SUSAN
CROSBY

I'M YOUR MAN

Desire

Susan Crosby
I'm Your Man

Аннотация

There was a hot-looking man in her kitchen. And he was cooking! Maureen Hart had never had a summer so crazy…not even the year she'd become a teenage unwed mother. Now her life was on track with a steady boyfriend and a big promotion looming. And the one person who could derail everything was now waiting on her doorstep! Maureen's estranged daughter desperately needed her to care for her six-year-old son for several months. She just never imagined when she said yes that the child's gorgeous paternal grandfather, Daniel, would insist on staying, as well. Quarters were getting interestingly close.But Maureen was technically almost engaged…and a workaholic…and a control freak. And totally about to cut loose and indulge in a little fun with a man capable of doing his own laundry!

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I’m Your Man
Susan Crosby

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For Austin and Molly, who brighten my life in infinite ways.
And for Barbara, Chickie and Linda,
who soothe the savage beasts.

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CHAPTER 1

Maureen Hart watched the glass cleaner drip down the bedroom window as she waited for someone to react, her back to the three other females in the room. Usually she spent the third Saturday of every month with the Rowdies, a group of girlfriends who descended on San Francisco's club-and-concert scene with all the restraint of teenagers on spring break. This third Saturday, however, the Rowdies were blowing off steam without her as Maureen helped the pregnant-and-bedridden Bonnie Sinclair instead.

"He gave you a key to his house?" Maureen's aunt Cherie repeated, her reaction sufficiently surprised. She had picked up her red Candy Land game piece but didn't move it to the next purple square on the path. "Did you accept it?"

Maureen attacked the wet window with paper towels. "I didn't know how not to."

The game came to a complete halt at the news that Maureen's boyfriend of five months, Ted Montague, had made a show out of giving her a key to his house, having wrapped it up like a present and smiling like a kid at Christmas as she opened it.

"Did you give him yours?" Cherie asked.

"I didn't have an extra one."

Cherie gave her an easily interpreted look.

"Well, I didn't," Maureen said.

“Are you going to?”

“I either have to or return his, don’t I?”

“Play, please,” ordered five-year-old Morgan, fidgeting on the queen-size bed.

Morgan’s seven-months-pregnant, ordered-to-bed mother, Bonnie, brushed the girl’s brown curls from her face and smiled. “Be patient, sweetheart. This is important information for later in your life.”

Morgan sighed. “Boring. Can I watch a movie?”

“Sure.”

The girl climbed off the bed and skipped out of the room. Bonnie rubbed her hands together. “Now we can talk. Why don’t you want to exchange keys, Maureen? You’ve been dating long enough, and you’re taking a big vacation together. It’s a natural step.”

It was a fish-or-cut-bait step, Maureen thought, eyeing the clean window for streaks. Exchanging keys was only a step away from moving in together, a first in her thirty-nine years.

“I’m sorry,” Bonnie said, subdued. “It’s really none of my business.”

“No, that’s not it at all. I just don’t have an answer.” Maureen set her cleaning supplies aside and sat on a chair next to the bed that Bonnie had called home for a week, and would continue to until she gave birth. “I’m sorting through how I feel.”

Maureen’s gaze drifted to the framed photograph on the nightstand of a handsome Navy lieutenant, Bonnie’s husband of

six years, now stationed in the Middle East, with six months left on his current tour. “Did you hear from Jeremy today?” Maureen asked.

“I got an e-mail. He was very upbeat. I know he doesn’t want me to worry….”

An impossible task, Maureen thought, since Bonnie was confined to bed, unable to work, unable to do much of anything for herself or her daughter, which left a lot of time for thinking—and worrying. She had no family nearby, was dependent solely on public services and Cherie and Maureen, strangers until a week ago.

Morgan bounded back into the room, carrying several DVDs. With the efficiency of someone who’d grown up with the technology, she popped in a movie then climbed onto her mother’s bed, remote control in hand.

“So, Bonnie,” Cherie said as she put away the board game. “What else can we do before we leave?”

“Else? You’ve cleaned my apartment, top to bottom. You’ve stocked my refrigerator, given Morgan a bath, changed the bedding. I can’t even list it all. There’s nothing else. Thank you so much. Both of you.”

“Gregor will bring your food tomorrow and Monday. By Tuesday we should have a helper in place, at least for four or five hours a day. No word from your sister about coming to stay with you?”

“She’s trying to work it out. She’s got three kids of her own,

you know. Everyone else has jobs they can't leave."

Can't or won't? Maureen wondered.

"I'll see you on Tuesday," Cherie said. "Just to make sure everything is working out. Call me if you need anything before then."

Everyone hugged goodbye. A minute later Maureen and Cherie went down the flight of stairs and left the building. Night hadn't quite fallen on the cool, breezy June day, a time of year Maureen loved, contrary to winter, when it was dark so early, making her bus ride home from work seem twice as long.

"I can't believe no one from Bonnie's family has come," Maureen said as they walked to her car. "Or Jeremy's for that matter. Why isn't anyone helping?"

"My guess? Bonnie's downplayed the seriousness of her condition."

"Well, that's ridiculous. Maybe I can sneak around a bit, find a phone number or two and give someone a nudge."

"You're getting attached," her aunt said with a smile as Maureen pulled away from the curb, agitated.

Maureen smiled back. "Guilty. I can't imagine being restricted like she is. I'm glad you found out about her. Glad we can help."

"Me, too."

Maureen admired her aunt more than anyone on earth. At seventy most people had slowed down a little. Cherie seemed to get busier. Retired from a forty-five-year career as a nurse, she now volunteered at a free clinic three mornings a week; delivered

Mobile Meals three afternoons a week, a service she started herself five years ago when she retired, and worked at a soup kitchen on Sundays. She swam twice a week and walked almost everywhere. A petite five-two, she dressed in comfortable, trendy clothes and kept her hair colored and highlighted. She'd never married, but men doted on her. Most people did, actually. She sparkled like the silver peace symbol she always wore on a chain around her neck.

"Are you going to catch up with the Rowdies?" Cherie asked. "Seems like there's enough time."

"I'm tempted just to take a shower, slip into something comfortable and watch TV. It's been a long day. But…" Every Saturday Maureen acted as Cherie's driver to deliver meals to homebound people, starting at noon to pick up the prepacked meals from whichever restaurant was donating that particular day, until whatever time Maureen and Cherie finished delivering the meals and chatting with the recipients, who often didn't have other company.

"But?" Cherie prompted.

"But I hate to miss seeing the Rowdies. Kicking up my heels."

"How does Ted feel about your girls' night out?"

"He'd rather I spend the time with him, of course. I don't let it bother me." Much. Maureen turned onto Cherie's street and double-parked in front of her house.

Cherie patted Maureen's cheek. "Thanks so much for going the extra mile for Bonnie."

She hugged her aunt, the woman who'd been most responsible for raising Maureen since her mother died when Maureen was five. "It's fun watching Morgan, especially since she's so close in age to Riley."

"I know it makes you miss him more, too."

Maureen nodded and said good-night. Yes, she missed her grandson, and her daughter, too, who lived in Seattle. Maureen led a full, busy life. She had a job she loved, was even up for promotion to vice president of operations. She had a boyfriend, her first long-term, steady boyfriend in years and years. She had her Saturday work with Cherie for Mobile Meals, which satisfied a deep need to nurture. But it wasn't the same as being with the people she loved most in the world.

Maureen's house was only a few blocks from Cherie's in the same Bernal Heights area of San Francisco. She parked her car in the garage she rented a few doors down from her own garageless house, then walked home.

Maybe she should invite Bonnie and Morgan to move in with her until the baby came. She had a guest room. And toys not being used by anyone….

The wrought-iron gate at the bottom of her stairway creaked when she opened it. The climb to her sweet little house seemed steeper than usual. Sometime soon she was going to find time for an exercise routine beyond her once-a-day ascent up one single flight….

Uh-huh. Sure. What other fantasies do you entertain?

“That Social Security will be viable when I retire,” she muttered aloud. “That chocolate is a food group. That knights in shining armor exist.”

Maureen fit her key into her front door and found it already unlocked. She froze. Had she locked it that morning? Of course she had. She never forgot to lock her door.

She turned the handle gingerly and eased open the door, then crept down the hallway to the living room, hearing voices. Heart hammering, she peeked around the corner and spotted her daughter and grandson watching television.

Shock gave way to pleasure, her heart pounding in a different way. She hadn’t seen them in six months, since Christmas. “Looks like I need to call 9-1-1. Somebody broke into my house.”

“We used Mommy’s key!” her six-year-old grandson exclaimed, looking nervously at his mother.

Maureen laughed. “Well, it’s not a crook, after all. It’s my sweet Riley. C’mere, you.” She crouched and opened her arms.

