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# The Manny

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Wheels Up!

If you want to see rich people act really rich, go to St Henry's School for Boys at 3 p.m. on any weekday. *Nothing* makes rich people crazier than being around other rich people who might be richer than they are. Private school drop-off and pick-up really gets them going. It's an opportunity to stake their claim, show their wares and let the other parents know where they rank in the top .001 per cent of the top .0001 per cent.

A cavalcade of black SUVs, minivans and chauffeured cars snaked its way up the block beside me as I raced to my son's after-school game. I'd skipped another meeting at work, but nothing was going to keep me that day. Gingko trees and limestone mansions lined the street where a crowd gathered in front of the school. I steeled myself and waded into a sea of parents: the dads in banker suits barking into their phones and moms with their glamorous sunglasses and toned upper arms – many with dressed-up little darlings by their sides. These children played an important role in their parents' never-ending game of one-upmanship as they were trotted out in smocked dresses, shuttled from French tutor to Cello class and discussed like prize livestock at a 4-H Fair.

Idling in front of the school, with his tinted rear window half open, a cosmetics giant read about himself in the gossip columns. His four-year-old little girl watched a *Barbie Fairytopia* DVD on the small screen that dropped down from the ceiling of the vehicle while he finished the article. The nanny, in a starched white uniform, waited patiently in the front seat for him to inform her it was time to go inside.

A few yards down the block, a three-and-a-half-inch green lizard heel was reaching for the sidewalk from the back of a fat, silver Mercedes S600. The chauffeur flashed its yellow headlights at me. Next I saw a brown tweed skirt jacked up on a shapely thigh, ultimately revealing a thirty-something woman shaking out her honey-coloured hair while her driver sprinted like a madman to get her arm.

'Jamie! Jamie!' called Ingrid Harris, waving her manicured hand. Dozens of chunky gold bangles jangled as they slid down her arm.

I tried to shield my eyes from the glare. 'Ingrid. Please. I love you but no. I've got to get to Dylan's game!'

'I've been trying to reach you!'

I ducked into the crowd, knowing she would come after me.

'Jamie! Please! Wait!' Ingrid caught up to me, leaving her driver behind to contend with her two boys wailing from their car seats. She let out a huge breath as if the fifteen-foot walk from the Mercedes to the kerb had taxed her. 'Hooo!' Remember this is a crowd that touches down on actual pavement as seldom as possible. 'Thank God you were home last night!'

'No problem. Any time.'

'Henry is so in debt to you,' said Ingrid.

The burly chauffeur carried each of her younger boys in one graceful arc from their car seats to the kerb, as if he were placing eggs in a basket.

'The four Ambien. Henry was going hunting with some clients for five days, it was wheels up at 10 p.m. to Argentina and he was crazed!'

'Jamie.' Next, voice I loved. My friend Kathryn Fitzgerald. She commuted from Tribeca and she was wearing jeans and French sneakers. Like me, she wasn't one of those people who grew up on the Upper East Side and never touched a doorknob in their entire life. 'Hurry. Let's plough up front.'

As we started up the marble stairs, a white Cadillac Escalade pulled up to the kerb. You could tell a hundred feet away that there were children of a major CEO inside. It came to a stop and the aristocratic driver, wearing a bowler hat like Oddjob, walked around to open the door and the four McAllister kids piled out with four Filipina nannies – each holding a child's hand.

All four of the nannies were wearing white pants, white rubber-soled shoes and matching Dora the Explorer nurse's shirts with little Band-Aids all over them. There were so many little children and nurses in their tight little pack that they looked like a centipede making its way up the marble steps.

At five minutes after three, the school opened and the parents politely, but forcefully, pushed each other to get in. Up four flights of stairs to the gym, I could hear echoes of young male voices and the screech of sneakers. St Henry's fourth-grade team was already out practising in their royal-blue-and-white uniforms. I quickly scanned the court for my Dylan, but didn't see him. I looked up at the crowd to my right. The moms and dads from Dylan's school were beginning to gather on one side of the bleachers. Scattered among them were the team's siblings with their nannies representing every country in the United Nations. No Dylan. I finally spotted him

huddled on a bench near the locker-room door. He was still dressed in his khakis and white button-down shirt with the collar undone. His blue blazer was draped on the bench beside him. When he saw me, he squinted and looked away. My husband Phillip summoned the exact same expression when he was angry and feeling put upon.

