate, but she got married. When the new owners converted

the apartments to condominiums, I couldn't afford to buy the unit—I could barely make the rent as it was. Then they ended up with leftover space under the stairs and they offered to turn it into a one-room studio if I'd sign a five-year lease. So I did.”

Harrison knew all about her lease. Why the condo board didn't just wait her out, he didn't know.

He held out his hand. “Give me the citation. I'll tell the board I spoke with you, and that you will keep your plants inside.”

“But how will they get any sunlight? Can't I just set them outside the door—”

“Carrie.” He leveled a look at her and opened his office door. She grinned. “Okay. Can't blame a girl for trying.”

Actually he could, but he wasn't going to.

She sauntered—apparently her top walking speed—past him. “See ya around, Harry.”

Harrison watched her stroll down the hall. “Don't call me Harry,” he murmured under his breath.

Did she always have to make a huge issue out of everything? All the residents who lived at the White Oak Bayou Condominiums wanted was to maintain the property value of their investment. Was that such a bad thing?

“Was that business, or pleasure?”

Harrison glanced to his left, where his brother stood in the doorway to the office next to his. “That was trouble.” He took the copies of the agenda for this morning's meeting out of Sharon's in-basket.

“Pity.” Jon Rothwell watched Carrie’s progress.

She’d passed through the glass outer doors, and was waiting for the elevator. When it arrived, she stepped inside and waggled her fingers at Harrison as the door closed.

“Can you make her business or pleasure?” Jon asked.

“That was Carrie Brent,” Harrison said, irritated that she’d caught him watching her. He handed his brother a copy of the agenda. “It gives me pleasure not to have to deal with her.”

“Oh, come on, you like her. You know you do.”

“She’s an irritating, disorganized flake.”

Jon chuckled as he scanned the agenda. “Did it ever occur to you that she’s causing all the trouble in order to have an excuse to see you?”

“I—” Harrison broke off. No, the thought hadn’t occurred to him. He didn’t want the thought occurring to him. He was sure the thought hadn’t occurred to her, either. Pretty sure. “No.”

Jon glanced at him assessingly and mercifully dropped the subject. “Under the vice president’s report, do you want me to mention Felicia’s idea for expanding into the domestic arena?”

“Felicia’s already talked to you about it?”

“I’m marketing—of course she’s talked to me about it, and I think it’s right in line with our goals for the company.”

Harrison didn’t like being bypassed. “Domestic time management isn’t that different from corporate time management. We have to consider the possibility that this venture will flop. People might feel ripped off.”

Jon grinned at him. “You’re a single man living in a condo with total outside maintenance, a maid and plenty of money. You have a five-minute commute. Try a wife, two kids, a dog and a huge mortgage on a house in the suburbs with an hour commute, and then tell me domestic and corporate are similar.”

“It’s a matter of—”

Jon held up his hand and disappeared into his office. “We’ve had this discussion before. In fact, I should write the book, not you.”

“Be my guest,” Harrison called after him.

“I would if I had any solutions.”

Domestic time management. How hard could it be? But Harrison had thought corporate efficiency was self-evident, too. The success of his company, Rothwell Time Management Consultants, proved otherwise.

People needed help managing their lives, and Harrison was delighted to provide that help. He felt a deep satisfaction when he received letters of gratitude from clients—and he always received letters of gratitude. Effusive letters.

He treated his talent as a calling and felt he was fortunate to earn a living at what he felt compelled to do.

His brother, Jon, didn’t share that talent, but was an expert at selling others on it. Together he and Harrison were a great team. A profitable team.

Harrison didn’t want them to become a stagnant team.

With that realization, Harrison knew he’d made his decision.

Typically, he didn't waste time dwelling on it. Felicia had stewed enough waiting for him to call her back, anyway.

Harrison smiled to himself. Carrie Brent might have done him a favor by interrupting the call. Imagine that.

He returned to his desk, dumped the agendas beside the telephone and hit the redial. "Felicia," he said when he was connected with his publisher. "I've thought it over and I've already got ideas for adapting Rothwell's Rules for the home."

Though he didn't return any more phone calls before the staff meeting, Harrison felt the morning was well spent. Felicia made an offer on the project and Harrison would let her haggle details with the company lawyer while he ran the staff meeting.

The only blot on the day was the disconcerting lingering of Carrie Brent's perfume.

He stepped out of his office, leaving the door open in hopes that the room would air out, and stopped when he saw his assistant. "Sharon? You're not in the conference room?"

She sent him a tight-lipped look. "I'm sorry, Harrison. I'm waiting for a call from my daughter's teacher. It's a midterm telephone conference. I requested a telephone conference so I wouldn't have to take time off work."

"What do you call this?" Everyone who worked at Rothwell knew his position on conducting personal business during work hours.

"It's only for ten minutes. I arrived ten minutes early this morning. The teacher is obviously running late."

“But why should you and I have to be inconvenienced because she can’t keep to her own schedule?”

“Some people are better at schedules than others.”

It was an oblique reference to Carrie Brent. With her visit fresh on everyone’s mind, he couldn’t very well chastise Sharon, could he?