He finally smiled as he shyly approached her. His two front teeth were missing, giving him even more of an impish look than what she could see during their twice-weekly computer-video calls. Maureen kissed him, noting his shock of blond hair was spiked with gel, a new style for him. He looked adorable. Her heart swelled as she held him close. She wished he would relax against her. They’d had too little contact through the years, and had to rebuild their relationship every time they saw each other.

“Where did you come from?” she asked before she got mushy and embarrassed herself.

“From the car, silly.”

“Can I get a hug, too?” came a hopeful voice.

“Jess, honey.” Maureen reached for her beautiful daughter. She felt sturdy and strong, for all her slenderness. The rare pleasure of holding her daughter brought the sting of tears again. “What a wonderful surprise.”

Jess was only a slightly darker blond than Riley, but they both had Maureen’s green eyes, the only physical trait she seemed to have passed on to the next generations, which was okay by her. She’d been teased all her life about her red hair. “When did you get here?”

“Just a few minutes ago.”

“We’re having a ’venture,” Riley said.

“You are? Are you going on a safari?”

“No, silly. We came to see you!”

“I’m so happy you did.” Although curious…and wary. “You drove all the way from Seattle just to see me?” Without calling first?

“In only thirty-teen hours,” Riley announced.

Maureen looked sharply at her daughter. Like Maureen, Jess had become a single mother at seventeen. Unlike Maureen, Jess hadn’t been a model of responsibility.

“Thirteen,” Jess corrected her son. “We made plenty of stops along the way, Mom.”

The last thing Maureen wanted was an argument with her daughter, whom she usually saw only twice a year. “Are you hungry? Or thirsty?”

“Chocolate milk and chocolate chip cookies, please,” Riley said.

“Plain milk will have to do, okay?” If I’d known you were coming…

“Okay.”

She opened the cabinet where she kept toys for Riley’s rare visits. He raced over and pulled out a basket of Hot Wheels, grabbing the three unopened packages on top. “Awesome! Mommy, look! Fire engines.”

“Cool.” Jess knelt to help him open the packages.

Maureen watched them for a few seconds. Something was up. Tension beyond the normal mother/daughter strain crackled in the air. Jess barely made eye contact, unusual for her. “In your face” was a term coined with Jess in mind.

“How about you, Jess?”

“Cookies and milk would be great, Mom. Thanks.”

Maureen retreated to her cozy kitchen, her thoughts spinning. She glanced at the refrigerator, decorated with photos and crayon drawings. She touched a fingertip to last year’s Christmas photo and the grins on their faces. Why had Jess come? What was happening? Since Jess had spirited Riley off to Seattle when he was just a few months old, she rarely initiated contact. Maureen had been the one to make plans to visit, to make ninety-five

percent of the phone calls. She'd even bought them a computer with a video camera so that she and Riley could keep in touch more intimately than through phone calls.

Why are you here, Jess?

Maureen got her cookie plate down from her cupboard and took out a bakery box of the big, chewy, chocolate chip cookies she kept to satisfy Ted's sweet tooth, then poured two glasses of milk.

"I could use a little help," she called out, hoping to get a minute alone with her daughter, but it was Riley who popped into the kitchen.

"Those cookies are big," he said.

"Hmm. I think you're right. Maybe I should break them into smaller pieces and put some back?"

"No way." He grinned.

She handed him the plate, then picked up the glasses and followed him. They sat on the floor among a city of cars already in place.

"This is the dish that Mommy painted, huh, Grandma? I can read it now. It says, 'I love you, Mom.'"

"That's right. She made it for me when she was twelve years old, for Mother's Day." When I was still a cool mom to her.

Jess slid her fingers around the circle of multicolored hearts painted around the edge. "Aunt Cherie took me to a do-it-yourself ceramics shop. We had a blast."

"I wanna do that," Riley mumbled, cookie crumbs spraying.

“Swallow before you talk, bud.”

Maureen took advantage of the opportunity. “Maybe the shop is still in business. How long are you staying?”

“I’m not sure yet, Mom.”

“No idea? A day? A week? A month?” she added in a teasing tone.

“I really don’t know.”

An open-ended visit? Now Maureen was really worried.

A long silence followed, until Riley finished his cookie and yawned. “Mommy, I’m tired.”

“Of course you are, bud. Let’s get you to bed.”

Maureen opened the sleeper-sofa in the guest room while Jess supervised Riley’s bedtime preparations. Hugs and kisses followed. His stuffed tiger, Stripe, was tucked in with him. He was almost asleep before the light was turned out.

“I’m going to bed, too,” Jess said outside the guest room door. “I’m wiped.”

She headed toward the bathroom, but Maureen stopped her. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you drive all the way down here without calling first. What if I’d been gone?”

“You’re never gone.”

Maureen had no response to that. Jess was right. It was a bone of contention with Ted, too. Which was why she’d finally given in and scheduled a vacation.

"Jess—"

"Really, Mom, I'm exhausted. Can we talk later?"

"I guess so." What else could she say?

Jess slipped into the bathroom and shut the door.

Maybe it would be good to wait until tomorrow anyway. Since they pushed each other's buttons easily, having a full night's sleep first could only help.

By the time Maureen cleaned up the kitchen it was a little after ten o'clock. She climbed into bed and dialed Ted's number.

"Guess what I came home to?" she said when he answered.

"An empty house with no one to rub your feet."

She smiled. "That's true. And in retrospect…"

"I can be there in ten minutes." When she didn't encourage him, he said, "I give up. What did you come home to?"

"My daughter and grandson." She filled him in.

"It's hard to imagine someone coming that far without checking to see if it was okay."

"It's also so Jess. She's always been impulsive. I wouldn't be surprised to learn she got up early this morning and decided on a whim to come." But what does she want? Because there has to be a catch….

"She knows we're leaving for Europe in two weeks, right?"

"We really didn't get to talk." A long silence ensued. "Maybe we all could go on a picnic tomorrow. It would be a great way for you to get to know each other, in a casual situation like that."

"Sure. I'll come around noon."

“Good. Gives me time to shop first.”

“How come you got home so early from your girls’ night?” he asked.

“Cherie and I ended up staying at Bonnie’s place a lot longer. She needed quite a bit done. I came home to change my clothes and go back out, but then Jess and Riley were here.”

“Lucky timing.”

“It sure was.”

After they hung up she lay in bed, too keyed up, too curious and too, well, happy. She shouldn’t question why Jess had come but just be grateful. Maybe Jess was reaching out. Maybe at twenty-three she was finally maturing.

Maybe second chances could happen, after all.

Then again, maybe it was just something to add to her list of fantasies.

CHAPTER 2

As much as Maureen wanted to sleep in, her internal alarm woke her at 6:00 a.m. Frustrated, she pulled the blanket higher and rolled over—and came almost nose to nose with Riley, who stood beside her bed, solemn-faced, staring at her. Her heart thumped at the surprise, but she calmly said good morning.

"Here." He shoved an envelope at her.

Dread slammed into Maureen. She sat up and patted the spot beside her, inviting Riley to join her. He didn't budge, except to tighten his hold on his tiger. His eyes brightened with tears.

She opened the letter.

Dear Mom,

I'm sorry to just take off like this, but I couldn't let you talk me out of leaving. I'm going to be on True Grit! It's a reality TV show, and the winner gets a million dollars. I'm going to win. I just know it.

The filming takes about six weeks. You won't be able to get in touch with me unless it's an emergency. I attached a sheet of instructions from the show's producers and the legal forms you need if you have to authorize medical care for Riley. I won't be allowed to call home. I have no idea where I'll be.

I know you don't think I'm responsible, Mom, but I can do this. I can win it. Then I'll have enough money to be independent and take care of Riley by myself. It's for him, Mom. He'll also

need money for college, and this is the best chance I have of getting it. And it's time for me to go out on my own, not rely on Daniel anymore.

So I'm leaving Riley with you. You've always said you've been cheated out of knowing him because I took him to live at Daniel's. Now's your chance.

Have fun with my baby.

Love, Jess

P. S. I've enclosed a blank journal. I'd appreciate it if you would jot things down, you know, the Rileyisms he's famous for, so that I don't feel like I've missed so much time with him. Thanks!

"She went away," Riley said, his lower lip quivering. "She's not coming back for a long, long time. Forever!"

Against his protests, Maureen lifted him into bed and tucked him close. Jess, Jess, Jess. What have you done? And why me instead of Daniel? "Did Mommy tell you where she's going, honey?"

He nodded, his face rubbing her chest. "She's going to win a bazillion dollars."

And what were the chances of her being the last one standing and winning the prize?

"I want my mommy."

"I know, sweetie." She searched for the right words to help him. It was the first time he'd been away from Jess, and she'd apparently surprised Riley as much as Maureen. "Did she tell

you she's going to be on television? On True Grit? Do you watch True Grit?"

"Yeah, with Mommy. It's kinda weird."