'Dylan! I'm here!'

'You're late, Mom.'

'Sweetheart, I'm not late.'

'Well, some of the moms got here before you.'

'You know what? There's a line outside, four moms deep, and I can't cut the line. There's a lot of moms still coming up behind me.'

'Whatever.' He looked away.

'Honey. Where's your uniform?'

'In my backpack.' I could feel the waves of stubborn tension emanating from my son.

I sat down next to him. 'It's time to put it on.'

'I don't want to wear my uniform.'

Coach Robertson came over. 'You know what?' He put his arms in the air, signalling his exasperation. 'I'm not gonna force him into it every time. I told him he would miss the game, but I can't make him put the uniform on. If you wanna know the reality of the situation here, he's being ridiculous . . .'

'You know what I say, Coach? It's really not being ridiculous. OK?' This guy was never in tune with Dylan. I brought the coach to the side. 'We've all discussed this – Dylan's unease before a game. He's nine years old. It's his first year on a team.' The coach didn't seem to be moved, and he took off. Then I put my arm around Dylan. 'Honey. Coach Robertson isn't my favourite person, but he's right. It's time to put on the uniform.'

'He's doesn't even like me.'

'He likes all the boys the same, and even if he's tough, he just wants you to play.'

'Well, I'm not gonna.'

'Even for me?

Dylan looked at me and shook his head. He had big brown eyes and strong features with thick dark hair that never fell just right. Dylan's mouth smiled more than his eyes ever did.

'Dylan!!! Hurry!!!' Douglas Wood, an obnoxious little kid with freckles, a crew cut and a pudgy bottom waddled over. 'What's wrong with you, Dylan?'

'Nothing.'

'Well, how come you don't have your uniform on?'

'Because my mom had to talk to me. It's her fault.'

Coach Robertson, angry with Douglas for leaving the warm-up and with my son for his refusal to play at all, marched towards us pumping his elbows. 'Come on, kid. Time's up. Let's go.' He picked up Dylan's backpack and pulled him by his hand towards the locker room. Dylan rolled his eyes back at me and lumbered along, dragging his uniform behind him on the floor. I walked up towards the bleachers with an ache in my heart.

Kathryn, who'd gone ahead to save me a seat in the bleachers, was now waving to me from the fifth row on the St Henry's Boys' School side. She had twin boys in Dylan's grade, as well as a daughter at our nursery school. Her twins, Louis and Nicky, were fighting over a ball and Coach Robertson leaned down to whistle loudly into their ears to break it up. I watched Kathryn stand up to get a better look at their arguing, her long blonde ponytail cascading down the back of her worn suede jacket. As I edged by twenty people to slip in next to her, she sat down and squeezed my knee.

Kathryn smiled. 'We made it just in time.'

'Tell me about it.' I placed my tired head in the palms of my hands.

A few beats later, the Wilmington Boys' School team burst through the gym doors like an invading army. I watched my tentative son hang back beside the other players. His sweaty teammates ran back and forth, all in their last fleeting years of boyhood before the gawky ravages of adolescence took hold. They rarely threw the ball to Dylan, mostly because he never made eye contact and always jogged along the periphery of the team, safe outside any commotion. His lanky build and knobby knees made his movements less than graceful, like a giraffe making short stops.

'Dylan's not playing well.'

Kathryn looked at me. 'None of them play well. Look at them; they can barely get the ball up into the hoop. They're not strong enough yet.'

'Yeah, I guess. He's just down.'

'Not *always* down. It's just sometimes,' Kathryn answered.

Barbara Fisher turned around from the row in front of me. She was wearing tight jeans, a starched white blouse with the collar turned up against gravity and an expensive-looking fuchsia cable-knit sweater. She was too tan and as thin as a Giacometti statue.

'Ohhh, here's the busy-bee-worky-worky-mom at a game.'

I jerked back. 'I know it means so much to him.'

I looked over her head towards the boys.

Barbara moved her head up five inches to block my view and make another point. 'We were talking at the school benefit meeting about how hard it must be for you, never being able to get involved in Dylan's activities.'

She was so annoying.

'I like to work. But if you choose not to work outside the home, I can certainly understand. It's probably a more enjoyable lifestyle.'

'You're not doing it for the money. *Obviously*. Phillip's such a heavy-hitter lawyer these days.' She was whispering – she thought – but everyone around us could hear her. 'I mean, you can't possibly be contributing much financially on a scale that *matters*.'

