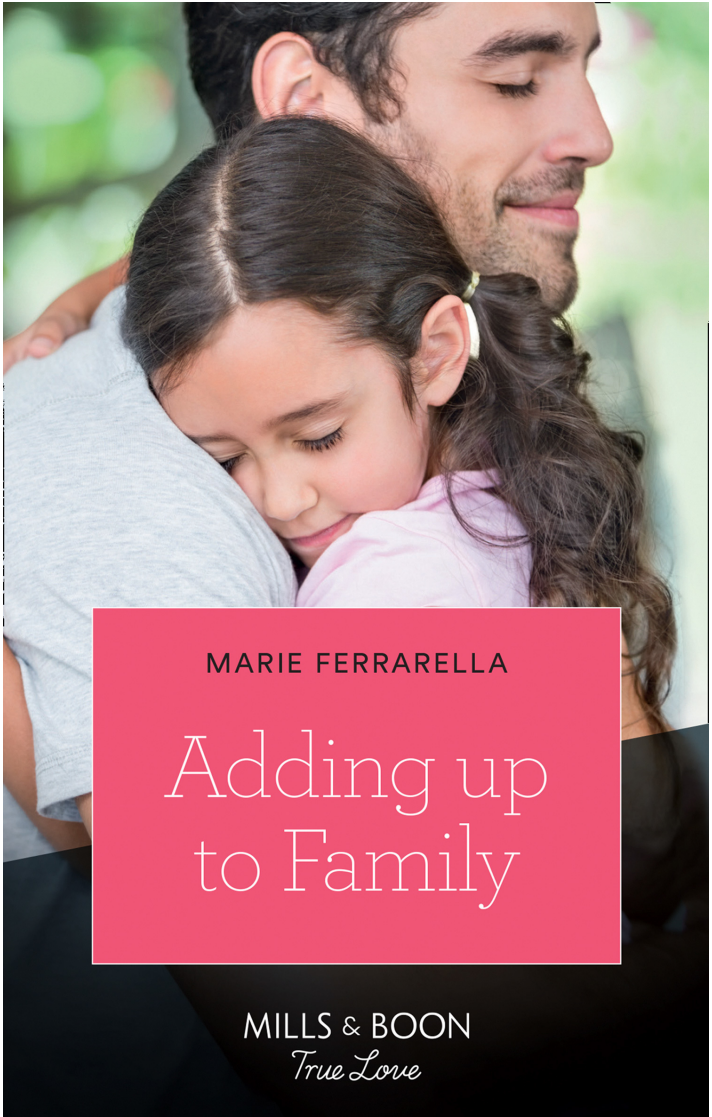

MARIE FERRARELLA

Adding up to Family

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Marie Ferrarella
Adding Up To Family

Аннотация

1+2 = Happily-Ever-After…When widowed Steve Holder needs a housekeeper who can also help with his precocious 10-year-old, they assign Becky Reynolds. Becky gently solves the equation of Steve's daughter, but the moody widower requires more calculation. Love could be the solution…!

For the Matchmaking Mamas,

1 + 2 = Happily-Ever-After

When widowed rocket scientist Steve Holder needs a housekeeper who can also help with his precocious ten-year-old, The Matchmaking Mamas assign Becky Reynolds. The math whiz turned domestic engineer gently solves the equation of Steve's daughter, but the moody widower requires more calculation. Love is definitely part of the solution! Becky just needs to find the right algorithm to solve the equation to Steve's heart.

USA TODAY bestselling and RITA® Award–winning author **MARIE FERRARELLA** has written more than two hundred and seventy-five books for Mills & Boon, some under the name Marie Nicole. Her romances are beloved by fans worldwide. Visit her website, marieferrarella.com.

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Adding Up to Family

Marie Ferrarella

MILLS & BOON

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ADDING UP TO FAMILY

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To
Patience Smith Bloom,
Congratulations on twenty years
As a fantastic editor.
Here's to the next twenty.
May we see it together.

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Prologue

"Please, Celia, you're a mother. You must know what I'm talking about," Bonnie Reynolds implored, obviously attempting to appeal to her longtime friend's maternal instincts. "For the first twelve years of that girl's life, I felt as if I could barely keep up with her. Even her homework assignments were so far beyond my own understanding, I had a headache every time I tried to check it."

Despite the situation that had brought her to Celia, there was pride echoing in Bonnie's voice as she added, "Rebecca whizzed through her studies like it was child's play—at a time when she was little more than a child herself."

Celia Parnell smiled understandingly at the distraught woman sitting opposite her in her Bedford, California, office.

When Bonnie had come in, looking as if she was at her wit's end, Celia had closed the door to her small inner office to ensure privacy. Speaking calmly, she had poured them both a cup of vanilla chai tea. She'd urged the trim brunette to take a seat and tell her exactly what was troubling her.