She would have to take his word for it, since she'd never seen an episode. But it had become a pop-culture icon, and she knew enough about it to wonder if Jess could compete. Was she strong enough, physically and mentally, to withstand the intense challenges?

"Won't it be fun to see Mommy on TV?"

"I guess."

"And I'm happy because I get you all to myself." What was she going to do with him? She couldn't stay home from work. And what about her vacation with Ted? He wasn't going to understand. Oh, no, he wasn't going to understand at all.

"Are you hungry? Would you like some of my super-duper chocolate-chip waffles?"

"Can I have maple syrup, too?"

Maureen refrained from shuddering at the double dose of sweetness. "Of course you can." Her mind was whirling. Why hadn't Jess left Riley with Daniel? It made no sense to bring Riley all the way down here, to take him from the only home he'd known.

But he's mine. Happiness overshadowed her questions. For just a little while she would enjoy the gift Jess had given her.

"SOMEONE'S HERE," Riley said, standing at Maureen's front window.

"A tall man with short gray hair?"

"Yeah. He's skinny."

Maureen preferred to think of Ted as lanky. He was fifty, eleven years older than she, and very handsome, turning heads everywhere they went. "That's Ted. He's my boyfriend," she said, getting up off the floor and heading toward the hallway.

"You have a boyfriend?" he asked, as if shocked.

Yeah. A stunner, isn't it? She laughed quietly as she went to the front door, opening it before Ted could knock. "Hi."

He was nine inches taller than her five foot six, so he had to stoop a little to kiss her, even as she went up on tiptoe. She moved in for a hug, more for herself than him. She dreaded telling him —

"You must be Riley," Ted said, stepping back and looking over Maureen's shoulder.

She turned. Her grandson was peeking around the doorway. "I'm Riley Joshua Cregg," he said.

"Ted Montague. Good to meet you." They shook hands like gentlemen, which made Maureen smile.

They all moved into the living room. Ted stopped and stared. "You opened a toy store."

Not exactly, but she'd dug out Jess's old toys, and Riley had brought a lot with him. They were scattered and piled throughout the room. "We couldn't decide what we wanted to play with."

"I see." He looked around. "And your daughter?"

Without comment, Maureen picked up the envelope and

passed it to Ted. Halfway through reading Jess's letter, he sat in the overstuffed chair he'd claimed as his over the past few months. She looked around the room as he poured through the documents. The place really was a mess, and she generally hated mess, but she didn't mind this one, the scattering of toys and the noise of one small boy.

Her furnishings suited the Italianate Victorian facade of the building, with its pretty blue-with-white trim. The eleven-foot ceilings made the house seem bigger than its actual square footage. It was roomy enough for her—two bedrooms, a full basement with lots of storage space, a bright, cozy kitchen and big, sunny backyard. She'd bought it fifteen years ago, before the area had started to gentrify, and it was now worth a small fortune, at least to her.

Ted folded up the papers and slid them back into the envelope. He met her gaze. She'd never seen him angry before. Annoyed, maybe, but not truly angry—until now. His whole face frowned, making him look his age, when he usually looked younger.

"We'll talk about it later, okay?" she said, angling her head toward where Riley was vrooming cars across the hardwood floor.

"Six weeks, Maureen? Six weeks?"

Riley looked up, responding to the strident tone by shrinking back. He shifted his gaze to Maureen, his eyes wide. She smiled and joined him on the floor, choosing a bulldozer from his construction zone and using it as if pushing a pile of dirt.

“Riley and I packed a picnic,” she said. “We thought we could go to Holly Park.” She felt a little guilty about telling Ted in front of Riley, since Ted would look like the bad guy if he said no.

He gave her a look that said he knew what she was doing. “Fine.”

They took advantage of the nice day to walk the less-than-half-mile trek to the park. Ted held her hand but said nothing. Riley didn’t hold her hand and talked nonstop. He pointed out houses, cars and dogs that caught his eye, stopping in his tracks and saying things like, “Look at that!” or “Isn’t that funny?” with open exuberance and wonder. Had Jess been like that? Surely she must have been, but Maureen couldn’t remember specifically.

They reached the green dome of Holly Park with its view above the rooftops. The marine layer was burning off, leaving a beautiful panorama of the city. Maureen had been to Holly Park only one other time—Jess and Riley’s last visit, a year ago. The recently renovated park that used to be a blight was now an urban paradise for families.

Riley wanted Maureen to stay close as he hopped from the playhouse to the slide, then onto the swings and cargo ropes. When he got to a stretch-rope merry-go-round, he watched the other children play but didn’t make a move to join them.

Even at six, he’s a loner, Maureen thought, watching him. Or maybe he needed to know the lay of the land before he threw himself into the fray—which was a smart move and the opposite of his mother, who had rarely thought through anything before

taking action.

Maureen gave Riley a push on a swing then glanced to where Ted sat at one of the picnic tables, staring into space. He'd been married at thirty, divorced at forty and was childless—a conscious choice. He didn't think the city was a good place to raise children, and he was a city man through and through. His ex-wife had at first been in agreement, then changed her mind and wanted a family, after all. She divorced him, remarried and now had four children—and lived in the city. He'd kept no photos of her, not even of their wedding, so Maureen had never seen what the woman looked like.

"Higher, Grandma! Push me higher!"

He giggled as she pushed him, and she saw Ted smile at the joyful sound.

Together they ate their lunch of turkey sandwiches, chips and cookies, all things Riley had selected at the deli section at the local market. He swung his legs while he devoured his lunch, the toes of his sneakers dragging the ground, his focus on the children playing. She wished she knew him well enough to read his expression. Was he tired? Or sad, perhaps? He looked solemn, anyway, had lost his former playfulness.

"Won't be too long before you're in first grade," Maureen said.

"Grandma." His tone was tolerant. "I'm already in first grade. I graduated, you know."

"Do you like school?" Ted asked.

"It's fun. But Cody says first grade is hecka hard."

“Who’s Cody?”

“He lives next door. He’s seven.” He took a big bite of cookie. “He knows everything.”

They left the park soon after with a promise to return the next day. Riley skipped a little ahead of Maureen and Ted, stopping often to inspect items of interest. He would be ready for a nap, then Maureen would have to face the music with Ted.

“Can I have another cookie, plea—Papa!” Riley shouted as they neared the house. He took off running. “Papa!”

A man rose from his perch on Maureen’s tiny porch. She’d recognize him anywhere—Daniel Cregg, Riley’s paternal grandfather. Maureen’s nemesis.

The man who’d stolen her daughter and grandson.

CHAPTER 3

Rileyism #1: "I'm six. You know what that means, don't you?"

"Papa!" Riley opened the gate and raced up the stairs into Daniel's arms. Envy swamped Maureen. She'd gotten a hug from Riley only by taking one, yet he threw himself at Daniel.

Riley even had a nickname for him, Papa, while she was just plain Grandma.

"The grandfather, I presume," Ted said as they reached the wrought-iron gate.

"In the flesh." And she certainly couldn't fault the flesh.

He wasn't quite six feet tall, had a runner's lean build with a weight lifter's shoulders. His dark-blond hair was thick and wavy, not quite long enough to band into a ponytail. He dressed like the college students he taught, in jeans, T-shirt and a Cascade University sweatshirt, even though he was, like Ted, fifty years old.

And he was a vegetarian. And never on time for anything. And disorganized. All the things she disliked. But mostly she disliked —hated—that he'd enticed her daughter and grandson away from her.

He stood on the porch nuzzling Riley into giggles as Maureen and Ted climbed the stairs.

"Hey," he said, his tone friendly.

"Doesn't anyone have the courtesy to call ahead anymore?"

she asked, walking past him and unlocking her front door. “You don’t own a telephone, Daniel?”

“I didn’t have time to waste or the inclination to warn her that I was coming. I knew I couldn’t stop her by talking to her on the phone.” He set Riley down and picked up a small, scuffed, black leather bag.

Riley raced down the hallway and into the living room, his energy back in full measure. “Come see my city, Papa!”

“Just a sec, bud.” Daniel extended a hand to Ted. “Daniel Cregg.”

“Ted Montague.”

“Oh, yeah, the boyfriend. You got yourself a…an interesting woman there.” He flashed a grin at Maureen. “So, where’s Jess?”

“Gone.”

He paled. “Gone? She doesn’t have to report until Tuesday.” Gone, too, was the devil-may-care smile. “She’s already in L.A.?”

Maureen glanced at her watch. “I would say she’s there by now, yes. We’ll talk about it while Riley’s having his nap.” She’d always made an effort to be civil to Daniel in front of Riley. And for the first time, she had possession, therefore control. She liked it—a lot. “Can I get you some refreshment?” she asked.

“I don’t suppose you have any carrot juice?”

“Gee, Daniel, if only I’d known you were coming….” She gestured toward the sidewalk. “I can give you directions to the local health food store. You can jog there and back in twenty

minutes, I would guess. Or will that interfere with your getting to the airport on time for your return flight?"