I rolled my eyes at Kathryn. 'I actually make a pretty good salary, Barbara. But, no, I'm not really working for the money. It's just something I like to do. Call it a competitive streak. And right now I need to concentrate on Dylan's game because he can be competitive too, and I'm sure he'd like me to watch him play.'

'You do that.'

Kathryn pinched my arm too hard because she hated Barbara more than I did. I jumped at the pain and smacked her on the shoulder.

She whispered into my ear, 'Amazing Barbara didn't find a way to bring up the new plane. In case you missed the billboard, Aaron's Falcon 2000 jet finally got delivered this weekend.'

'I'm sure I'll hear about it soon,' I answered, staring out at the court. Dylan was now attempting to block a shot, but the player ran right around him towards the basket and scored. The whistle blew. Warm-up over. All the kids retreated to their sides in a huddle.

'You know what's so obnoxious?' Kathryn whispered to me.

'So many things.'

'They can't just say, "We're leaving at three for the weekend", which would actually mean they are leaving at 3 p.m., either by car or train or some commercial flight or whatever.' She leaned in closer to me. 'No, they want

you to know one thing: they're flying private. So suddenly they start talking like their pilots, "Oh, we're leaving for the weekend, and it's *wheels up* at 3 p.m."' She shook her head and grinned. 'Like I give a shit what they're doing in the first place.'

When I first married into this crowd, coming from middle-class, Middle American roots, these Upper East Side families naturally intimidated me. My parents, always donning sensible Mephistos on their feet and fanny packs around their waists, reminded me all too often that I should keep a distance from the people in this new-found neighbourhood – that back home in Minneapolis, it was easier to be haaaaapy. Though I've tried to adjust for the sake of my husband, I'll never get used to people throwing out their pilot's name in conversation as if he were the cleaning lady. 'I thought we'd take a jaunt to the Cape for dinner, so I asked Richard to please be ready at three.'

Dylan was on the bench with about ten other teammates as Coach Robertson threw the ball in the air for the first string. Thankfully, Dylan was excited by the game. He was talking to the kid next to him and pointing to the court. I relaxed a bit and let out a breath.

Two minutes later, a sippy cup ricocheted off my shoulder and landed in Kathryn's lap. We both looked behind us. 'So sorry!' said a heavily accented Filipina nurse. The McAllister centipede was trying to manoeuvre into a row of bleachers behind me. Two of the younger children were braying like donkeys. This was the kind of thing that really got Kathryn going. She was no stranger to poor behaviour from her own children, but she couldn't stomach the lack of respect the bratty Park Avenue kids spewed at their nannies.

She looked at them and turned to me. 'Those poor women. What they must put up with. I'm going to do it.

Right now. I'm going to ask them which day is which uniform character and see what they say.'

'Stop. Kathryn. Please. Who cares?'

'Hello? Like you, the obsessive list keeper, wouldn't want to know?' Kathryn smiled. 'Next time you're at Sherrie's house for a birthday party, sneak into the kitchen and go to the desk next to the phone. There's a bound colour-coded house manual that she had Roger's secretary type up. Instructions for everything – I mean every single thing you could imagine.'

'Like what?'

'I thought you weren't interested.'

'OK, maybe I am a little.'

'Timetables for the overlapping staff: first shift, 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., second, nine to five, and third, four to midnight. Schedules for the pets, for the dogs' walkers and groomers. Directives on which of the children's clothes should be folded or hung. How to organize their mittens and scarves for fall, for winter dress, for winter sports. Where to hang all the princess costumes in the walk-in cedar closet once they're ironed – yes, you heard me – after they are *ironed*. Which china for breakfast, lunch, dinner and season: seashells for summer, leaves for Thanksgiving, wreaths for the Christmas holidays. I can't even remember half of it.' Kathryn pressed on, 'It's priceless.'

'You know what's even sicker?' I added. 'I'd want to get cosy under my sheets with a mug of hot tea, and read every goddamn word of that insane manual before bedtime.'

Thirty minutes later, the game was going strong. Suddenly Wilmington scored and the crowd jumped to their feet and roared. I stepped on top of the bleacher to get a better look, almost falling on to the Barbara Fisher creature. Then Wilmington stole the ball again from St Henry's.