“Cecilia is covering the meeting for me until I can get there,” she added.

“Join us when you can.” With a curt nod, Harrison proceeded to the conference room, mentally plotting a chapter dealing with domestic responsibilities and how to plan for the unexpected.

Harrison didn’t think his policies were unreasonable. In fact, they were the cornerstone of a successful business.

To him, it made sense that work should be completed during work hours and not at home. Home life should not interfere with, nor be discussed, at work. He felt just as strongly about the reverse—he didn’t want company business interfering with his employees’ family life.

Each employee received a copy of the company philosophy, which essentially maintained that if one worked efficiently and kept interoffice socializing down to a minimum, then all work should be able to be completed during a regular forty-hour week. If, due to unavoidable personal business, work was pending at the end of the week, then the employee could come in on the occasional Saturday. Never on Sunday. However, if the employee found that he or she was working most Saturdays, then that

employee was encouraged to reevaluate his or her personal time-management skills.

Personal time-management skills. He'd assumed his employees would know how to translate the practices of the company to their personal lives. That's what he did. Obviously the moment had come for a book on personal time management. He knew others were out in the market, but they weren't based on Rothwell's Rules.

With a sense of mission lightening his mood, Harrison approached the conference room. People everywhere would be happier and more productive once he—

Jon stopped him in the doorway. "Hey, Hare, you got a minute?"

"No." Only Harrison's brother was allowed to call him "Hare," and not because Harrison liked it, either. If he let Jon get the occasional "Hare" out of his system, then he'd refer to Harrison by his full name in public.

"Let me put this another way, take the minute now and save time later, or I'll bring this up in my report and throw off the whole meeting schedule."

Harrison laughed. "Since you put it that way, what is it?"

Jon pointed to the seminars chart. "You've got me lined up to start the Chicago Manufacturing training next week. I can't go. You need to send somebody else."

Harrison's good mood evaporated. "What do you mean, you can't go?"

“Remember Stephanie’s retreat?”

“Vaguely.”

“She’s leaving this afternoon, hooking up with some college buddies, then they’re all going to tramp around the wilderness and prove they’re Amazon women, or something.”

Harrison tried to envision his sister-in-law going native and couldn’t. This was a woman who thought “roughing it” was drinking beer out of the can instead of a glass. “I don’t see the connection.”

Jon gave him an impatient look. “The kids? Your nephews? I’ve got to be home to take care of them.”

“That’s what baby-sitters are for!”

“I’m not leaving them with a stranger for a week!”

“And when were you planning to tell me you were taking the entire week off?” The tone in Harrison’s voice hushed the murmuring of the department heads gathered for the meeting.

“I’m not taking the whole week off. I’d planned to work at home. Make phone calls, reports, that sort of stuff. The kids have a play group thing that meets a couple of mornings and I’ll stop by here then. And when I pick up and drop paperwork off, I’ll bring them with me, or hire a sitter. I didn’t see that it would a problem.”

This wasn’t a problem. This was a disaster. Harrison lowered his voice. “Chicago is a huge client. The contract was contingent upon you conducting the initial training.”

Jon shook his head. “Postpone it, then.”

“Impossible. They’ve had to rearrange the schedules of their top management to clear that week.”

“Okay, offer them a discount and send somebody else.”

“This is Chicago Manufacturing, Jon. They don’t want discounts, they want you.”

Jon glanced to his left and Harrison realized that everyone in the room was straining to hear each and every syllable they uttered. Here were the Rothwells, themselves, involved in a schedule conflict. How they handled it would demonstrate Harrison’s methods better than any pamphlet printed with the corporate philosophy.

Trying to communicate all this, he stared into his brother’s eyes. “What about Stephanie’s parents? Can’t they watch the boys?”

“They live in California.”

“What about our parents?” Harrison didn’t like the tinge of desperation in his voice.

Jon’s face turned hard. “They live in Florida. I can take care of my own sons.”

Harrison felt Jon was being deliberately difficult. “I know that. I only thought...well, whatever happened to doting grandparents? Wouldn’t they like to visit their only grandchildren for a week?”

“I’m not asking them. Steph wants me to take care of the kids, and I’m going to. She’s been at home with them ever since Nathan was born and she needs the break.”

“A break from what?” Harrison had been surprised when

Stephanie hadn't returned to work. He was even more surprised that his brother hadn't objected. "They're two little kids. What does she do all day?"

Jon raised his eyebrows.

Murmurings from the female members of their audience told Harrison he'd erred.

He held up his hands, palms outward. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"You shouldn't have thought that," Sharon commented, slipping past them and finding her seat in the room. "But we all know you do."

Women were neither efficient, nor reasonable when it came to children. Harrison vowed to devote as many chapters to children as necessary in the Rothwell Domestic Primer. Ah, a title. That was a good sign.

Harrison carefully chose his next words. "What I think, Sharon, is that parents are reluctant to encourage efficiency in their children, and in the people who deal with children."

"Harrison, raising children is not like running a corporation."

Murmurings of agreement signaled mutiny in the ranks.

He forced a smile and casual body language. "Ah, but you see, running a household, even a household that includes children, is exactly like running a corporation."