And just like that, the words poured out of Bonnie like a dam whose retaining wall had suddenly cracked in half.

Listening, Celia nodded. It was a story she was more than a little familiar with.

"Rebecca had a wonderful job, Celia. An absolutely wonderful job—for three years. And then one day she decided to

just up and leave it. Just like that." Bonnie snapped her fingers. "Don't get me wrong. When you first offered Rebecca a job with your company, I was grateful. I thought that this—this *wrinkle* was something she needed to work out and then she'd be back to herself again. In the interim, she was still earning money. But, Celia, that girl is *wasting* her potential. You know she is," Bonnie cried, sitting so close to the edge of her chair, she looked as if she was in danger of falling off it if she so much as took in a big breath.

"Breathe, Bonnie," Celia counseled.

"I *am* breathing—and very nearly hyperventilating," the other woman cried, very close to tears now. "Celia, Rebecca graduated from MIT at eighteen. *Eighteen!*" she stressed.

"I remember," Celia replied calmly.

But Bonnie only grew more agitated. "And she did it on a full scholarship, because her father, that rat, ran out on us, leaving me with nothing but debts and no way to pay for anything without working two jobs! That meant hardly ever seeing Rebecca, and yet she turned out like a gem."

"I know," Celia said, doing her best to continue to sound calm.

She had a feeling that she knew where this was going, but she allowed the other woman to say her piece, hoping that Bonnie would find a way to calm herself down and not be so hopeless about her daughter's current situation. Because if there was anything she'd learned these last few years, it was that no situation was hopeless.

“When she first got that job at the engineering firm—practically the best aerospace firm in the country—I was in seventh heaven. But after three years, the bottom suddenly dropped out for her. Without any warning, Rebecca decided that she was ‘burned out.’ Burned out,” Bonnie repeated, shaking her head. “What does that even *mean*?”

“That she worked so hard, exceeding all expectations for so long, that she wound up exhausting herself,” Celia told her friend. “She just needs to recharge her batteries.”

“She’s been *recharging* now for three years,” Bonnie lamented. “My brilliant daughter has been *cleaning houses* for three years,” the woman cried, looking at Celia for her understanding.

“I know, Bonnie. I’m the one who writes her paychecks,” she replied with a smile.

As if worried that she might have insulted her, Bonnie quickly apologized. “Look, Celia, I meant no disrespect—”

“None taken,” she replied serenely.

Bonnie let out a shaky breath, then continued. “But I am afraid—no, terrified—that Rebecca is just going to go on cleaning houses forever. That she’s never going to be my Rebecca again.”

“There is a possibility that she’s happier this way,” Celia suggested.

Bonnie looked stunned at the mere suggestion that this could be the case. “No, she’s not. I know she’s not. And right now, she’s so busy cleaning other people’s houses that she’s not doing

anything to put her own life back together again. She lives in a silly little apartment, for heaven's sake."

"How's that again?" Celia asked, slightly confused. She interacted with the young woman under discussion all the time, and from where she stood, Rebecca seemed rather content.

"She's not *dating*," Bonnie complained, verbally underlining the word. "She's cleaning other people's houses and not saving up to buy her own house."

Hiding her amusement, Celia said, "I thought she liked living in an apartment."

Bonnie let out a long sigh. "That's okay for now—but what about later? She's not thinking about later," she complained, clearly irritated with the situation. "Am I making any sense to you?"

"Actually, I think you are. You're not upset that Becky's not working herself into a frazzle in the engineering world. What you're actually upset about is that she's not looking for a husband."

Bonnie pressed her lips together. Hearing it said out loud, she had to admit that it sounded rather old-fashioned, as well as self-centered. But it was still the truth and there was no point in denying it.

After releasing another long, frustrated breath, she confessed, "I want grandchildren, Celia. Is that such a horrible thing?"

Celia laughed. "No, not at all, Bonnie. Been there, done that. I understand perfectly what you're going through."

The subject was touching on something that she and her two best friends, Maizie and Theresa, had begun doing almost eight years ago. It had started as a spur-of-the-moment undertaking to find a husband for Maizie's daughter, without the young woman suspecting what they were up to. But the venture had turned out to be so successful, all three of them began doing it as a hobby on the side.

The women still maintained their own businesses, but they all agreed that it was matchmaking that afforded them the most satisfaction.

Leaning forward, Celia beamed at the woman. "Bonnie, I think that I just might have a solution for you."

"Oh please, tell me," her friend all but begged. "After waiting three years for this to resolve itself, I'm ready to listen to anything and even make a deal with the devil."

"Luckily," Celia told her with a smile, "it won't have to go that far."

Chapter One

"Mrs. Parnell? This is Steve Holder," the deep male voice on the other end of the phone said.

Celia recognized the name. Steve was one of her sporadic clients, making use of her services whenever he suddenly found himself without a housekeeper. Although she didn't remember all her clients, she remembered the ones who were special, and Steve Holder's case was. A widower, he was struggling to raise a preteen daughter on his own.