My Dylan, in sync with them for once, wildly trying to block the ball while his opponents threw it back and forth around the key. Time was running out before half-time. Wilmington was up one point. One of their players made a bold move to score again, but the ball bounced off the hoop. They grabbed the ball and tried again. This time, it bounced off the bottom corner of the backboard at a hundred miles an hour. Right at Dylan. Miraculously he caught it, and was completely stunned. Looking petrified, he surveyed the distance to his basket on the other side of the court, miles and miles to go before he scored. Then came an opening between two opposing guards and Dylan sprinted. The crowd cheered him on. I looked at the timer: 07–:06–:05–:04. We all counted the seconds before the buzzer rang. Dylan was directly under the basket. Oh please, God; scoring this shot would rock his world.

The shot was clear. He looked at me. He looked at his teammates rushing towards him. He looked back at the basket. 'Shoot, Dylan, shoot!!!' they screamed.

'C'mon, baby. C'mon, baby. Right up there, you can do it.' I dug my nails into Kathryn's arm. Dylan took the ball, grasped it in both his arms like a baby and fell to the floor sobbing. He just could not shoot. The half-time buzzer honked. Silence on the court. All eyes on my little mess of a boy.

## CHAPTER TWO



# *Morning Sickness*

'So what'd he say this morning?' My husband Phillip was leaning over his sink naked, wiping a dab of shaving cream off his ear with a thick white towel.

'He says he's fine, but I know he isn't.' I stood half-dressed at my own sink three feet from him, jamming the mascara wand back into the tube. 'I just know he isn't. It was really bad.'

'We're going to work together to get him through this, Jamie,' Phillip answered calmly. I knew he thought I was overreacting.

'He doesn't want to talk about it. He always talks to me. *Always*. Especially at night, when he's going to bed.' I crinkled the crow's-feet around my eyes.

'By the way, I know what you're thinking right now and you look thin and very young for thirty-six, and, secondly, I don't blame Dylan for not wanting to relive it. Give him a few days. Don't worry, he's gonna make it.'

'That was a big moment, Phillip, I told you that last night.'

'Fourth grade is tough. He's going to move on. I promise, and I'm going to make sure to get him there.'

'You're so good to try to reassure me. But still. You just don't understand.'

'I do, too! There was a lot of pressure on the kid,' Phillip continued. 'And he freaked out. Let it rest or you'll make it worse.' He patted my bottom and walked towards his dressing room. At the door, he turned around and winked at me, his expression full of his easy confidence.

He peeked back into the bathroom. 'Enough with Dylan. I have a surprise for you!'

I knew. The shirts. I tried very, very hard to switch gears.

Phillip disappeared again into the bedroom and yelled behind him. 'You're going to faint when you see what finally arrived!'

The shirts lay nestled in a large navy felt box on the bed. Phillip had been waiting for them with more anticipation than a child on Christmas Eve. When I returned to the bedroom, he had pulled the first two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar custom-made shirt from the box and was carefully peeling off a sticker that held the red tissue paper wrapping together. The tissue was thick and expensive, soft like a chalkboard on one side and shiny and slick on the other. The paper made a loud, crackling noise as he tore it open to reveal a shirt with wide yellow and white candy stripes. Very British aristocracy and very every other lawyer we knew.

I had no patience for shirts that morning. I walked down the hall towards the kitchen.

'Jamie! Come back here. You didn't even . . .'

'Give me a minute!'

I came back stirring my coffee and clutching the newspaper under my elbow.

'The kids are getting up. You have two minutes for your little shirt show.'

'I'm not ready yet.'

I sat in the corner armchair and started reading the headlines.

'Just look at this!' Phillip, delighted with himself, slipped the yellow shirt on his broad six-foot-two frame. A few wet blond curls covered the top of the back collar and he combed his wavy hair back, and then slicked it down with the palm of his hand. He chuckled to himself and hummed a happy little tune as he buttoned himself in.

'Very nice, Phillip. Nice cloth. Good job on that choice.'

I went back to my papers and out of the corner of my eye, I saw him head towards his mahogany dressing room with an ever-so-light skip and rummage through a silver bowl that he had won at a sailing regatta in high school. He picked out three sets of cuff links and placed them on top of his bureau – a little ritual that only developed once Phillip began making good money and could afford to have more than one set of good cuff links. He chose his favourite Tiffany gold barbells with navy-blue lapis marbles on either end.

'OK, honey.' I threw my papers down and headed for the door. 'We done here? Mind if I . . .'