His amber eyes glittered. "Water will be fine. Thank you."

"Is tap okay?" Oh, yeah, she was enjoying herself.

"If that's all you have."

"Come in, then. I'm surprised you don't have your own with you. I can't remember seeing you without a bottle of water with that funny-looking filter on it." She headed for the kitchen, leaving Daniel in the living room. Ted followed her.

"What's going on between you two?" he asked, setting their picnic cooler on the counter.

"I told you before that we've never gotten along."

"I know you feel he's kept Jess and Riley from you all these years, but you were the one she left her son with this time. Obviously, things aren't as rosy as you thought with that relationship."

Obviously. But why? What had happened? She poured a glass of tepid tap water. "I don't feel he kept them from me. I know he did. He offered her an apartment of her own above his garage—a really nice one. He pays all of her expenses. She doesn't have any responsibilities whatsoever. Is that any way to help a teenage mother mature and become independent, as she should have been by now? Daniel hasn't helped Jess. He's enabled her. He's stunted her. And it looks like it's come back to bite him, doesn't it?"

"I think you need the full story before you decide that. Maureen, I have to say, this is a side of you I haven't seen before.

It's not attractive."

Okay, maybe her smugness over Jess leaving Riley with her wasn't attractive, but she had a right to feel happy about whatever it was that had brought Riley to her after hurtful years of having so little contact. They would have a chance to have a real grandmother/grandson relationship. It was what she'd wanted for so long.

"You don't understand," she said to Ted. "You haven't had a child turn her back on you when she should've been needing you more than anyone else."

"You're right. I don't understand the situation in that particular way. But that was then, Maureen. This is now."

"And now is a second chance. Don't take the joy out of it. Please."

He stared at her for several long seconds, then he wrapped her in his arms and held her tight. "Okay, sweetheart," he said, resting his chin on her head. "As long as you're putting Riley's needs first."

Of course Riley's needs would take center stage, but her needs mattered, too, this time.

When they returned to the living room, Daniel was stretched out on his stomach on the floor playing demolition derby with Riley. They were making all sorts of crash sounds—brakes squealing, metal hitting metal. Cars were flying into the air then crashing down.

Riley climbed onto Daniel's back and ran a car up his spine

and into his hair, where it just about got lost in the denseness, then did get stuck.

"Oops," Riley said, tugging at the car. "Sorry, Papa."

"Ouch. Hold on, bud. You're gonna give me a bald spot."

Maureen watched Daniel try to extricate the car before she finally set down his glass of water and went up to him. "Here. Let me. Sit on the chair."

It was like performing microsurgery, unwrapping long strands of hair from the tiny tire axles, almost one by one. His hair was incredibly soft, and up close like this, she could see it was shot with silver here and there, not easily visible since his hair wasn't very dark. He bounced Riley on his knee, and they kept their heads together, as if they were telling secrets.

Maureen yanked the final few strands free to get the job over and done with.

"Hey!" He rubbed his head.

"Sorry. It wouldn't come loose."

He gave her a look of disbelief but muttered his thanks.

"Nap time," she said to Riley.

He gave her a look. "I'm six. You know what that means, don't you?"

"What does it mean?"

"I don't take naps anymore."

"A rest, then. You got up early and you played hard at the park. Just close your eyes for a little while."

"But—"

“Do as your grandmother says,” Daniel said.

Which really ticked Maureen off. How dare he stick his nose where it didn’t belong? But Riley had already headed for the bedroom.

“Bathroom first,” Maureen said.

The three adults stood waiting, the silence awkward. When Riley emerged she followed him into the bedroom and made sure he took off his sneakers before getting onto the bed. She handed Stripe to him, then covered him with an afghan that Cherie had crocheted and kissed his forehead.

“I’m not gonna sleep,” he said, the words muffled by the stuffed tiger.

“That’s fine.”

“Papa will still be here when I get up, won’t he?”

“I don’t know what his plans are. But I’m sure he’ll say goodbye before he goes anywhere.” Like back to Seattle on the next available flight.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” He pulled the afghan up to his chin then. “Don’t shut the door.”

“I won’t shut it all the way.”

When she returned to the living room, she found Ted in her big chair and Daniel picking up the toys, putting them in their plastic containers.

“Thanks,” she said.

"He likes to start over. There's something about creating a new city that appeals to him."

"Maybe he'll be a builder," she said, taking a seat on the sofa, next to Ted's chair. She was determined to stay calm.

"Maybe." Daniel picked up his glass of water and sat down, too. He looked at Ted. "I don't think I heard what you do for a living."

"I'm a CPA and financial planner."

"How did you two meet?"

"At work," Maureen said. "I'm not sure if Jess told you about Carlos Martinez, my boss at Primero Publishing? He passed away suddenly five months ago, and his wife, Bernadette, stepped in as publisher. Ted's been a friend of theirs for years. She asked him to take a look at the company finances."

"Then I took a look at Maureen, too," he said, smiling at her.

She smiled back. "He came along at a busy time, since we'd just started working on two new projects a couple of months before Carlos died. We're trying to see them through, but it's taking everything out of us."

"She works very long hours," Ted said, laying a hand on her shoulder, his fingers resting against her collarbone in a proprietary way, making Maureen uncomfortable. She'd never seen him possessive.

"It took me months," he went on, "but I finally convinced her to take a vacation. We're leaving two weeks from today."

The implications of that statement reverberated through the

room. They all knew Jess was supposed to be gone for six weeks.

Maureen was stuck. She needed to tell Ted that they would have to postpone their vacation, but she couldn't do it in front of Daniel.

"Why are you here?" she asked Daniel, taking control of the discussion. "What did you hope to accomplish by just showing up?"

He dragged his hands down his face. "We had an argument."

"You and Jess? About what?"

"About this harebrained scheme of hers to be on True Grit."

Maureen might have agreed with him, but she wasn't going to let him criticize her daughter. "My understanding is that she beat almost impossible odds to make it onto the program." She and Riley had looked it up on the Internet that morning. "So many people apply, yet she was chosen. It's a huge accomplishment."

"I'm not denying that. I even had a hand in it, since I'm the one that got her training. She's become quite an athlete."

"I could tell. When I hugged her, I could tell. I would think you would be proud she got on the show."

"Proud? What about her job?"

"She had a job?"

"You didn't know?"

Maureen shook her head. "She never said. What was she doing?"

"She's an assistant in my department at the university."

"Since when?"

“Since Riley started kindergarten last year. She only works—worked—part-time, just while he’s in school. It was ideal. She would’ve been able to increase her hours as his school days got longer.”

“Would have?”

He nodded. “She’s supposed to be there now, for summer session. She quit.”

Why hadn’t Jess told her? How little she knew of her daughter’s life.

“So, you arranged the job for her?”

“Yeah. I stuck my neck out, too, since she didn’t have any experience, and there were other candidates more qualified. I thought it might get her interested in going to college. Her tuition would’ve been almost free.” He tunneled his fingers through his hair.

That soft, thick—Maureen caught herself. “She’s lived with you all these years and you don’t know what a dreamer Jess is?” she asked, not unkindly. “This is the big-fantasy kind of thing that Jess thrives on.”

Daniel leaned his arms on his thighs and turned his head to look at her. “I didn’t think she’d go through with it, in the end. She may be a dreamer, but she usually has little follow-through. I certainly never expected her to take off as she did. I was out of town. She left me a note.”

“And you hopped a plane without calling first? What if Jess hadn’t come here? What if I hadn’t been home?”

He frowned. “Where would you be? You’re always home.”

She really needed to get away more.

“Anyway,” Daniel went on, “Jess said in her note she was leaving Riley here, but I knew you probably couldn’t take much time off from work, and I’m off for the summer….”

“This works out perfectly,” Ted said, participating in the conversation for the first time. “We can figure out a way to keep the boy until we go on vacation, then he can go back to you for the remainder of the time.”

Daniel cheered up. “I could work with that—”

“No.” Maureen didn’t raise her voice. Her heart pounded in her ears. She could barely swallow. She felt both men focus on her, and for a moment she looked out the front window, not wanting to continue what was bound to be a hard conversation.

“No?” Ted repeated, shock in his tone. “Maureen, it’s the perfect solution. And obviously the boy loves being with his grandfather.”

Yes, he does. Way too much. “Jess left him with me. I’m sure she had her reasons.”

“Now, hold on a minute,” Daniel said. “Jess and I had an argument. She’s not used to being denied anything, and so she decided to get back at me by bringing Riley here. It’s not as if she doesn’t trust me with him.”

“How do I know that? The only thing I know for sure is that she wanted me to have Riley for the time she’s gone. The whole time. Period.”

“We need to talk about this,” Ted said with a telling glance at Daniel.

Daniel, obviously realizing that Ted was his ally in his cause, offered to go for a walk.