"Uh, Hare?"

But anything his brother had been about to say was drowned out by the eruption of disagreement from the department heads

—male and female.

Ah, skeptics. Harrison liked converting skeptics to his way of thinking almost as much as reading their subsequent letters of gratitude.

With a confident smile, he took his place at the conference table.

People quieted—except Sharon.

“You know how to run a corporation, but you don’t know anything about living with children.” Sharon had experienced more than her share of domestic crises lately. That must account for her inclination to challenge him today.

“You are correct,” he said. The room hushed. “You all are also aware that Jon and I have been working out a schedule conflict. What we have here, are two problems with one solution. Backup plans are a key to avoiding delays. Jon, what’s your childcare backup plan, say, for a family emergency?”

“I’m Stephanie’s backup, then either of our folks.”

“And after that?”

“Well...you, I guess.”

Harrison smiled. “Exactly. Therefore, you’ll go on to Chicago, and I’ll take care of Nathan and Matthew.”

“You?” Jon hooted.

“Yes. You’ll keep the Chicago account, and I’ll gain practical experience with children.” Harrison addressed Sharon. “Do you think a week will be enough time for me to understand living with children?”

Sharon smiled. "A week will be more than enough time."

"Problem solved, then." Harrison felt a sense of satisfaction.

"Shall we begin the meeting?"

CHAPTER TWO

"THIS is not a good idea," Jon said, and dumped the third load of baby paraphernalia just inside Harrison's doorway.

"Stephanie thought so." Harrison's sleekly contemporary entryway was no longer sleek. Neither was the kitchen, the spare bedroom nor the living room where he was now unfolding a playpen.

"How can you tell? She was laughing so hard when we called her, I know she didn't take us seriously."

"She does now." Privately Harrison attributed his sister-in-law's laughter to wine shared with good friends and the desire to appear indispensable. And since he was about to prove her wrong, he'd allowed her a few male-bashing cracks. He'd remind her of them when she apologized later.

He looked at his nephew—the mobile one. "We're going to have a great time this week, aren't we, Nathan?"

"Haht?" Nathan pointed to the window.

"Yeah, a hot time." Or Nathan could have said "What." Harrison wasn't yet fluent in toddler-speak.

Nathan toddled past him.

"I know Stephanie," Jon fussed.

Harrison noticed that Jon had only started fussing after he got married. In the interest of brotherly harmony, he declined to

mention it.

“The only reason she agreed to you taking care of the boys is because she doesn’t think you’ll last more than a day. He—heck, she didn’t think I’d last more than a day.”

“Women like to think they’re the only ones who can care for children.” The playpen was bigger than it looked. Harrison shoved a chair out of the way.

“There may be something to that,” Jon muttered. “Harrison, where is Nathan?”

“Right behind me.”

“Hare! Pay attention. No, Nathan! Hot!” Jon leaped over the double stroller and snatched the twenty-month-old Nathan from under the lamp table. “Nathan likes electrical outlets,” he explained.

“That’s a dangerous hobby for a kid his age.”

“You need outlet plugs.”

“So, I’ll get outlet plugs.” Wherever those might be.

Jon still looked worried. “You know, you ought to come live at our house for the week. That’s where all the boys’ stuff is.”

“And my stuff is here. I’ll have more credibility with clients if I incorporate the boys into my own environment. I’ll have a better understanding of what adjustments people who have children must make.” Harrison was prepared to continue lecturing, but Jon was wrestling a squirmy Nathan into his high chair. and obviously not listening to him.

“I never realized how much glass you have here,” Jon called

from the kitchen as he poured a few Cheerios onto the high chair tray. Nathan squealed and pounded the tray, bouncing cereal onto the floor where it rolled who knew where. "I'm going to buy furniture bumpers after I finish unloading."

Harrison didn't ask. what furniture bumpers were, but imagined they weren't going to enhance the appearance of his once-pristine home. At Jon's insistence, he'd already removed the set of crystal coasters, fireplace tools, his collection of kaleidoscopes and anything sharp, breakable, or flammable. That pretty much cleared all surfaces three feet high or less.

Jon pulled open the cabinet beneath the kitchen sink and removed Harrison's cleaning supplies. "Store these up high, or get child safety latches for the cabinets." Looking around, he ultimately set the assortment of cleaners on top of the refrigerator.

"I'm running out of high places." Harrison put the pad in the bottom of the playpen and transferred a sleeping Matthew from his infant seat to the playpen. The baby was a sound sleeper. Good. They were going to get along just fine.

Jon walked over and stared down at his son. "He's a cute little guy, isn't he?"

He looked like a typical baby to Harrison. "Yes. Sure is."

Jon checked his watch. "This is a long morning nap for him, but it'll be easier to let him sleep until we've got everything settled. He was up in the night. If he gets cranky, don't worry. He's teething."

Harrison waved around the room. "Is this everything?"

His brother laughed. "Of course not. I haven't brought up their toys, yet. And there is a case of formula, diapers, the baby bath and a potty seat."

"Potty seat?"

"We've just started toilet-training, so don't expect miracles."

"I expect nothing in that area." Harrison didn't want to go anywhere near that area.