And Celia had just been thinking of him.

"Steve," she said with pleasure. "How is everything?"

"Not good, I'm afraid," he replied honestly. "It happened again."

Celia didn't have to guess what he was talking about. The young aerospace engineer wouldn't be calling her just to shoot the breeze or talk aimlessly. He was far too conscientious about how he used his time—and hers—for that.

"I take it that you've had another housekeeper quit?" There was no judgment in Celia's voice, only sympathy. She knew Steve to be a very personable man. Unfortunately, for one reason or another, the housekeepers he employed seemed to have no staying power. She suspected that it had to do with his daughter. Incredibly intelligent, the ten-year-old was becoming increasingly difficult to handle.

She heard Steve sighing as he answered, "Yes."

Since she needed the information to update her files, Celia tactfully asked, "May I ask what happened?"

Steve had to admit that at least this housekeeper, who had lasted longer than the others, had a viable excuse for leaving. "Mrs. Pritchett's daughter just had a baby and Mrs. Pritchett is moving to Seattle to help her take care of the new addition. She already told me that she didn't think she'd be coming back," he added.

"Was it a girl or boy?" Celia asked.

He wasn't a people person and had to pause and think for a

minute before he could answer the question. “Girl,” he finally said.

“That’s lovely,” Celia said with genuine feeling. “But that does leave you in an immediate bind, doesn’t it, dear?”

He appreciated how direct the woman was. No polite beating around the bush. He restated his position. “Well, I can have you and your company clean my house once every two weeks, and Stevi’s going to school right now, but I do need someone to cover the hours when she’s home and I’m still at work.”

“She’s going to school?” Celia repeated, surprised. “But it’s summer.”

“I know. Stevi’s going to summer school. She wanted to take some classes so she could get ahead. It was her idea, not mine,” he added quickly, before Mrs. Parnell could accuse him of robbing his daughter of her childhood. He was pleased she wanted to learn, but had to admit that he was really beginning to miss his little “buddy.” Stevi had begun to change on him in the last few months.

“My daughter’s suddenly gone serious on me, Mrs. Parnell,” he confessed. “She doesn’t even want to be called ‘Stevi’ anymore. She’s ‘Stephanie’ now. And I’ve got this feeling that those fishing trips we used to take might just be a thing of the past.”

Steve took his work very seriously. These outings he used to take with his daughter were what he’d looked forward to, a way to wind down. And now it appeared that this might be changing.

“Not necessarily, Steve. Your daughter could just be broadening her base, not shifting her focus,” Celia pointed out. “Ten-year-olds have been known to change their minds a great deal at this age.”

He could only hope, Steve thought. “Could I talk *you* into becoming my housekeeper?” he asked wistfully.

Steve knew it wasn’t possible, but if it were, having the woman as his housekeeper would be an ideal solution.

If he could put in an order for the perfect grandmother, it would be Mrs. Parnell. He was beginning to feel as if he knew his daughter less and less these days, but he was fairly certain that Stevi—Stephanie, he amended—would get along very well with her.

“I would if I could, Steve,” Celia answered kindly. “But I’m afraid my company keeps me very busy these days. Otherwise—”

“I know,” Steve said, cutting her short. He didn’t want the woman feeling that he was serious. “I just thought I’d give it a shot.”

Celia knew he was attempting to politely extricate himself from the conversation, but she detected an underlying note of bewilderment and even sadness, now that she listened carefully. She didn’t think she remembered ever hearing him sound down before.

“Steve, I wouldn’t give up on the idea of finding a decent housekeeper just yet.” She recalled the visit she’d had with

Bonnie Reynolds the other day. An idea began to form. “I just might have the perfect person for you. Let me get back to you—”

“Wait, there’s more,” he said, wanting to tell her something before she hung up. “I mean, I do need a housekeeper, but she’ll need to be more, as well.”

“Oh?” Celia wasn’t altogether certain where this conversation was going and if she’d be able to help once it got there. She waited patiently for him to continue.

Steve hesitated. “I don’t know how to put this, really.”

“Words might be useful, Steve. Just start talking. I’ll do my best to try to figure it out,” she promised.

An intelligent man, he wasn’t accustomed to being out of his element. But he definitely was now. Taking a breath, he started doing exactly as she suggested.

“Well, as you know, it’s been Stevi—Stephanie and I for the last six years. Despite the demands of my job, I’ve been able to manage finding a lot of quality time with my daughter. We’ve done everything together. Everything from fishing to tea parties to baseball games and ‘Aliens and Astronauts’—”

“‘Aliens and Astronauts’?” Celia questioned, puzzled. As the grandmother of three, including one teenage boy, she made an effort to keep up on the latest trends in games, but this was a new one.