“Don’t you have a plane to catch or something?” Maureen asked, annoyed that the men were ganging up on her.

“I bought a one-way ticket.”

“Of course you did,” she muttered. “Fine. Go for a walk. Or go into my backyard.” Or go to hell.

He stood. “How much time should I give you?”

“Fifteen minutes?” Ted said when Maureen clammed up. “If you turn right when you leave the house and walk a few blocks, you’ll hit Cortland Avenue. That’s the commercial district. You’ll find a couple of places to get something to eat, if you want.”

“Thanks.” Then he was gone, and the air was filled with unspoken accusations.

Maureen didn’t trust herself to say the right thing. Angry, she pushed herself up and went to the front window, spotting Daniel as he made his way up the street, that jaunty walk of his annoying her even more.

“I don’t appreciate your interference,” she said to Ted, her back to him.

“Interference? This situation involves me, too. Why shouldn’t I be allowed my opinions?”

“Opinions are one thing. Decisions without discussion are another.”

"What do you mean?"

She faced him, crossed her arms. "You decided what would happen. I wasn't given a say in the matter." And it made her look weak in Daniel's eyes, she thought. She couldn't afford any sign of weakness or Daniel would pounce on it in some way, maybe even enlist Riley in his cause. Riley would probably like nothing better than to go back with Daniel. That thought hurt. "Your plan isn't going to work for me, Ted."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning we need to postpone the vacation."

Silence descended, deafening and tense.

He came close to her. "Postponing is the same as canceling, and you know it. It took me weeks to convince you to take this trip. If anything happens to interfere with it, we'll never go."

"Even without Riley it's a horrible time for me to be gone, and you know that. Everything at work is tenuous. I've got a shot to be vice president. If I leave, I could very well be saying goodbye to that opportunity."

"Bernadette gave her enthusiastic approval for you to go."

"What else could she say? You're not there every day, under the gun. I know what's going on, and I know it's going to be hard for them without me."

"You're not indispensable. And it's only two weeks."

She heard the underlying anger in his voice, his frustration with her. She understood it, but it didn't change the fact she had the opportunity to really connect with her grandson for the first

time—and by default, reconnect with her daughter. To Maureen, it wasn't even a decision.

"A postponement, Ted. That's all. I need to do this. I need to have this time with Riley. And Jess did leave him with me. She certainly wouldn't want me to pawn him off on someone else. I'm sorry. I know it's horrible of me to ask you to change plans on such short notice, but I can't do anything else. I need you to understand that."

His whole body seemed to sigh. "We'll probably have penalties to pay for changing our reservations—if we can even get changes. That'll put us into August. You do realize that Europe goes on vacation in August, right? It could change a lot of our plans."

"The Louvre will still be there, right? And the Eiffel Tower?" She slipped her arms around him. "And the Venice canals? The Tower of London?"

"I get your point." He kissed her, but not with much depth or warmth. "I spent a lot of time researching the right hotels and the most efficient train schedules and the best restaurants."

"We'll find a bed to sleep in and trains to ride and places to eat." She wasn't going to back down, so she hoped that he would. If he didn't, she didn't know what she would do.

She remembered his excitement when he gave her his house key. Was she willing to give up all that it represented for this brief time with Riley? She'd been alone all her adult life, having a few relationships that never got anywhere near marriage and having a permanent partner for the rest of her life. Ted was a real

possibility for that changing. But if she had to make a choice… There was no choice.

"All right," Ted said after a long, tense silence. "I'll rearrange the trip. Jess will be back toward the end of July, right? We'll allow an extra week, in case something else comes up. We'll leave on your birthday, August fourth. Okay?"

Her fortieth. She would be celebrating a new beginning to her life as she marked that auspicious birthday—a new relationship with her daughter and grandson, a solid, steady relationship with a man and, hopefully, a new job with loads of responsibility and a nice pay raise.

Turning forty looked to be a banner year.

"Thank you, Ted," she said, relaxing against him. "I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"Sweetheart, I see how much it means or I wouldn't be doing it. Just don't let it take over your life completely, okay? I need attention, too."

He was right about that. He'd been so patient about her long work weeks that left her exhausted and edgy. "I'll try to do better," she said. "I don't mean to ignore you."

"I know you don't." He released her. "You're going to need a sitter or day care or something."

"Yes. I'll get busy on that."

"What're you going to do about Daniel?"

"Tell him to enjoy his cab ride back to the airport."

"Something tells me it's not going to be that easy."

“He doesn’t really have a choice, does he?”

He shrugged. “Do you need me to stay until he’s gone? I’d like to get going on the changes in our itinerary.”

“That’s fine. I can deal with Daniel alone.” Preferred to. She was glad Ted didn’t care whether or not he was there. “And Riley will want to spend a little time with him. I can’t send him away until they’ve had a chance to talk.”

She walked him to the door and kissed him goodbye, all the while hoping Daniel would get back before Riley woke up. She couldn’t have the honest conversation she needed to have with Daniel in front of Riley, but have it she would.

Really, Daniel had some nerve. All these years he’d had the upper hand. It was her turn.

And there was no way she was going to give an inch to him. No way at all.

CHAPTER 4

Rileyism #2: “I don’t want to be rotten.”

“Grandma, I’m hungry.”

Maureen looked sharply at her watch. Where was Daniel? He’d been gone for three hours. No call. Nothing. “How about some grapes?” she said.

“How about some cookies?” he asked with that missing-tooth smile.

She couldn’t help but smile back. “Too close to dinner.”

“Aw, man.”

She patted the gelled spikes on his head. “Grapes, then?”

“I guess. How come Papa’s not back yet?”

Because Papa is an inconsiderate jerk. “He must be enjoying seeing San Francisco,” she said instead.

The front door burst open then, and Daniel breezed in as if he were welcome.

“Hey, bud,” he said, crouching down as Riley ran to him. “How was the nap?”

“I rested, Papa. I didn’t nap.”

Right. He didn’t nap for two whole hours, Maureen thought with a smile. He’d been so soundly asleep that he hadn’t even flinched when she’d checked on him and had bumped into a chair that skittered a few inches across the hardwood floor.

Daniel looked up at Maureen. His hair was wind-tossed, his

face surprisingly tanned for a man who lived in rainy Seattle. He looked years younger than the fifty he was.

"What's the verdict?" he asked, standing. Riley looked at Maureen, too, as he leaned against his grandfather's legs, Daniel's hands on his shoulders. The two Cregg men made an indomitable force.

Where have you been all this time? "We're going to do what Jess asked."

"Okay."

Okay? O-kay? Now what game was he playing, to give in without a fight? "I'm glad you agree," she said, aware of how still Riley was, and how he'd reached up with both hands to grab Daniel's.

"Didn't say I agree, but I understand your position."

"Do you need a ride to the airport?" She figured that was the least she could do.

"No, thanks. In fact, I'm not going anywhere for, oh, I figure about six weeks."

"What?" She plunked her fists on her hips.

"I found myself a place to live—one of the kids who works at the health food store offered his spare bedroom. Seems his roommate is gone for the summer, so he's in need of the cash."

"Why would you do that?"

"I've never been to San Francisco. I'm off for the summer. And I figure you need someone to watch Riley during the day while you work. I'm your man."

All the things Maureen wanted to say stuck in her throat when she saw how happy Riley was. The arrogant Daniel Cregg. He'd given her no choice. He'd set his course without discussing it with her, then presented it to her in front of Riley. If she told Daniel he wasn't welcome, she would be the bad guy. Then what chance would she have of forging a new bond with Riley, one she hoped would seal things between them for life?

"I already have day care lined up," she said tightly.

"Hey, I'm free—in both senses of the word. It's a win-win situation. There's a lot to see and do in this city. Riley and I will explore. It'll be fun, and educational."

"I have plans to show him things, too, you know."

"Look, Maureen, which do you want? Day care, where he sits around and plays video games and watches television? Or an adventure every day—fresh air and new experiences? You'll have him every night and every weekend, the same as you would if I weren't here. There's plenty of time for both of us."

She didn't know how much Riley was understanding of their conversation, but he seemed anxious.

"What kind of apartment will you be living in?"

"The kind college kids can afford. Two small bedrooms, a kitchen sink piled with dirty dishes. Pizza boxes jammed into overflowing trash cans."

"And the kid works in a health-food store?"

"I'm sure they were vegetarian pizzas."

She refused to smile at that. "It doesn't sound like a healthy

environment to me." For Riley, she added mentally, assuming Daniel would pick up on that.

"We'll use your house as our home base, if that's okay with you. You walk in the door at night, I walk out."

Like she really had a choice? She couldn't stop him from renting a room. She couldn't keep him away from Riley without being the mean ol' grandma. And having Daniel instead of some stranger care for Riley was a good thing.

"Do you have to go back to Seattle and pick up clothes and whatever?"