A dark storm cloud appeared out of nowhere. 'Shit!'

There was clearly a very big problem with his new shirt. Phillip was trying to jam the cuff links into the holes that were sewn too small. This made him what one might call angry.

He took off the yellow striped shirt and squinted.

Our five-year-old Gracie walked in rubbing her eyes. She grabbed him around his slender thigh.

'Pumpkin. Not now. Daddy loves you very much, but not now.' He shooed her over to me and I picked her up.

Phillip returned to the bed, no skip in his gait now, and took out another custom-made shirt; lavender and white stripes this time. He paused and breathed rather deeply, kind of like a bull in a Madrid ring before it

charges. He held the starched shirt in front of him and cocked his head sideways as if to help him remain positive. Standing there in his blue Oxford cloth boxers, white T-shirt and charcoal socks, he put on the brand-new shirt and again attempted to stuff his lapis barbell cuff links into the holes. Again they didn't fit. Our Wheaten Terrier Gussie loped in, sat on his hind legs and cocked his head sideways like Phillip had just done.

'Not. Now. Gussie. OUT!!!' The dog cocked his head in the other direction, but his body, rigid and firm, remained in place.

I leaned against our bedroom doorway biting my lip, with Gracie in my arms.

Third-generation Exeter, Harvard, Harvard Law attorneys do not possess tremendous psychological apparatus for dealing with life's little disappointments. Especially the ones like Phillip who were born and bred on Park Avenue. Nannies have raised them, cooks have served their meals and doormen have silently opened their doors. These guys can win and lose three hundred million of their clients' dollars in the blink of an eye and retain their cool, but God forbid their driver isn't where he's supposed to be after a dinner party. When a glitch discomforts my own husband, his reaction is not, in any scenario in the history of the world, commensurate with the problem at hand. As a rule, it's the most insignificant events that unleash the most seismic explosions.

This morning was one of those times. This was also one of those times when Daddy's strict rules about swear words didn't apply.

'Fucking Mr Ho, obsequious fucking midget, comes here from Hong Kong, charges me a goddamn fortune for ten fucking custom-made shirts, in two separate goddamn fittings and the guy can't sew a goddamn buttonhole? Two hundred and fifty dollars can't get me the right

goddamn fucking buttonhole?' He stormed back into his dressing room.

I placed Gracie under the covers of our bed, with tightened lips and big saucer eyes. Even at five, she knew Daddy was being a big fat baby. She also knew if she said anything right now, Daddy would not react favourably. Michael, our two-year-old, toddled in and reached his hands in the air next to the bed, signalling he wanted help getting up. I placed him next to Gracie and kissed his head.

I waited while I struggled with the zipper on the back of my blouse, knowing . . .

'Jamieeeeeeeeee!'

When Phillip proposed to me, he told me he wanted a woman with a career, a woman who first and foremost had interests outside the home. He declared himself a modern man, one who didn't care to have his mundane needs serviced by a wife. A decade later, I beg to differ. I put on the Pinky Dinky Doo tape for the kids and calmly walked towards the voice now in the study, wondering, at that exact moment, how many women across America were dealing with early-morning husband tantrums over absolute nonsense.

'How many times do I have to tell Carolina NOT to touch the contents on my desk? Would you please remind her that she will lose her job if she once again takes the scissors off my desk?'

'Honey. Let's try to remember we're just dealing with a cuff-link problem here. I'm sure she didn't take them, you must have put them . . .'

'I'm sorry, honey.' He kissed my forehead and squeezed my hand. 'But I *always* put them in this leather cup right here so I know where to go when I need them. Fucking little idiots. Fucking Mr Ho.'

'Phillip, cool it. Do not call Chinese people little idiots.

I know you don't mean that. Stop that, please. It's extremely offensive. I'll get you another shirt.'

'I do not want another shirt, Jamie. I want to find some small scissors, preferably some nail scissors so that I can cut a little bit out of the hole.'

'Phillip, you will ruin your shirt if you do that.' I retrieved a perfectly fine laundered shirt from his closet. At the sight of it, he closed his eyes and took some long deep breaths through his nose.

'I'm sick and tired of my old shirts.'

He jerked open the drawers of his desk and rummaged through each one until he found a pair of small silver nail scissors. Then for the next two minutes I watched my husband – a man who was a partner in a prestigious law firm – try to operate on the expensive Egyptian cotton.