“It’s a video game,” Steve explained. “It’s Stevi’s—Stephanie’s favorite. I am having a really hard time remembering to call her that,” he complained. “Anyway, suddenly, without any warning,

she's switching gears on me."

"By asking you to call her Stephanie," Celia said knowingly.

"That's part of it," Steve admitted. "The other part—the bigger one—is that she suddenly seems to be growing up right in front of my eyes."

"They have a habit of doing that," Celia told him wryly. "I think it might have something to do with the daily watering," she added, tongue in cheek.

Distressed over what was going on in his life, he barely realized she was trying to lighten the mood.

"What I'm trying to get at is that all of a sudden, Stevi's got these questions I don't know the answers to. I mean, I *know* the answers, but I just can't—I just can't..." He trailed off helplessly.

"I understand, Steve," Celia told him kindly. "Your daughter's at a crossroads in her life. It's an admittedly delicate area and sometimes a young girl just needs to talk to another woman, no matter how close she is to her father."

"Yes!" Steve cried, relieved that she understood what he was attempting to clumsily put into words. "I need someone who knows how to cook, who's neat, and most of all, for Stevi—Stephanie's sake, I need someone who is understanding and sympathetic. Someone who my daughter can turn to with all her unanswered questions and be comfortable doing it. I know it's a lot to ask," he confessed with a sigh. "And I don't mean to be putting you on the spot like this. To be honest, I've been considering the possibility of perhaps sending Stevi to boarding

school."

"Boarding school?" Celia repeated, surprised. She couldn't think of a worse idea. She had a feeling his daughter would wind up feeling rejected if he did that. "Have you spoken to her about it?"

"No, not yet," he admitted. "But I thought that it might be best for her, all things considered."

Celia wanted to tell him how bad she thought that idea was, but managed to refrain. Instead, she tactfully suggested, "Why don't you hold off on that, Steve? Let me see if I can find someone for you who could fill that bill, before you decide to do anything rash." Realizing that he might think she sounded judgmental, Celia softened her words by saying, "I'm assuming that you really don't want to send Stevi away."

"No," Steve confessed, "I don't. But she needs more than me right now. She's got questions about, well—" he dropped his voice "—bras and boys and the changes her body's going through that I can't figure out how to address without embarrassing both of us. Do you understand what I'm trying to say, Mrs. Parnell?"

"Completely," she assured him. "Do me a favor, Steve. Hold off doing anything permanent for now. Don't start calling any boarding schools just yet. Worst comes to worst, I'll fill in as your housekeeper for a few days and be there for Stevi when she comes home after summer school, so you won't have to worry about her. I'm sure we can resolve this situation to everyone's satisfaction."

She could almost hear the weight falling off Steve's shoulders.

"You are a lifesaver, Mrs. Parnell," he told her with genuine enthusiasm and gratitude.

"It's all part of the service, Steve," Celia replied warmly. "One way or the other, I'll be getting back to you," she promised, before hanging up.

The moment she terminated her call to Steve, she was back on the phone, calling first Maizie Sommers, who was the unofficial leader of their informal group, and then Theresa Manetti.

She informed both women that she needed to have an emergency meeting with them.

* * *

"Okay, we're here," Maizie announced, as she and Theresa walked into Celia's house later that afternoon. Because she spent a good deal of her time driving from place to place, Maizie had swung by Theresa's catering business and picked her up before coming to Celia's. Theresa had been making last-minute changes to a menu for an anniversary party that she and her company were catering tomorrow afternoon. "So, what's the big emergency?"

"I need to run something by you," Celia told her friends.

"And you couldn't do this on the phone?" Maizie asked. "Celia, we went over conference calls. Are you still having trouble with that?"

Celia shrugged. "I'd rather see your faces when I talk."

"Uh-oh. Is this something we should be sitting down for?" Theresa asked, taking a seat at the dining room table.

Friends since the third grade, the three women had gone through all life's major events together—weddings, births, deaths—and supported each other through the good times as well as the bad.

"Maybe you had better sit," Celia said. "It's nothing bad," she added quickly. "But this might take me a little time to explain."

Waiting until Maizie was settled, as well, Celia finally sat down and began talking. "You know how one of us is usually approached by either a parent or a friend to find someone for their son or their daughter, or maybe even friend, and then we all sit around this table and brainstorm, trying to find the perfect match for that person?"

Maizie studied her friend, wondering what was behind this. "You're preaching to the choir, Celia. Where are you going with this?"

"Fair enough," Celia agreed. "I could be clearer."

Theresa laughed. "You think?"

"I had a friend," Celia started. "Actually, she's the mother of one of my employees. Anyway, she asked me to find someone for her daughter."

"All right," Maizie said. So far, this sounded no different than anything they normally undertook. "What's the problem?"

"It's not a problem exactly," she replied. "I actually think that I came up with the perfect person for her..." Her eyes swept over her friends. "I just wanted to run this choice by the two of you before I make the introduction."