"Nope. I asked a friend to pack up my whatevers, including my laptop, and airfreight them. So, how about I take you two to dinner, then I'll show you where I'll be living."

She should call Ted and let him know what was happening, but decided to wait until after Riley went to bed, so she could have a private conversation. She didn't know whether the new plan would make Ted happy or not. He'd seemed not to like Daniel very much—until Daniel had become a solution to a problem that directly affected Ted.

"Dinner sounds good to me," she said finally. "As long as the restaurant serves normal food. And meat."

"What's normal?" He grinned. "I don't force my convictions on others, Mo."

"Don't call me that. Please," she added, softening the order for Riley's sake. Daniel's calling her Mo reminded her of her father, and he was the last person she wanted to be reminded of. Well,

him and Jess's father. "Would you mind if I ask my aunt to join us? She hasn't seen Riley since last year." And Ted couldn't get irritated with another adult along.

"Sure. I've never met the old gal. Do we need to pick her up?"

"She'll walk. She doesn't live far from Cortland. And she wouldn't appreciate you calling her 'the old gal.' You remember Auntie Cherie, don't you, Riley?"

He nodded several times. "She's fun."

"Exactly. Let me give her a call and see if she's free. The woman has a busy calendar." Maureen went into her bedroom and shut the door. She leaned against it for a few seconds, forcing herself to relax. It wasn't a matter of coming out the winner over Daniel, although that was a nice side benefit, but of her not backing down from what she wanted. She'd stood up for herself. She didn't consider herself a weak woman, but, with the exception of at her job, she tended to go along with what anyone else wanted to do, in order to keep peace. She liked peace. She liked order. The one time she hadn't been the model of responsibility had resulted in her becoming pregnant and a single mother at seventeen.

But this time the stakes were too high to give in to Ted or Daniel. She needed Riley and Jess in her life. So, she'd stood up for herself.

And it felt pretty darn good.

MAUREEN SAW RILEY spot Cherie coming into the PeaceLove Café. He was kneeling on a chair at the table and

started waving both arms to get her attention. They had seen each other several times through the years, and occasionally Cherie would talk with him over the computer camera. Now Riley would have a chance to really get to know her well, too. Thank you, Jess.

"There you are!" Cherie called, waving off the hostess, then heading toward them. She greeted at least a half-dozen guests as she made her way through the funky restaurant, a throwback to the old flower-power days complete with psychedelic art on the walls and the servers wearing beads, headbands and long, flowing outfits.

Daniel stood and held a chair for Cherie, but first she went around the table, giving hugs and kisses. She included Daniel before she sat down, as if they were old friends.

"You don't quite fit the picture I had of you in my head," she said to Daniel after ordering a glass of white zinfandel.

"Which was?"

"I was thinking, Dr. Cregg, professor of English. Tweed jackets and a pipe. A bow tie, maybe, receding hair line. And a certain tone."

"What kind of tone?"

"A sort of lofty use of language, with a Bostonian accent, even if he came from Baton Rouge."

He laughed. "I've met those professors. They were my inspirations to be the opposite."

"A worthy goal." She leaned toward Maureen. "So, adorable girl, what's going on?"

Maureen summed up the events in an upbeat manner as Riley used the restaurant-supplied crayons to draw on their butcher-paper tablecloth.

"Will you take me to the 'ramics place, Auntie Cherie? I want to make my mom an I-Love-You plate for when she comes back to get me," he said, lifting his head finally.

"That's a date, young man."

His smile lit up his entire face and got even wider somehow when she picked up a crayon and started drawing with him. Forehead to forehead, they chattered like old friends.

Daniel was uncharacteristically quiet.

"You must be tired," Maureen said to him.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. A little. How is it you can get jet lag without leaving the time zone?"

"It's just your body letting down from the stress of travel," Cherie said. "A good night's sleep and you'll be right as rain."

"I wonder how good my nights are going to be," he said. "My new roomie, Ty, gets off work at nine. I think his night is just beginning at that point. Should be interesting. Think I'll be bunkin' with you, Master Riley, when you na—rest in the afternoon."

Riley frowned. "Grandma doesn't have bunk beds, Papa."

Daniel grinned. "It's an expression, bud. It means lying down to rest."

"Maybe you'd like to help me one day when I deliver meals," Cherie said.

“Do you have a motorcycle? Our pizza guy has a motorcycle.”

“Wouldn’t that be fun? Alas, I don’t even have a driver’s license, so they give me a driver. He waits in the car while I take the dinners inside to people who can’t fix a meal for themselves.”

“Why can’t they?” He’d abandoned his artwork to listen to her.

“Mostly because they’re old. Like me.”

He giggled. “You’re not old.”

“Well. Isn’t that nice?” She beamed. “Do you think you’d like to help me out sometime? Your grandma helps on Saturdays. They’d love to see that sweet smile of yours, I can tell you that.”

“Sure. I can, can’t I, Papa?”

Maureen took a quick swig of her wine, hiding her hurt that Riley had asked Daniel for permission instead of her. He was staying with her.

“That’s up to your grandma,” Daniel said. “She’s the boss now.”

“Can I, Grandma?”

“Of course.” She caught Cherie looking intently at her.

“I hafta go to the bathroom.”

“Okay, bud.” Daniel stood. “Let’s go.”

“What’s got your knickers in a twist?” Cherie asked the second they were alone.

“I wish Daniel weren’t here. Frankly, I want Riley to myself.”

“Well, I can see your jealousy, Maureen, and Riley’s going to pick up on that, too. You’ve got Riley. Let go of the old hurt, and everyone will be happier.”

"I'm trying."

"Building a relationship takes time."

"I know." Maureen rubbed her forehead. "I do know. He calls Daniel Papa." She put a hand to her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that out loud, to sound belligerent about it.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Daniel has a nickname, Papa. Riley calls me Grandma. Nothing special."

Cherie sat back, holding her wineglass, swirling the contents. "Papa is probably the most common variation on Grandpa. It's those double-repeat syllables that babies learn so much easier—mama, dada, papa. He was there every day with Riley. Aren't you being overly sensitive?"

"Maybe." Probably. "It's just been a long, trying day dealing with everything."

Cherie sipped her wine, then set down the glass gently. "How's Ted taking it all?"

Maureen summed it up, adding, "He's being amazingly patient."

"Hmm."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've been wondering how he would handle it if you ever didn't go along with what he wanted."

"I don't know what that means, Cherie."

"Just what I said. You defer to him, that's all. Today you didn't. I'm glad he's being patient."

Even if Maureen had wanted to explore the point further, Daniel and Riley returned then.

"Grandma, that bathroom is crazy!"

Since Maureen was a regular customer at the restaurant, she knew what Riley had discovered. "How is it crazy?"

"There's no reg'lar lights but there's colors all over the walls and they…glow. What's it called, Papa?"

"Day-Glo paint and black lights."

"Black lights. Isn't that funny? Papa says that's what the hippers liked."

"Hippies," Cherie said. She touched her peace-symbol necklace. "I was a hippie."

"You were?" His eyes went round. "Did you glow?"

Cherie laughed. "Oh, honey, did I ever. I glowed like a neon sign."

"I'll show you pictures," Maureen said. "She was beautiful."

"She's still beautiful," Daniel said, lifting his glass in a toast.

"Well. Flattery will get you everywhere." Cherie clinked glasses with him, then Riley wanted to join in. After much toasting and clinking, their meals were brought and everyone dug in as if they hadn't eaten in days.

After dinner they walked to Daniel's apartment. Ty wasn't there.

"This isn't too bad," Maureen said, looking around. Nothing was new but it wasn't too cluttered or dirty.

"I decided to clean the place up a little before I went back

to your house. It reminded me too much of dorm life." Daniel led them into his bedroom. He turned to Maureen. "Any chance you've got an extra set of sheets you can loan me? I don't think even bleach will help these." He lifted the ratty quilt to unearth equally ratty sheets.

Maureen pictured his house in Seattle, a three-bedroom craftsman with wood-shingle siding on a quiet, tree-lined street, a far cry from this tiny, street-noisy place. She caught Cherie's pointed look.

"I'd be glad to loan you some bedding," Maureen said. "Anything else you need?"

"Nope, thanks."

Cherie glanced at her watch. "I'm supposed to meet some friends in a few minutes, so I'll leave you. Thank you for dinner, Daniel." She hugged Riley. "We'll make a date soon, okay?"

"Okay. Auntie Cherie? You know my mom, right?"

"I know your mom very well. Your mom and grandma lived with me until your mom was six, just like you."

"Really?"

"That's right."

"She'll come back, right?" he said, almost whispering.

Maureen's throat ached. Why did he have so little faith in his mother returning? Why was he so insecure? Jess had never once left him.

"She'll be back just as soon as she's done with the TV show."

"You promise?"

“I promise.” Cherie looked at Maureen then Daniel. “In the meantime, you’ve got two doting grandparents and one doting great-aunt to spoil you rotten.”