"At least Nathan will see it in your bathroom and maybe get the idea." Jon shoved his hands into the pockets of his khaki pants. "I'll bring up the humidifier, too, but I hope you won't need it."

As he wondered where he was going to store everything, Harrison vowed to devote a minimum of one chapter in the Rothwell Domestic Primer to simplifying the amount of baby equipment insecure new parents had been convinced they needed. "Who needs a humidifier in Houston?" he wondered aloud.

"Parents with sick kids." After delivering that chilling piece of information, Jon left to bring up another load of the unending supplies needed to raise two small boys.

The instant the door closed, Nathan burst into tears. "Daaa-deee!"

"Hey, sport. Remember me?" Harrison crunched on cereal as he entered the kitchen. "It's Uncle Harrison." That sounded awkward, but Harrison was not going to be called Hare. Harry

was not to be considered.

Apparently Nathan did not remember Uncle anybody and continued to cry.

Harrison poured him more cereal.

Still crying, but not as hard, Nathan ate a handful, then said, "Joose!"

"Juice!" Harrison repeated, his voice booming with false heartiness. "The man wants juice." Trying to avoid stepping on cereal, he opened the refrigerator. "We've got orange juice, tomato juice and beer juice." He looked over the door at his nephew. "That's a joke."

"Joose!" Nathan smacked the plastic tray for emphasis.

Since orange juice seemed to go with the cereal theme, that's what Harrison poured. He reached for a glass, then realized what he was doing and chose a plastic cup he'd bought at a Rockets basketball game. Who said he didn't have parenting instincts?

He poured a small amount of juice into the thirtyounce souvenir cup and offered it to Nathan.

"Joose?"

"Juice," Harrison reassured him.

Nathan gleefully grabbed the cup with both hands.

"Need some help?"

"Nathan do it." He swiveled his body away and tilted the cup.

All the liquid rushed from the bottom of the tall cup to his face, startling him. He dropped the cup, blinked in surprise, snorted juice out his nose, then howled.

Harrison stared. With breathtaking speed, his kitchen, painted a fashionable white, with white tile and cabinets, had been splattered far and wide with dribblets of orange juice and pulp.

He picked his way to the paper towel dispenser and attempted to mop up Nathan.

That was the scene which greeted Jon's return. "Nathan," he called from the door, propping it open with a case of formula.

"Da-da!"

"Everything's under control," Harrison told him as Jon tossed in plastic bundles and boxes of diapers, which bounced and rolled over the couch. "We only spilled juice."

Jon walked over and stared at the mess. Bending down, he picked up the cup. "Is this what you gave him?"

Nodding, Harrison threw more paper towels on the floor. Nathan had stopped crying, his interest caught by Cheerios floating in the orange juice on his tray.

Unfortunately Nathan's crying had awakened the baby, Matthew.

How could such a tiny person make such a loud sound?

"Nathan has a cup with a lid on it in the diaper bag. Use that," Jon suggested as he went to tend to Matthew.

"Now he tells me," Harrison muttered.

"Oh, and you'll have to strain the orange juice. The pulp clogs the spout."

The only strainer Harrison possessed was a cocktail strainer. It was barely adequate.

“You want a diapering lesson?” Jon asked.

“I can figure it out.” Harrison spoke from the kitchen floor just as something dropped in his hair. His fingers encountered a squishy lump. Cereal. Or what used to be cereal before it absorbed orange juice. He looked up and caught Nathan shoving more over the side of his tray.

“I’ve learned a couple of diapering tricks that might make your life easier,” Jon said.

“And other than keeping your children in a cage and hosing them down twice a day, that would be...?”

Jon laughed. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it. But seriously, don’t leave Matthew alone on a table or he’ll roll off, and keep him covered at all times.”

“Why? He’s not going to get cold.”

“He squirts. And this kid has got an impressive range.”

Harrison stood and peered over the kitchen bar. His brother had unfolded a plastic pad and was changing Matthew’s diaper on the floor in front of the fireplace.

Harrison had fond memories of other activities that had taken place on the floor in front of the fireplace.

He would never feel the same about that area of his home.

A knock sounded at the door. “Excuse me?” A grouchy Carrie Brent stood framed in the open doorway. “How’s a person to get any sleep around here?”

Carrie, in her typically casual way, looked as if she’d rolled out of bed and climbed the stairs to Harrison’s floor. She wore

a giant gray sweatshirt with arms so long her hands disappeared into the sleeves. The bottom edge stopped a few inches above her knees and her feet were bare.

The contrast between the rumpled Carrie who stood in his doorway and the Carrie who'd come to his office yesterday was...interesting. Very interesting. So interesting that orange juice dripped from the paper towels Harrison held onto his running shoe before he realized he was staring.

"Most people aren't trying to sleep at noon on Saturday." He tossed the soggy paper towels into the sink and ripped more off the roll.

Carrie yawned, stretched her arms, and the hem of her sweatshirt rose. "They are if they work nights."

"So what do you do?" Jon asked over his shoulder after glancing at the silent Harrison.