The cuff link went through the hole and fell to the floor. 'Fuck, now the goddamn cuff-link hole's *too* big.'

Dylan picked this unfortunate moment to enter the scene. He had no idea what was going on and didn't care.

'Dad, I heard that. You said the F-word so you owe me a dollar. Mom can't do my math. She can't even do percentages.' He thrust a fourth-grade math book at his father. 'I need you to help me do it.'

Dylan was dressed for school in a blue blazer, striped tie, khakis and rubber-soled loafers. Even though he'd tried to smooth the top of his head down with water, there was still a clump of messy hair sticking out the back of his head. I reached out to give my son a hug but he shrugged me off.

'Not right now, Dylan.' Phillip studied the enlarged holes and kept poking at them with the nail scissors. 'I've got a major problem here.'

'Phillip, I told you, you're just going to ruin your new . . .'

'Let . . . me . . . do . . . what . . . I . . . need . . . to . . . do . . . to . . . get . . . to . . . my . . . client . . . meeting . . . on . . . time . . . so . . . that . . . I . . . can . . . make . . . a . . . living . . . here.'

'Mom says she forgets how to multiply fractions.'

'Dylan, now is not the time to be asking for help with work you should have done yesterday.' Phillip was trying to be gentle, but his voice came out high-pitched and strained. Then he softened a bit, remembering. He sat down in his desk chair so he could be eye level with his son. 'Dylan. I know you had a really really bad experience on your basketball team yesterday and . . .'

'Did not.'

Phillip looked at me for guidance; he hadn't gotten home last night in time to even talk with Dylan. 'You didn't have a, uh, rough time at the game?'

'Nope.'

'OK, Dylan. Let's forget the game for now and talk about the math . . .'

'Just so you know, I don't ever want to talk about that game. Because it's not important. My homework is important and it's too hard.' Dylan crossed his arms, and with a wounded look on his face, stared at the floor.

'I understand.' Phillip was really trying to reason here. 'That's why I want to discuss the math situation as well. How come you didn't finish it last night? Is it because you were upset after the game?'

'I told you! I wasn't upset! The game doesn't matter! We're supposed to be talking about why you can't help with my math. Alexander's dad *always* does his math homework with him *and* picks him up on his tandem bicycle after school.'

'Alexander's daddy is a violinist and Alexander lives in a hovel.'

'Phillip, *please*! Grown-up time out. Come with me.' I

grabbed his hand and pulled him back into his dressing room and closed the door.

He winked at me. I crossed my arms. He clenched his hands like two big suction cups on my bottom and pulled me into him. Then he kissed me up and down my neck.

'You smell so good. So clean. I love your shampoo,' he whispered.

I wasn't having any. 'You have got to listen to yourself this morning.'

'I'm sorry. It's the client meeting. It's gotten me nervous. And now you've gotten me hot.'

I slapped his hand. 'You can't say Chinese people are little idiots within earshot of the kids. It's so offensive to me, first of all, and if they ever heard you . . .'

'You're right.'

'And if Alexander lives in a small apartment, you don't need to use that as a criticism against his father, who happens to be a world-class musician. What the hell kind of message do you think that sends?'

'That was bad.'

'So what are you thinking? You're driving me crazy.'

He tried to unzip my shirt. 'You're driving *me* crazy.' He tickled the back of my ribcage.

Gracie banged on the door.

'Mommy!'

'Stop.' I laughed, despite myself. 'I can't take it. I've already got three children. I don't need a fourth. It's a cuff-link hole, OK? Can you try to get a grip?'

'I love you. I'm sorry. You're right. But those shirts cost me a lot of money and you would think . . .'

'Please.'

'Fine. Let's start again.' He opened the door for me, gallantly motioned for me to go through it and carried Gracie back into the study like a bundle of wood under his arm.

Dylan was staring out the window, still furious. Phillip sat down at his desk chair and concentrated once again on his son. 'Dylan. I know the homework's hard. I suppose if you can give me some time and not ask when I'm rushing to the office.'

'You weren't here yesterday, or I would have asked you to help then.'

'I'm sorry.' Phillip grabbed Dylan's hands and tried to look him in the eye. But Dylan pulled away. 'You're a big boy now and you're old enough to do your own homework without your mother or father. If you need a tutor, then we can discuss it, but it is almost seven thirty and I have my car waiting and you have to get to school on time.'