“I don’t want to be rotten. I—”

“It’s an expression,” Daniel interrupted. “It’s an okay thing, bud. She means you’re going to have a whole lot of fun.”

“Oh. Okay.” He grinned finally.

“May I escort you where you’re headed?” Daniel asked Cherie.

“Wouldn’t that shock and delight my girlfriends, me walking into the club with a young stud on my arm.” She laughed. “Maybe another time. But thanks.”

They all left the apartment, Cherie heading in the opposite direction. Back at her house, Maureen loaded bedding and a fresh pillow into a shopping bag and brought it to Daniel where he was sitting with Riley, playing Go Fish.

“I added a can of air freshener,” she said.

Daniel grinned, and for the first time Maureen saw Riley in him. She’d never noticed before, maybe because she and Daniel hadn’t smiled at each other much.

“It did have a hint of unwashed student about it, didn’t it?” Daniel said.

“More than a hint.”

“All part of the adventure. Go Fish,” he said to Riley.

Maureen sat next to her grandson but addressed Daniel. “This is an adventure to you?”

“Isn’t it? Something unexpected. A chance to explore a part of the country I never have before—and not just for a weekend but for enough time to really get to know a place.”

“Is there a girlfriend at home who’s not too happy about this?” Almost instantly she folded her hands in her lap and tried not to fidget. She didn’t know how to take the nosy question back.

“Do you have any sixes, bud?” His eyes sparkled at her discomfort. “Not one in particular.”

“Go Fish. Papa has lots of girlfriends,” Riley said matter of factly. “Do you have any Ks?”

“What are Ks?”

“Kings?”

“Right. Yep. Here you go.”

Papa has lots of girlfriends. He’d played a wide field for as long as she’d known him, never committing to any one woman, and most of them substantially younger. She studied him now, playing the card game animatedly with Riley, making him giggle. She wondered what he was like in the classroom. It was hard to picture him in the role of English professor, as Cherie had pointed out. He didn’t fit any stereotypical mold. She bet his students loved him—

“You beat me again,” Daniel said, ruffling Riley’s hair, most of the gel having worn off during the course of the day. “I’ll hit the road.” He stood.

Riley threw himself against him. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“Hey, bud. You saw where I’m living. I won’t be far away.”

“Sleep in my bed. You’ll fit.”

A part of Maureen understood Riley’s fear. A different part was hurt that Riley didn’t want to be alone with her. It wasn’t as if they were strangers, after all.

“I’ll be seeing you lots. So much that you’ll get sick of me and wish I’d go away.” Daniel lifted him and rocked him side to side, Riley’s legs dangling and flying, making him giggle again. “You sleep tight.”

“Don’t let the bedbugs bite,” Riley finished. “Will you be here when I wake up in the morning?”

“I will. Or before your grandma heads out, anyway.”

Maureen followed him down the hall to the front door. “Thank you, Daniel.”

“No reason why we can’t work together on this. Give him some great memories.”

“I agree.”

“I know you hate me,” he said. “But this can be our chance for a new start, too. For Riley’s and Jess’s sake. And our own.”

“I don’t hate you.”

He lifted his brows.

“I resent you,” she said, then added, “with reason.”

“That sounds so much better.”

“And I’ve been really pissed off at you. And stuck pins in a voodoo doll that happens to look like you.” She smiled, taking the edge off the words.

“And if that doesn’t add up to hate…”

“I can see where you might think that.”

He grinned. “Your aunt’s quite a woman.”

“She is, indeed. I don’t know where I would be today without her.”

“I’d like to hear more about that sometime.”

“I’d like to tell you. Sometime.”

“Good night, Maureen. Sweet dreams.”

He walked away, and Maureen went off to tuck her sweet grandson in bed. How much had changed in just a day—Riley was hers for now, and Daniel? Well, there might be more to him than she’d thought. Time would tell.

But for now life didn’t get much better than this.

CHAPTER 5

Rileyism #3: “I have everything under control.”

The following morning Maureen paced her living room in front of the window. Back and forth, stop to look outside, back and forth again. Why hadn’t she asked for Daniel’s cell phone number? He was always late. She should’ve told him fifteen minutes earlier than she actually needed him to arrive. If she was late to work because of him…

She spotted him jogging up the street and hurried to the front door to fling it open.

“Good morning,” he said, as if nothing were wrong.

“You’re late.”

He merely raised his brows.

His hair was wet, either from a shower or the jog, which might have started an hour ago, for all she knew. He was annoyingly faithful about anything related to physical fitness, but not about everything else in life.

“I’m going to be late to work,” she said, arms crossed.

“You look…official,” he said of her gray pantsuit and crisp white blouse.

She didn’t think he was complimenting her. He wore not-new shorts he must’ve packed in his carry-on bag, and a Golden Gate Bridge T-shirt he must’ve bought since his arrival.

“If this is going to work for us, Daniel, you need to be on time.

I don't like starting my day frazzled."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, succeeding in making her feel like a shrew, when all she wanted was to catch her bus at the normal time and get to work at her normal time. The distance between Bernal Heights, where she lived, and the Mission District, where she worked, was short, but too far to walk in less than fifteen minutes.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked, forcing the harsh edge off her tone as they walked down her hallway, aware that Riley was within hearing range.

"Dead to the world." He held up the shopping bag she'd sent him home with the night before. "Mind if I use your washer? My stuff could be delivered this afternoon, but maybe not until tomorrow."

"Be my guest." She passed him a business card. "Here's my work information. Please call if you have any questions."

Riley pounced on him then and she was off to work. She did miss her usual bus, but still arrived at work just at eight o'clock. She didn't stop to chitchat with her coworkers, instead heading straight to her boss's office. It was empty, a rarity. Maureen left a note on the desk, then settled into her own office. Only one voice mail awaited her—

"Hi, Mom. I just wanted to let you know that I got here okay. I hope you forgive me. I really am doing this for my son, the same way you sacrificed a lot for me. I just don't have your patience to take it year by year. I kind of want it now. I know, I know. Gee,

what a surprise." Maureen could hear the smile in Jess's voice. "But you'll see. It'll be a good thing. I'll talk to you as soon as I'm allowed to. Tell Riley I love him. Bye."

The time stamp at the end of the message indicated Jess had called the day before, Sunday, apparently not willing to talk in person, probably not wanting to get an earful from Maureen. Smart girl.

Maureen might have surprised Jess, however, by not arguing with her, except to challenge her daughter about why she didn't feel she could've just asked if she could leave Riley instead of simply taking off as she did.

It was probably best for Riley, too, not talking to his mom. That way he could settle in. Maybe Jess was being responsible in that, too. If it was true that she really was pursuing this dream of hers to give herself and Riley a shot at independence and a good future, then Maureen couldn't fault her for it, just as Maureen had left Cherie's house and made her own way in the world.

The manner in which Maureen and Jess sought independence may be different, opposite really, but the goal was the same.

"Good morning, good morning." The cheerful greeting accompanied the arrival of Esperanza Ochoa, Maureen's coworker and friend, one of two full-time proofreader/editor/researchers with the company. She breezed into Maureen's office, looking gorgeous and rested, and landed in the chair opposite Maureen's desk, a bright smile on her face.

"Same to you, sunshine."

Anza leaned closer and singsonged in a whisper, “I’ve got a secret.”

“One you’re going to tease me about or share?”

“Share. But only with you. No one else can know, okay?”

“Do you really have to ask?” Maureen could guess the secret but waited for confirmation.

“I’m pregnant. Six weeks.”

Maureen flashed back to when she’d found out she was pregnant—just turned seventeen and scared to death. There’d been no happy glow on her face, like Anza’s now. No ecstatic husband, which Gabe undoubtedly was.

“That’s wonderful news! Congratulations,” Maureen said, coming around her desk to hug her friend and feeling a sudden rush of envy. “I’m so happy for you both,” she said, meaning it, but struggling past her own surprising emotions.

“Thank you.” Anza’s voice quavered and she hugged Maureen tighter. “It took a year, but finally I will be a mom. Finally.”

They moved apart as they heard someone walking nearby.

“How was your weekend?” Anza asked.

“Eventful. Can we have lunch today? I’ll tell you then.”

“It’s a date.”

“What’s a date?” Bernadette Martinez, the president and owner of Primero Publishing, strolled in. She was the most stylish woman Maureen knew, although the past five months since her husband had passed away had taken their toll. Until recently Bernadette looked ten years younger than the forty-eight

she really was. But who wouldn't look worn-out after losing her husband and inheriting the job of running a rapidly expanding company?

"Anza and I were just making a lunch date," Maureen said as her friend slipped out.

Bernadette took Anza's seat and held up the piece of paper Maureen had left on her desk. "You wanted to see me?"

"I wanted to let you know I won't be going on vacation as scheduled. We're postponing until August fourth."

"Okay. How come?"