"I review music groups at local clubs. And if a place is new, I'll mention the decor, tone and the sort of customers they're trying to attract. Anyway—" she yawned again "—after I get home, I've got to write the reviews. I usually go to bed about ten or eleven o'clock in the morning." Raking her hair back from her face, she padded into the room. "So what's all this?"

For some reason, the sound of a female voice had quieted the babies.

For some reason, the way Carrie casually manhandled her curls had quieted Harrison.

It was left to Jon to introduce himself. "I'm Jon, Harrison's

brother. This is—”

“A baby!” Carrie had passed the couch and could see the front of the fireplace. Cooing, she knelt on the floor. “May I hold her?”

“Him,” Harrison said, unwillingly reminded of the long-ago evening when he and Carrie had sat in that very spot and had eaten her vegetarian lasagna in front of the fireplace. “My nephews are visiting me for a while.”

Jon handed a freshly diapered Matthew to Carrie.

“Aren’t you just adorable? What’s your name?”

“Matthew,” Jon answered.

“Matthew, you’re just a doll. A great big doll.” Carrie’s voice had gone all high and gooey as she repeated more nonsense.

But to Harrison’s surprise, Matthew had stopped fussing and was smiling.

Something about seeing Carrie with the baby made Harrison want to smile, too. Matthew grabbed a handful of her dark hair. Carrie promptly retaliated by raising his shirt and tickling his tummy. The baby squealed.

Harrison grinned at Jon, only to find his brother regarding him thoughtfully.

Harrison guessed those thoughts concerned Carrie and whether or not there was something going on between them. “No,” he mouthed.

“Why not?” Jon mouthed back over Carrie’s bent head.

Because. Harrison knew there was a good reason—probably several good reasons. He simply couldn’t think of them right now,

not with Carrie looking all casually soft and approachable.

“Down!” Nathan had finished destroying his food.

Harrison, grateful for the interruption, removed the tray. Before he could set it on the counter, Nathan arched his back, slid down the seat and landed on the floor on his well padded rump. “Joose,” he said and patted the floor. Then he picked up a stray Cheerio and stuck it into his mouth.

Harrison grimaced.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot to warn you about the high chair trick.” Jon had arrived in the kitchen. “I also forgot the diaper pail. I’ll snag one when I buy the plugs and the door latches.”

Nathan got to his feet and ran toward his father. Jon picked him up. “You’re wet.” He pointed to the dark area on the front of Nathan’s overalls.

“Joose,” Nathan said.

“You can get going,” Harrison offered. “I’ll clean Nathan up.”

Jon raised his eyebrows and grinned, setting Nathan on the floor. “Good luck.”

Harrison had a feeling he wasn’t referring to the kids.

Within moments, Harrison was alone with a half-dressed Carrie.

“Da-dee!” Nathan shrieked.

Okay, not alone.

Matthew had tired of pulling Carrie’s hair and was puckering his face.

“Hey, Harry, I think he’s hungry. Can I feed him his bottle?”

Bottle. Right. “Uh...”

Nathan escaped the kitchen and flung his orange-juice soaked body out the door.

Harrison ran after him and scooped him up before he reached the stairs. Then he kicked the case of formula inside his foyer and let the door slam shut.

“Da-dee!” Nathan made a full-body imprint of orange juice on the front door.

“And what have we here, Matt?” Carrie was bent over a diaper bag.

Harrison was so thrown off balance by the knowledge that he’d lost control of his house and the people currently within it, that he didn’t even stop to enjoy the view.

Carrie stood and held up a bottle in a thermal container. “Should I heat it up first?” she asked.

“Uh, whatever,” Harrison said as he wrestled a crying Nathan into the spare bedroom, tried to open his suitcase with one hand and keep Nathan from spreading orange juice with the other.

Eventually he succeeded in undressing Nathan, only to realize that all the diapers were in the living room.

He returned to the living room to find that all was quiet. Carrie stood in front of the windows, swaying slightly and feeding Matthew a bottle. She smiled at Harrison, all traces of her earlier grumpiness gone.

“You’ve done that before,” Harrison commented.

“Actually, no.” She looked down at Matthew. “But there

doesn't seem to be much to it."

Harrison hoped there wasn't.

"Da-dee!" Nathan, wearing only socks, and damp socks at that, streaked by.

"Daddy's going to be back in a little while, sport," Harrison tried to reassure him. "Hang in there."

"But what are you going to tell him when Daddy doesn't come back? From the looks of this place, I'm guessing that they're here for more than the afternoon."

"I don't know," he admitted.

"Whatever you do, don't lie to him."

Nodding, Harrison picked up a box of diapers.

"Hey, Harry, those are baby-size. The toddler ones are in the purple bag."

Harrison squeezed the diapers in annoyance before exchanging them. "Please do not refer to me as Harry," he said, adding, "Harry and Carrie sounds like a vaudeville team."

She flashed him a grin. "I like it."

"I don't."

"Well, what do you want to be called?"

"Harrison."

"No kidding? I thought that was a name your mother saddled you with."

Tamping down his annoyance, Harrison corralled his nephew and the correctly sized diapers. "It was her maiden name."

Carrie raised her eyebrows. "Gotcha."