Dylan flew on to the sofa in abject frustration. 'Oh, maaaaaan.' He laid spread-eagle on his back, his eyes buried in the crook of his elbow. He was too old to cry easily, but I know he wanted to. I also knew that if I went to hug him, his fragile composure would crumble and he would lose it. I kept a safe distance.

'All the moms can't do the math homework, and all the dads in my class have to do it for everyone. It's not fair that you won't help me.'

'Were you spending too much time on your Xbox?' Phillip looked at me. 'Jamie, we've got to start monitoring his time with those screens, it's just too . . .'

'Dad, you're the one who bought me Madden 07!'

'He doesn't play video games until he's finished with his homework. He knows the rules,' I answered. 'You know, today'd be a good day to ease up on the rules around . . .'

'Dylan,' he said tenderly, now sitting on the edge of the couch. 'It's just that Daddy has a hard time understanding sometimes. I love you very much and I am so proud of you and I will figure out some time tonight to get this done.' He tapped him on the nose. 'You got it?'

'Yeah.' Dylan stifled a smile.

Gracie appeared at the doorway of Phillip's office with a small pink pair of plastic Barbie scissors and raised them in silent offering.

Phillip looked at her. Then at me. Then he laughed out loud. 'Thank you, honey.' He pulled Gracie over and ruffled her hair. Then he picked up Dylan and gave him a huge bear hug. Just when I was convinced Phillip was a real monster, he would do something that would make me think that maybe I could still love him. In my moments of deep honesty, I tell my friend Kathryn I might leave Phillip at some point down the road. We drift, he's impossible, and then he acts responsible and fatherly and I think I'm going to try to make this work after all.

'Dylan, we're going to get through this together. As a family.' Then he turned to me. 'Give me the old shirt. I'm late. Call Mr Ho for me and tell him he's got twenty-four hours to fix all ten shirts. If I have to deal with him, I'll call in a hit squad.'

We rode down in the elevator together with backpacks and cell phones and jackets flying everywhere: my husband, Dylan, Gracie and baby Michael, Carolina the housekeeper with our Wheaten Terrier Gussie, and our nanny Yvette. The fact that Phillip had moved beyond his buttonhole tantrum didn't mean he was actually going to engage with the rest of us. Dressed in his lawyer suit and shiny black shoes, he was readying himself for a client meeting and successfully ignoring the chaos around him. Jamming his cell-phone earpiece into his ear, he started dialling his voice-mail with his thumb while he pressed a thick bunch of folded newspapers into his hip with his upper arm.

I picked up Gracie with one hand and put a clip in my hair with the other. Yvette, filled with pride over her well-

kept charges, dressed my two little kids like every day was a Sunday church day in Jamaica. And since she'd been with us since Dylan was born, I didn't interfere. Gracie was wearing a red gingham dress with matching red Mary Janes and a huge white bow the size of a 767 on the side of her head.

'Mommy, are you going to pick me up or is Yvette?' Gracie started whimpering. 'You never pick me up.'

'Not today because, you know, Tuesday is a work day, sweetheart. I have to go to work all day. But remember I try to pick you up on Mondays and Fridays.' 'Try' being the operative word there: though I worked at the network part-time, my hours were erratic and increased to full-time when a story broke. This lack of consistency wasn't easy on the kids. Gracie's delicate face began to curl up in that look I knew so well. I brushed her hair down with the palm of my hand and kissed her forehead. I whispered, 'I love you.'

Dylan's backpack was bigger than he was. He pulled it around to find the Tamagotchi on his keychain and began poking at it like a mad scientist. Just like Daddy with his BlackBerry.

'I can't do a conference call at 3 p.m.' Even if we're in an elevator, Phillip insists on returning voicemail messages the second he hears them. 'Call my secretary, Hank, she'll work it out. Now let me give you a full report on the Tysis Logics litigation . . .'

'Phillip, please, can't that wait? It's just so rude.'

Phillip closed his eyes and patted me on the head and then put his finger up to my lips. I wanted to bite it off. '. . . It's just going to be a hell of a crapshoot for the following three reasons – let's start with the stock split; we don't even have enough shares authorized . . .'

Michael grabbed at my skirt from his stroller and dug his nails into the inside seam, tearing a few stitches out.

Carolina pulled tighter on Gussie's leash as the elevator stopped on the fourth floor. Phillip shot her a scary look; apparently he hadn't recovered from the missing nail scissors.