"I have inherited my grandson for the next six weeks." She turned a framed photo on her desk toward Bernadette and gave her a short version of how Riley came to stay with her. "I think you can probably appreciate that I would like to spend as much time with him as possible, and since I normally am just getting home about the time he goes to bed, that's going to be difficult. I'm wondering if I could leave work earlier, say at five, and then work at home after he goes to bed?"

No clock ticked, yet Maureen heard one in her head. The past few months had been overwhelming, since they'd taken on the projects that Carlos had started but hadn't yet completed before his death. Maureen's job as the liaison between Primero and the various writers was crucial, as she kept track of every project and author.

"That would be okay," Bernadette said finally. "As long as it's only six weeks. You're a key player, after all, plus I don't want

others to think they can do the same thing."

Maureen hid her surprise. She'd been working ten-hour days since being hired nineteen years ago, and twelve-hour days for the past several months. Most of the other employees put in the same long hours. She never used up her annual sick leave, and had so much vacation carryover, she could be off for months with pay. Not that she would….

She thanked her boss and settled down to work, although not with her usual focus. Her life, which had seemed in perfect order—a steady boyfriend and being on the fast track at work for a promotion—was suddenly topsy-turvy.

It was difficult for Ted, too, she knew, although he'd called to say he'd gotten their itinerary changed, with only a small penalty and almost the same hotel arrangements, which seemed to ease his mind. She'd been reading a bedtime story to Riley and had rushed Ted through the conversation, then felt guilty about it. She would've called him back later, knowing he generally stayed up until midnight, but she'd fallen asleep on the couch, not waking up until 2:00 a.m., when she shuffled off to bed.

She hadn't talked to him this morning because he liked to sleep in, then work from home for a couple of hours before going to the office. Weekends were sometimes difficult for her because she woke up at six and he wanted to sleep until nine.

Maureen stared at the San Francisco-skyline poster on her wall and wondered what Riley and Daniel were doing.

She eyed her phone. Should she call home, even if just to say

hi to Riley? She'd woken up at six to find him in bed with her, and had no idea when he'd joined her. She couldn't remember Jess ever getting into bed with her during the middle of the night. In fact, she remembered telling Jess she had to stay in her own bed, that she was a big girl.

Not her finest moment as a mom. Look what she'd missed—waking up to that warm little body huddled close, needing her.

Maureen pressed her face into her hands for a second. She'd been a rules-and-regulations kind of parent.

Just like her father.

She'd learned her lessons the hard way. The one time she'd rebelled against his rules she'd ended up pregnant. She'd toed the line ever since. Had made Jess toe the line. Not that Jess had done so.

On the contrary, Jess had kept moving the line as it suited her, rarely putting a toe to it, and ending up in exactly the same position as Maureen at the same age—pregnant and unmarried, not yet done with high school. At least her daughter had finished school. And the baby's father had wanted to marry her. If he hadn't died…

Maureen sent an e-mail to the staff explaining about Riley and how she would be leaving at five and then working from home, so that everyone understood what was going on. She got back several nice notes, and a few people stopped in to personally tell her to enjoy her time with her grandson. Two coworkers were in line for the same promotion as she—Ginny Barber, who was in

charge of payroll and accounting, and Doug Fairlane, the office manager. Both Ginny and Doug had been with Primero longer than Maureen.

And those two also seemed to give her the heartiest farewells when she left at five that night. Normally the staff got along exceptionally well, but now that there was a competition brewing for the vice president position, there was a tension in the air not normally in evidence. She wished Bernadette would make up her mind soon, before the camaraderie suffered.

Maureen didn't know anyone on the five-o'clock bus, and it wasn't until she stepped off that she realized she didn't know what she would fix for dinner. When she was alone she usually heated up a frozen dinner. Who wanted to cook at eight o'clock? If Ted joined her, he picked up something on his way.

She should've shopped.

Maureen opened the door to an incredible aroma. She eyed two large suitcases with courier tags attached to the handles, then she wandered down the hall into the kitchen. Riley stood on a chair in front of the sink washing lettuce leaves, and Daniel stirred a mouthwatering mix in a large pot.

"Barefoot and cooking," she said, drawing their attention. "That's the way it should be."

"Hi, Grandma," Riley said. He didn't hop down from the chair to greet her, so she walked over and hugged him. "I'm making salad."

"So, I see." She eyed the bowl on the counter, filled halfway

with chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, avocado and green onions.

"I have to dry the lettuce real good so the dressing sticks."

"You're doing a great job." She looked at Daniel, wanting to set the right tone in front of Riley. "You didn't need to make dinner. But thank you."

"You're welcome. It's Riley's favorite."

"Papa's a good cooker."

"What is it?"

"Aubergine-and-black-bean chili," Daniel said. "And there'll be enough for leftovers for a couple of meals."

"Aubergine? It sounds…purple."

He laughed. "It's another name for eggplant."

"I see. You fancy up the name and it tastes better?"

"To the nonvegetarian, maybe. Oh, and we called your boyfriend and invited him for dinner, but we thought we'd surprise you. Why don't you go change, and I'll pour you a glass of wine?"

Geez, a girl could get used to this, she thought, a little dazed. She told herself she was giving in so easily to him sort of taking over her life and telling her what to do because she didn't want things uncomfortable for Riley. Was it really a lie if you only lied to yourself?

Maureen stopped just inside her bedroom door. On her bed were a couple of small stacks of laundry, all neatly folded, including her bras and underwear. She moved closer, pictured him tucking the bra cups inside each other and folding her

panties into neat little bundles. They weren't overly sexy, just beige or black, and nothing lacy or push-up, but the thought of him handling her private things and having that kind of intimate knowledge of her embarrassed her like nothing else had in a very long time.

Feeling her face heat up, she shoved the clothes into drawers and changed into jeans, a blue-striped blouse and white sneakers. She touched a finger to her tongue, then rubbed a spot of dirt off one sneaker. She was stalling, not knowing what to say to Daniel that wouldn't make her again sound like a shrew. But Riley was there, and she couldn't get angry at Daniel in front of him over what would be perceived as a normal household chore.

She went into the kitchen, keeping her gaze on Daniel. He turned just his head toward her, capturing her gaze, then he let his take a slow journey down and back up.

"I didn't have enough for a full load," he said, anticipating her possible tirade, she supposed. "Seemed like a waste of water and energy not to do yours at the same time."

Her full hamper had been sitting beside the washer. He couldn't have missed it.

But he could've ignored it.

"I hung your…delicates on the line out back. Figured you probably didn't put them in the dryer. Most women don't, anyway."

He was laughing at her. Oh, yes, he was having a great time at her expense.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said, finally finding her voice.

“Thank you?” He passed her a glass of merlot and kept his voice low. “You’re welcome, Double-D. I hope you’re going to invest in something a little more…lacy for the vacation.”

So, he’d even looked at the tag on her bra. “Not every man needs a crutch to arouse him,” she whispered, moving past him to where Riley was tearing up lettuce leaves and adding them to the salad bowl.

“Every man likes a woman who’s confident enough to want to please,” Daniel said. “We appreciate…effort.”

“That looks like a very good salad,” Maureen said to Riley. “Do you need any help?”

“I have everything under control,” he said, like a little adult, which made her smile.

“But if your grandma would like to set the table,” Daniel said, “that would be good.”

Maureen gathered plates, silverware and napkins. She stopped next to Daniel as she headed toward the dining room table. “You’re leaving right after dinner, right?”

“Of course.” He grinned, obviously liking the corner he’d backed her into. “Your boyfriend should be here any moment.”

“My boyfriend has a name, you know.”

“Yeah. But it’s more fun this way.”

She grabbed the plates a little tighter. “I thought we’d called a truce.”

“Are we arguing? I wasn’t arguing. I was being friendly.”

Her hands shook as she set the table. Why was she letting him get to her? She shouldn't give him that kind of power, but just ignore him, or tease him back.

However, six years of antagonism couldn't be erased in a day.

The doorbell rang. Grateful for the distraction, she hurried down the hall and opened the door.

"If I had my own key," Ted said, "you wouldn't have to—"

She flung herself into his arms, stopping any discussion about house keys. She had enough on her plate already.

"Well," he said, kissing her hello. "I missed you, too."

She wondered if he thought her underwear boring. Sex was fine between them. She had no complaints. Nor had he complained about the long T-shirt she wore to bed at night.

"This is nice," Ted said, "having you home so early. I'll bet Riley's happy."

Was that a subtle dig at her for not doing the same for him?

"It does feel good," she said. "Although you know I've got a few hours of work ahead after he goes to sleep."

"You don't have to remind me. I'm aware of what's expected."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know this is hard on you."

"I'm doing my best to be patient," he said.

Her conversation with Cherie the night before flashed in her mind. Did she defer to him? How would he react if she didn't?

And why did she, anyway? She liked to get along with people, but defer?

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