"So run it by us," Maizie encouraged, waiting for her to get to the heart of the matter. Celia didn't usually have this much trouble making up her mind.

"He's a single dad and his daughter's at an age where she's starting to ask *those* kind of questions," she said. "He told me that he needs a competent housekeeper, as well as someone to field such questions for him."

"And this employee of yours, you think she's a match for this single dad?" Theresa inquired.

"Well," Celia began cautiously, "he's an aerospace engineer and she graduated MIT at age eighteen."

"Wait a minute. I don't understand," Maizie protested, trying to make sense out of the scenario. "She graduated MIT at eighteen? No offense, Celia, but what is she doing working for you?"

Celia smiled. "I know. It sounds strange, doesn't it?"

"Not if she's in the witness protection program," Maizie quipped.

"She's not. She's just kind of conflicted. When Becky first came to me," Celia said, filling her two friends in, "she said she was looking for something 'different.' She felt burned out and she just wanted something that wasn't mentally taxing to do, something that made her feel as if she'd accomplished something basic and simple at the end of the day." Celia smiled. "Like cleaning a bathroom."

"Well, that's basic and simple, all right," Maizie agreed.

"Anyway, my point is that I think they have a lot in common and could help one another," Celia concluded. Again, she looked from Maizie to Theresa, waiting to get their take on the situation.

"Any red flags?" Maizie murmured.

"Not that I can see," Celia replied honestly. She'd gone over their backgrounds a number of times before Theresa and Maizie had gotten here. "Personally, I think they're made for each other."

"Well, if that's what you think, it's good enough for me," Maizie said. "Theresa?"

She nodded. "We've all gotten good at this," she told her friends. "I trust Celia's judgment."

Maizie totally agreed. "And if she's right, we'll all get the credit," she said with a satisfied chuckle. She put her hand on Celia's shoulder. "Have a little faith in yourself, hon. We do."

"All right, then," Celia declared, getting revved up. "I'll call Steve tomorrow and tell him that I have a housekeeper for him."

Maizie beamed. "It's settled, then," she stated. Then the corners of her mouth curved even more. "You know, ladies, since we all came rushing out here and settled this so quickly, how do you feel about a game of cards?"

"You mean play cards without talking shop?" Celia asked.

"You know, it just might be unique at that," Theresa speculated.

Playing cards had always been their excuse for getting together and brainstorming. Usually one of them would have been

approached by a parent, and brought that candidate to the table to be discussed and pondered over until the right match was discovered.

"What will we talk about?" Theresa asked innocently.

Maizie laughed, shaking her head as she took out the deck of cards she always kept in her purse. "We are three intelligent women, each with a thriving business and a whole tribe of grandchildren. If we can't find something to talk about other than the love lives of some strangers, then the world is in a very bad state," she told them.

"Don't forget all those successful matches we've managed to set up and bring together. As I recall, we're batting a hundred," Theresa said.

Maizie smiled at her as she began to shuffle the cards. "A thousand, dear. The correct term for that is that we're batting a thousand."

"But we haven't brought together a thousand matches," Theresa protested.

Maizie sighed as she rolled her eyes. "Never mind, dear. The point is, we've been exceedingly successful, and even if our streak ends today, we still have all those happy matches to point to."

"Why should our streak end?" Theresa asked. "We're very good at what we do. There's no reason to think we can't go on doing this for the foreseeable future."

"You're right," Maizie agreed. "We might very well be doing this for as long as we draw breath." She paused for a second,

looking at her friends. “Okay, ladies, no more talking. Let’s play cards.”

“Right, like that’s going to work.” Theresa smirked. “If I know you, you’ll be talking until the day you’re six feet under.”

“You think that’ll stop her?” Celia asked with a laugh.

“No, you’re right,” Theresa agreed. “Probably not.”

“Play!” Maizie ordered, doing her best to keep a straight face.

Chapter Two

“Stevi?” Steve called up the stairs to his ten-going-on-eleven-year-old daughter, as she was apt to remind him any number of times in a week. “Get a move on. You don’t want to be late for class and I don’t want to be late to work.”

The petite, dark-haired girl frowned as she came down. “Dad, I told you to call me Stephanie,” she stated, stepping into the living room. “And I also told you that I’m perfectly able to walk to school. You don’t have to risk being late to work just to take me there.”

They’d been over this ground a dozen times in the last six weeks, ever since Stevi had decided that she had outgrown practically everything. Next, she’d decide that she’d outgrown him.

“Maybe I *like* taking you to school,” Steve told his daughter. “Did you ever think of that?”

A tired, sympathetic look passed over her face. “Dad, I’m growing up,” she said wearily. “You’re going to have to get used to that.”

She hardly looked any older than she had six months ago, or even a year ago, but he knew she was. It was inevitable, just as she maintained.

But he didn't have to like it.