There was nothing to “get.” Harrison liked his name just as it was.

Conscious that Carrie was a witness to his first attempts at undressing and dressing a tiny, uncooperative human—all prior humans had been more than cooperative—it took longer than he would have liked to get Nathan taped into his diaper and snapped into clean overalls. After two futile attempts to put his shoes back on—when had Nathan’s feet turned to jelly?—Harrison decided to let the little boy run around barefoot.

And run was the operative word. Until Jon returned with the outlet plugs, Nathan couldn’t be trusted to keep from electrocuting himself, so Harrison wasn’t making much progress in unpacking the suitcase.

To Nathan, it was all very amusing to run squealing down the hall and watch Uncle Harrison lumber after him. Only Uncle Harrison was not amused.

Carrie was. He could hear her laughing. Okay, fine. Let her deal with the electricity addict. Harrison was going to unpack.

“Nathan, want to play a game?” he heard from the living room.

“Game,” repeated Nathan.

“It’s only for big boys.”

“Game!”

“Can you take this bundle to your uncle Harry?”

Not Harry. Sure enough, Harrison heard Nathan’s voice, “Hawee?”

“Yeah, you know, the tall grumpy dude in the bedroom?”

Harrison heard plastic crackling and Nathan arrived, carrying diapers. “Hawee?”

Knowing he was forever condemning himself to being called “Harry,” or a version of it, Harrison mustered a big, “Thank you, Nathan! You’re a big help. Let’s build a diaper house under the window.”

Though Harrison sounded as if he were the host of a children’s television show, the little boy carefully set the diapers in the spot where Harrison pointed, then turned and grinned at his uncle.

That grin made up for a lot of the hassle, Harrison admitted to himself. He knelt down. “You little rascal, you’ve got the Rothwell smile, don’t you?”

Nathan giggled.

“I know all about the Rothwell smile, so don’t you try using it on me.”

Nathan grinned wider.

“Rothwell smile?”

Harrison and Nathan looked up.

Carrie leaned in the doorway. “Oh, I see,” she said slowly. “Yes, you’ve got the same smile. In fact, you look a lot alike. Both of you with those big brown eyes and your hair is almost the same color of brown, with the same little flecks...” She stepped forward and squinted. “Oh, that’s cereal.”

In spite of himself, Harrison laughed.

Carrie had a wistful expression on her face. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you smile, Harry.”

Harrison stood and Nathan ran down the hall. "I suppose it's pointless to ask you to call me Harrison?"

She stared at him for several long moments, then straightened. "I'll call you Harrison."

"Thank you."

"Hawee!" Continuing the game, Nathan was bringing another box of diapers to the room.

Harrison and Carrie exchanged looks. "Good job, Nathan," he said.

- Carrie wagged her fingers. "Gotta go. Matt's in the playpen, but he's not going to be happy by himself for long."

Harrison walked her to the door. "Thanks," he said, knowing the word was inadequate.

"No problem. See you around."

They both nodded solemnly, knowing that when they next saw each other, it was likely to be on opposite sides of a hearing at the next White Oak Bayou Condominium board meeting.

Harrison thought the afternoon and evening went well, especially after he discovered which channels broadcast "Sesame Street." "Sesame Street" allowed him to install the safety latches without Nathan underfoot. Jon had wisely insisted in putting in the outlet plugs before he left.

Harrison bathed both boys, diapered them, gave Matthew his nighttime bottle, read the book Good-night Moon and they were now asleep. Harrison wanted to join them, but decided to use the time to reclaim his living room and mop the kitchen floor.

He was surprisingly tired after his efforts, but all in all had no doubt that he could cope with two young children. Cope? He was doing better than coping. He was a natural. If he wasn't doing things in exactly the way his sister-in-law insisted, well tough. The boys were fine. In fact, he had several ideas to include in his domestic primer.

One of the sidelines of Harrison's business was designing products to go with his time management technique. Before he went to sleep, Harrison sat at his desk and sketched a piece of furniture, a sort of wall cabinet, with a place for all this baby equipment.

"The Well-Organized Baby" he called that chapter . when he was finished outlining ideas for it.

Though it was one-thirty in the morning, Harrison felt extremely accomplished and self-satisfied when he turned out the light in his bedroom.

At three o'clock, he felt groggy and put upon. Matthew was crying.

Groping his way into the living room, Harrison turned on a table lamp. "Hungry, Matthew?" He bent down and picked up the baby, then squinted at the schedule Jon had left. There was nothing about a middie-of-the-night feeding. Maybe the long afternoon nap had thrown Matthew off schedule.

But Matthew didn't want a bottle. Harrison changed him, but that didn't help, either. In fact, since he had to go into the bedroom for diapers, he woke up Nathan. Fortunately Nathan

was a trooper and immediately went back to sleep.

Matthew did not.

Though he hated to do so, Harrison called Jon at his hotel in Chicago.

“Lo?”

Harrison didn’t have to identify himself. Matthew’s wails caught Jon’s attention.

“Harrison is that you?” He sounded amazingly wide-awake. “What’s happened? Is Matthew all right?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m calling you.” Harrison explained the problem and everything he’d tried so far.