The elevator door slid open for a white-haired, seventy-eight-year-old man wearing a striped bow tie and a beige suit. Mr Greeley, a stuffy Nantucket old-timer from apartment 4B, had recently retired, but still wore his suit every morning to get his coffee and papers. Somehow he mustered the courage to step into the packed elevator only to have Gussie begin feverishly scratching and sniffing at his groin as if he'd found a rabbit hole. Carolina yanked at the leash and now the dog was standing on his hind legs with his front paws on the door. Phillip was still barking into his cell phone about battle plans. I nodded at Mr Greeley with an apologetic smile and a pleading look in my eyes. He, meanwhile, focused on the elevator's descending numbers, pointedly ignoring us all. In the two years we had lived in this building, he had never once smiled back at me – all I ever got was a discreet nod.

The door slid open again and we poured into the marble lobby. Clutching his overflowing, Dunhill briefcase, Phillip waved goodbye and rushed ahead, jamming his earpiece further into his ear. In his distracted mind, his meeting had started five minutes ago. 'Love you!' he yelled without looking back. The doorman, Eddie, offered to carry something, but Phillip paid no attention and bolted into his waiting car. As his Lexus peeled away, I could see the *Wall Street Journal* snap open in front of him.

Yasser Arafat's motorcade had nothing on ours. With Phillip's car out of the way, my driver, Luis, pulled up in front of the awning in our monstrous navy-blue Suburban. Luis is a sweet, forty-year-old Ecuadorian man who works at our garage and speaks about four words of English.

All I really know about him is that he has two kids and a wife at home in Queens. For fifty dollars a day – all cash – he helps me drop off Dylan at eight and Gracie at eight thirty. Three days a week he also waits while I come home, change and play with Michael, then he takes me to work at the television network by ten. It doesn't escape me that for two hundred and fifty dollars a week in Minneapolis, my mother could feed us, pay all the utility bills and still have some left over.

Eddie helped me place Gracie into the car seat as Dylan climbed clumsily over her, brushing her face with his backpack. 'Dylan! Stop it!' she yelled. I kissed Michael in his stroller who reached out for me and tried desperately to yank off the shoulder straps binding him to his seat. In an instant, Yvette put a tiny Elmo doll in front of his face and he smiled.

In the rear-view mirror I watched Gussie's Doggy Daycare van take our place. On the side of the van it read 'The Pampered Pooch'. The doors slid open magically for Gussie, and Carolina managed to get in a big kiss on his head before he disappeared inside to greet his slobbering pals.

I closed my eyes as we drove the twenty blocks up Park Avenue to Dylan's school, grateful to be out of eye-contact range with everyone. Luis never spoke at all, just smiled his warm Latin grin and concentrated on dodging the taxis and delivery trucks around us.

Gracie was young enough that the motion of the car made her sleepy, so she stuck her thumb in her mouth, her eyes fluttering like butterflies as she resisted slumber. Dylan grabbed some electronics from the back of the seat. His thumbs sped over the keys of his Game Boy as he knew I'd let him continue if he put the sound button on mute.

'Gracie, stop! Mooooooooom!'

My head ached. 'What is going on?!'

'Gracie kicked my hand on purpose so I missed the last few seconds and now I'm back at level three!'

'Did not!' Gracie screamed, suddenly very alert.

'Dylan. Please,' I pleaded.

'Why are you taking her side?' he screamed.

'I'm not taking sides, it's just that she's five and I think you can move on. We've talked about this.'

'But it's so wrong what she did, Mooooom. She made me lose my game.' He threw the Game Boy on the floor and stared out his window, his eyes welling with tears. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea for him to take a break from Dr Bernstein. He hated going to the psychiatrist and said that all they did was play Monopoly and build model airplanes. I felt forcing him to go was stigmatizing him, as he didn't even have a formal diagnosis such as the ubiquitous Attention Deficit Disorder. And, I didn't want to pathologize a situation which seemed primarily to be about sadness and loss of self-esteem, more than likely due to an absent dad, and, yes, maybe a harried, distracted mom too – though it pains me to say that.

I looked back at my son and his Game Boy on the car floor. Dr Bernstein said it was important to show empathy with Dylan, to acknowledge his feelings. 'I'm sorry, Dylan. That must be really frustrating. Especially when you were about to win.'

He didn't answer.