Stifling a sigh, Steve put a hand on her shoulder and hustled his only child out the door. "Don't be in such an all-fired hurry to grow up, *Stephanie*. Enjoy being a kid a little while longer." He closed the door and locked it. "Trust me, it goes by fast."

"I've *been* a kid, Dad," Stephanie pointed out, sounding a great deal older than her actual years. She got into the car on the passenger side and buckled up. "And it's not going by nearly fast enough. At least, it isn't for me."

Steve started up the car. He knew he was losing this argument.

"Well, it is for me," he told her. "Anyway, I wanted to let you know that we're going to be getting another housekeeper. I talked to Mrs. Parnell and she called back this morning to tell me that she has the perfect match for us. She's going to be bringing her by this afternoon, right after I drive you home from school."

Steve stifled another sigh, knowing that his next words were going to be useless, but he said them anyway. "I want you to be on your best behavior, *Stephanie*. That means that I don't want you to do anything to scare this one away, understand?"

"I didn't do anything to scare Mrs. Pritchett away," Stevi protested. "She left us because she was going to be a grandma."

"She left because she had already become a grandmother," Steve corrected, wanting Stevi to get the details right.

She maintained a bored expression on her face. “What’s the difference?”

He made it through the next light just before it turned red. He didn’t think the topic was worth getting into now. “I’ll explain it later.”

Stevi sighed, sinking lower in her seat and crossing her arms indignantly. “That’s what you always say when you don’t want to explain something.”

He decided that the best thing for now was to ignore his daughter’s rather salient point. “Mrs. Parnell is bringing the new housekeeper by this afternoon—”

“You already said that,” Stevi pointed out impatiently.

“And I’m saying it again,” he told her. “I’ve rearranged my schedule so that I can pick you up from school and then we will meet this new housekeeper together.”

Stevi raised her small chin, a bantam rooster just itching for a fight. “What if I don’t like this one? What if she’s like Mrs. Applegate? Or Mrs. Kelly?”

“*Please* like this one,” he implored. He was torn between begging and telling his daughter that she *was* going to like the new housekeeper or else. He resigned himself to trying to reason with Stevi—again. “And for your information, there was nothing wrong with Mrs. Applegate *or* Mrs. Kelly.”

Stevi sniffed. “They were both jumpy and nervous.”

Caught at another red light, he spared his daughter a penetrating glance. “And who made them that way?”

The expression on his daughter's face was nothing short of angelic as she replied, "I don't know."

Right. "I've got a feeling that you do. And never mind them, anyway," he said dismissively. "We've got a chance for a fresh start here, so let's both try to make a go of it." When his daughter made no response, he added, "Please, Stevi? For me?"

"It's *Stephanie*," she stressed pointedly.

"Please, whoever you are," he said through almost clenched teeth, as he pulled up at the school where Stevi was taking summer school classes, "do it for me."

Stevi released a sigh that seemed twice as large as she was. Getting out of the car, she nodded. "Okay, Dad, if it means that much to you, I'll try."

"Do more than try," Steve called after her. "Do."

It was half an order, half a plea, both parts addressed to his daughter's back as she walked away, heading toward the building.

He hoped that this new housekeeper Mrs. Parnell had found came with an infinite supply of patience. Otherwise, he thought glumly as he pulled away, he was going to have to start looking into boarding schools in earnest.

* * *

Moving his lunch hour so that he was able to pick Stevi up from summer school, Steve arrived at the school yard to find that most of the cars that had been there earlier were now gone. It was a sure sign that everyone had already picked up their child and gone home. Steve really hated being late, hated the message

it sent his daughter: that she was an afterthought, even though that was in no way true.

She was the center of his universe, but he seemed to have lost the ability to get that across to her.

Scanning the immediate area, he saw Stevi standing at the curb, a resigned, somewhat forlorn look on her face.

"I could have walked home," she told him by way of a greeting when he pulled up beside her. "You didn't have to come running back for me."

Leaning over, he opened the door for her, then waited for her to get in. "I didn't run. I drove."

Stevi glared at him in a way that told him he knew what she meant.

There were times when it was really difficult to remember that she was only ten years old. It seemed more like she was ten going on thirty—and he didn't know how to handle either one of those stages.

Not for the first time, he wondered why kids didn't come with instruction manuals.

"Anyway, you forget," he told her, pulling away from the curb, "I had to bring you home so that we could meet the new housekeeper."

"Housekeeper," she repeated in a mocking tone. "You know that you're really getting her so you have someone to watch over me," she accused.

"In part," Steve allowed, unwilling to lie to his daughter. He

had always been honest with Stevi, and until a little while ago, that had been enough. It was the reason they had a bond. But these days, it seemed as if nothing was working, and he felt, rightly or wrongly, that it was his fault.

"I don't need to be watched," Stevi informed him indignantly, continuing her thought. "I'm too old to have a babysitter."

"She's a *housekeeper*," Steve stressed. "And her job is to run the household. You just happen to be part of it."