“Try this. Take your finger and press along his lower gums.”

Harrison did and Matthew clamped down on his finger so hard, he yelped out a word neither of his nephews had any business hearing.

“He’s teething,” Jon said. “Stephanie lets him chew on a plastic ring she puts in the refrigerator. It might be in the diaper bag, but I probably left it at home.”

“Gee, thanks, Jon.”

“I’m sorry, Harrison, but I warned you.”

Harrison gritted his own fully-erupted teeth and answered, “No problem.”

By four o’clock in the morning, he was ready to admit failure. He was ready to grant unlimited parental leave to all employees with infants, because these people were obviously too deprived of sleep to function in the workplace. He also realized that he

held the cure to the world's overpopulation problem right in his arms. After spending a day with a crying infant, any sane person would rethink the decision to become a parent. Those who didn't would be sentenced to a week in a two-bedroom condo with a toddler and a baby.

Harrison knew just the place.

He paced, more to keep himself awake than because it made any difference to Matthew.

Poor kid. At a time like this, a baby needed his mother. Just how far out in the wilderness was Stephanie anyway? Her group had only left Saturday morning. How far could a bunch of women hike in a day?

Over the din, Harrison heard a knock on the door. Great. Which of his neighbors had the baby awakened?

He looked down at himself. He was wearing loose knit boxer shorts, his usual sleeping attire. Clutching the baby to him, he peered out the peephole.

An eye peeped back at him.

Startled he jerked backward, which set Matthew off on another round of sobbing.

More knocking. "Harry—Harrison? It's Carrie."

"Terrific," he muttered to himself and flung open the door.

"What are you doing to the baby?" she demanded. "I'm not doing anything to him! He's teething."

"Ohhh, poor Matthew. Come to Carrie."

She held out her arms and Harrison gladly relinquished his

nephew.

Carrie headed for the couch, talking nonsense to the baby, and darned if Matthew didn't tone down his bawling to a few hiccuppy sobs.

Soon, even those subsided.

Carrie was an angel, an angel of mercy dressed in black leather, patterned stockings, boots and enough jewelry to lard a Nevada silver mine.

"He's exhausted," she whispered as the baby's eyes drooped.

Matthew wasn't the only one. "That's a trick. He does it just to give you hope, then snatches it away," Harrison grumbled. He lowered himself onto the chair by the sofa. Every muscle ached.

"You can hear him crying all over the complex," Carrie said.

"Did he wake you up?"

"Do I look like I've been asleep?"

Harrison took in the dark eye makeup and the way she'd bunched part of her hair on top of her head. No telling what she'd been doing. "You look like a corrupted doll."

She quickly looked down, but not fast enough to hide the flash of hurt in her eyes.

Harrison felt guilty for taking the verbal jab. "I meant...well, the contrast between the way you're dressed and the fact that you're holding a baby..." Oh, give her the compliment. "By the way, black leather is a good look for you."

She didn't look up, but she smiled. "I got home twenty minutes ago and started writing up my reviews. Saturday is my busiest

night.”

Matthew gave a shuddering sob, then wrinkled his face. Carrie reached for the bottle on the lamp table. “Is this the one you were trying to feed him?”

“Yeah.” How had she known he hadn’t been able to get Matthew to take his bottle? “He didn’t want it.”

“Maybe he’d like a little now.”

Matthew latched onto the bottle as though he hadn’t been fed in days. Within minutes, though, it was clear that he’d fallen asleep.

Harrison took him from Carrie’s arms and put him in the playpen.

Together, they crept toward the door.

This was twice Carrie had helped him, and Harrison was uncomfortably aware of being in her debt.

He was also aware of other things, namely, that he was not wearing a whole lot of clothes and that leather really, really was a great look for her.

“Thanks for stopping by,” he said, wondering if a kiss on the cheek might be in order.

“It’s okay. I’ve got to get these pieces written and I couldn’t concentrate with the crying.”

“Matthew was that loud?” Harrison opened the door.

Carrie turned to face him. “I could hear him through the duct work. You know, you’d better be careful. You don’t want to get crosswise with the condo board. I know from experience that

they're very strict."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Harry, that this is an adult-only complex."

CHAPTER THREE

"HAWEE?" A small hand patted his face, barely missing his eye.

Harrison struggled back to consciousness, feeling as if he'd been hit by a truck.

"Hawee?"

"Nathan, buddy, what time is it?" Squinting at the digital clock-radio, Harrison groaned when he saw that it was 6:20 in the morning. At least he hoped it was morning. What if he'd slept all day?

He forced his eyes all the way open and turned on the radio. An organ blasted through the speakers. Church music. Sunday. Sunday morning.

He collapsed back onto the pillows.

"Joose?" asked Nathan hopefully.

"S not time for juice," Harrison mumbled. "It's still sleepy time."

Nathan didn't argue with him. Seconds later, Harrison heard the crackling sound chubby legs wrapped in extra padded diapers made when they walked.

It grew fainter.

He wanted to go back to sleep. Desperately. This was prime sleep time, especially since he'd missed a chunk of his regularly

scheduled sleep.

However... Rolling out of bed, Harrison followed Nathan.

The little boy was squatting by the playpen poking his finger through the net at Matthew's head.

If Harrison had arrived three seconds earlier, Matthew might have remained asleep. That'll teach you.

They all ate cereal for breakfast. Matthew's was a bit of unappetizing reconstituted white flakes, but he seemed to like it well enough.

Four hours later, Harrison was desperate for both sleep and adult company. It wouldn't be cheating to call one of the sitters on the list, would it? After all, if he had a wife, he'd be able to take a break. Harrison only needed a couple of hours. He'd go for coffee and read the paper. Shower and shave, even. So far, he hadn't because he wasn't comfortable leaving Nathan unsupervised.

Harrison called all three sitters. All three sitters were busy.

Even worse, they were busy tomorrow.

What kind of sitters were these? Harrison hadn't considered the possibility that at least one of the three wouldn't be available.

Who could he get to watch the boys? He didn't know any baby-sitters. Yes, he was sure there were professional agencies he could call, but Jon and Stephanie didn't want that and Harrison had agreed to play by their rules.

Okay, who owed him a favor? As he cut up chunks of banana for Nathan's lunch and watched Matthew's attempts to crawl, Harrison uncomfortably remembered the times he'd criticized

employees for not having adequate backup child care plans in place.

That prompted an idea. Abandoning Nathan to his banana, Harrison recorded a memo to himself about establishing an emergency day care center for his employees. He wasn't about to get into the child care business, but if he stressed emergency, meaning short-term, and kept things simple, but licensed, he could see how employee efficiency and productivity would be increased.

As plans raced through his mind, Harrison became more enthusiastic about the entire child care issue. He should kiss his brother's feet for pointing out a weakness in the Rothwell time-management system.

Harrison became oblivious to his two charges, remembering them only when socially unacceptable smells from Matthew's diaper registered.

Resigned, Harrison checked on Nathan before cleaning up Matthew.

Nathan had squashed banana in his hair.

He'd also dumped it over the side of the tray and smeared it along the doorjamb. Harrison stared at him, then handed him more chunks. "Have fun." At least it would keep the little boy occupied.

He slipped on banana on his way out of the kitchen.

Nap time, blessed nap time arrived. Harrison took his long-awaited shower, then intended to try to find a baby-sitter for

tomorrow, but it was so quiet and he was so tired...

Something woke him up. For once, it wasn't Matthew crying, though he was making noises. There was another noise that Harrison couldn't identify.

Nathan wasn't in his room. Fully awakened by the shot of adrenaline to his system, Harrison ran down the hall where he found Nathan. Matthew wasn't visible.

What was visible was a mountain of diapers, big, little and overnight-size, all mixed together inside the playpen.

"Matthew?"

"Matt in dare." Nathan giggled and pointed, but Harrison was already digging out his younger nephew. Fortunately the baby didn't seem upset at being buried.

Exhaling, Harrison sat on the couch and stared at the playpen, then at Nathan.

"Uh-oh," said the little boy.

"Uh-oh is right, buddy."

He couldn't get angry. Nathan had been bored, no real harm had been done and this was one of those situations Harrison might find funny in the extremely distant future.

"Go get the diaper box, Nathan," he said, not knowing if Nathan would or not.

"Game!" shouted Nathan and ran off.

"What have you got to say for yourself, Matthew? Did you feel like you were in an igloo?"

A drooling Matthew looked as though he couldn't decide

whether he was unhappy or not. Harrison definitely wanted him happy.

“Hungry, sport?” Harrison spread out a blanket and set Matthew on it, dumped some toys around him, then retreated to the kitchen to make a bottle.

Nathan dragged a diaper box into the room. “Hawee?”

“In here, Nathan. Put the diaper box by the playpen.” As he poured formula into a bottle, Harrison watched Nathan from the bar. The little boy stood without moving, then picked up the cardboard box and walked over to the blanket where Matthew was chewing on some rubber thing. Without warning, Nathan threw the box on top of the baby, who promptly started crying.

“Nathan! No! You hurt Matthew!”

The sound of Harrison’s raised voice startled Nathan and he, too, began to howl.

But Matthew was Harrison’s immediate concern. After checking and finding nothing more than a red mark on his head, Harrison tried to comfort him. “You’re okay, Matthew. Come on, buddy, shake it off.”

Nobody was shaking off anything.

Harrison wasn’t at all surprised when he heard the knock at the door. He opened it without checking to see who was there. He just knew.

Carrie, or a version of Carrie, stood at the door. She wore a long, light-colored dress with a ribbon tied at the waist. Her hair was held back from her face with a band.

“I thought I’d come check on you on my way out.”

“You mean you could hear us from the parking lot.”

“Yeah.” She grinned and walked past him.

Harrison eyed her getup. “You look like Little Bo Peep.”

“And you look like, uh, heck. Real bad heck.” She sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. “Hey, Nathan, what’s the matter?”

As Nathan sobbed out his grievances against his uncle Hawee, Harrison checked his appearance in the foyer mirror. Yeah, he had a bad case of bed head caused by falling asleep when his hair was wet.

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