Stevi's face hardened. "She can't tell me what to do," the young girl insisted.

"Stephanie," he began, taking great pains to call her by the name she professed to prefer, "I expect you to be polite to the woman."

"You mean you expect me to do what she says," Stevi corrected.

"What I expect, *Stephanie*, is for you not to give me a headache," he told her, the last of his patience slipping away.

Reaching the house, he left his car parked in the driveway and went inside with his daughter.

When had parenting become so difficult? he wondered. He and Stevi had always gotten along, even right after her mother died. Stevi had been only four and they'd helped one another, supporting each other whenever the other was down and really needed it. Where had all that gone?

He was about to say something else to Stevi when he heard the doorbell ring. It pushed his train of thought into the background.

For now, he tabled the rest of what he wanted to say.

"Remember," he warned his daughter in a lowered tone, "be polite."

"Only if she is," Stevi said, just as he opened the door.

He gave his daughter a warning glance before turning to look at Mrs. Parnell and the housekeeper she had brought with her.

Steve found himself tongue-tied, staring at the woman beside Mrs. Parnell. Although no actual description had been given, for some reason he had expected this latest candidate for housekeeper to be like the others: another middle-aged woman in sensible shoes, with a somewhat expanding waistline and a pasted-on smile that ended before ever reaching her eyes.

Instead, the woman beside Mrs. Parnell was a blue-eyed blonde who might have been twenty-five or so. She was slender and there was nothing sensible about her shoes—or the rest of her, for that matter. She was wearing high heels and looked as if she was about to go out on a date, not a job interview. And since nothing had actually been settled between himself and Mrs. Parnell, that was what this actually was. A job interview.

"Mr. Holder," Celia said, addressing him formally for the sake of the interview, "I'd like you to meet Rebecca Reynolds." Celia smiled broadly at the young woman. There was a great deal of pride in her manner. "Rebecca is one of my best employees."

Steve was still at a loss for words. He knew that Mrs. Parnell had brought the woman here to be a housekeeper, but the more he looked at her, the more she just didn't seem like the type.

When his tongue finally came back to life and reengaged with his brain, he heard himself asking, “You’re a cleaning lady?”

Rather than be insulted by the demotion, Becky smiled. “My mother would prefer the term ‘maintenance engineer,’” she said with a soft laugh. “But yes, in simple terms, I’m a cleaning lady. Mrs. Parnell said the position you’re looking to fill is housekeeper.”

“You have any experience?” The question didn’t come from Steve, but from his daughter, who was regarding this new woman Mrs. Parnell had brought into her life with a great deal of suspicion.

To Rebecca’s credit, Steve noticed that she didn’t balk at having his daughter ask her a question.

“Yes, three years’ worth,” she replied.

“As a housekeeper?” Stevi asked, eyeing her closely as she grilled her.

“Stev—Stephanie,” Steve corrected, not wanting his daughter to go off on another tangent, “I’ll handle the questions.”

“I don’t mind answering,” Becky told him calmly. “This would actually be my first job as a housekeeper. But that would entail cleaning and cooking, and I can do both. I’ve done both before.”

“You’d also have to watch my daughter...” Steve felt bound to tell her that.

Stevi instantly took offense. “I don’t need watching,” she declared.

He was about to ask her to go to her room, but the woman

interjected before he could send her off.

"No, I'm sure you don't," Becky told the girl. "You don't need someone telling you what to do, do you, Stephanie?" Turning away from her very good-looking, would-be new employer, she focused strictly on the little girl. "You look as if you're perfectly capable of watching out for yourself. I'd just be here in case you needed me," she explained. "It would be more to set your father's mind at ease than anything else."

Stevi said nothing. She continued to study this housekeeping candidate as if trying to make up her mind whether she was being misled, or if this new woman might wind up being an ally.

Finally, Stevi nodded and said to Becky, "I guess that's okay."

"Well, Mr. Holder?" Celia asked, speaking up after quietly watching all three parties interacting with one another. It was easy to see that she was pleased with the way this was going. "Are you willing to give Rebecca a trial run? Say, for about two weeks?" she suggested, observing Steve's face.

"Two weeks," Steve repeated, as he rolled the words over in his mind. He was secretly stunned that it was so easy. Considering the way she'd been acting lately, he thought his daughter would fight this new setup tooth and nail. "Yes, I think I can do that. Two weeks should be enough time to find out if we can all work together," he concluded, giving his daughter a quick side glance.

"What about you, Stephanie?" Becky asked the little girl. "Do two weeks work for you?"

"Me?" Stevi asked, clearly surprised that she was actually

being consulted in this decision by the grown-ups. “Um, yes—I guess so,” she added, no doubt not wanting to seem too pleased to have her opinion matter.

But she was.

“Then I guess this is settled,” Celia declared happily. She turned toward Steve. “Until you decide this isn’t working out, I now pronounce you housekeeper and boss.”

“And charge,” Becky added.

“What’s a ‘charge’?” Stevi asked, apparently wondering if she should be taking offense.

“You.” The warmth of Becky’s smile defused any indignation that Stevi was debating harboring.

“I’ll walk you to the door, Mrs. Parnell,” Steve offered, turning toward the woman. “I’ve got to get back to work soon, anyway.” Once in the entry, he lowered his voice. “Isn’t she kind of young to be doing this kind of thing? I thought she’d be...”

“Older?” Celia asked, trying to supply the word he was looking for.

But that wasn’t it. “Sturdier,” he finally said, glancing over his shoulder at the woman Celia had brought to him.

“Rebecca is very capable, Steve. Trust me,” she stated. “She can take care of herself, and you’ll find that she’s more than equal to the job.”

“Of cleaning the house,” he said. He had no doubts about that. But he did about another matter. “I was thinking more about Stevi.”

“She’s more than equal to taking care of your daughter, too,” Celia assured him. That was based more on a gut feeling than on anything that could be found in a résumé. But there was something about the way Rebecca conducted herself that told Celia she’d be fully capable of doing so.

But Steve wanted to be convinced. “How do you know that?”

Celia merely smiled at him. “Some things, Steve, you just have to take on faith. Faith and instinct,” she added, feeling that he needed something more to hang on to. She wasn’t about to tell him about Becky’s background; that was hers to reveal. Besides, if she told him that the young woman who had just agreed to clean his house and look after his daughter had a degree from MIT, he either wouldn’t believe her or, just possibly, he would be intimidated, thinking that there was something wrong with the woman.

Celia wanted him to get to know Becky and vice versa before that extra piece of information was placed on the table. Because Becky wasn’t just a walking brain; first and foremost, she was a person. The kind of person Celia firmly believed Steve Holder needed in his life. As did his daughter.

But that was something all three parties needed to discover for themselves in due time. In this particular case, too much knowledge at the outset equaled too much information to deal with. She wanted everyone to proceed unhampered and learn about each other slowly, at their own pace.

Telling Steve goodbye and that she’d be in touch, Celia smiled

to herself as she took her leave.

She didn't want to jinx anything, but had to admit she had a good feeling about this.

Becky's mother was due to be made happy very soon, Celia thought.

Chapter Three

If it wasn't for the fact that he had known Celia for the last five years and trusted her implicitly, Steve might have had some doubts about leaving his daughter with this brand-new housekeeper. But Celia was obviously completely sold on the young woman's capabilities, and he knew for a fact that she carefully vetted everyone who worked for her. So if this young woman was good enough for Celia, well then, she was definitely good enough for him.

Besides, it was either that or send his daughter away to a boarding school. He'd already looked into the matter briefly, reviewing several schools and even selecting the top two that seemed to have a great deal going for them. They were exceptional facilities and each would do well in furthering his daughter's education, but her attending them would mean he wouldn't see Stevi for long periods of time.

So far, the longest he had ever gone without interacting with his daughter was a day and a half, and that was only because she was asleep when he had gotten home that one time and still asleep when he left for work early the next morning.

Stevi hadn't been thrilled to be left in the care of a

housekeeper, and he knew she wouldn't be happy about it now. But that was still a lot better than having to send her away altogether.

"So," Steve said to his new employee, as he walked back into the room, "did Mrs. Parnell explain to you that this was a live-in position?"

That surprised Becky, but she managed to recover quickly. "Actually, she didn't. What she did tell me was that she thought this would be a good position for me, and that she wanted you to be the one to explain everything that you require."

Steve took a breath. "So I guess I'd better do so," he muttered. He glanced at his watch. "You'll forgive me if I talk fast, but I have to be at a meeting in less than an hour and traffic at this time of day is usually abysmal."

Becky nodded. "It is that," she agreed. "Just give me the highlights and we can discuss the finer points when you come home tonight."

"The biggest highlight is that I need you to look after Stevi—"

"Stephanie, Dad," his daughter said impatiently. "My name's Stephanie."

"Right." Steve tried again. "I need you to look after *Stephanie*—"

"No, you don't," Stevi corrected once again, clearly pained by the declaration.

For the sake of maintaining the peace, Becky intervened. She smiled, nodding her head. "I understand, Mr. Holder."

A sense of relief washed over Steve. There was a lot being left unsaid, but he needed to go, and this woman he was hiring to run his household seemed to understand that. “Bless you,” he murmured to Becky.

“Get to your meeting, Mr. Holder. We’ll have plenty of time to talk about the rest of this later.”

That was the moment when he knew.

She was perfect, he thought. Absolutely perfect.

But the true test would be if she could last the day with Stevi and not want to run screaming for the hills by nightfall—if not sooner.

Mentally, he crossed his fingers.

“Thank you.” Steve fished a business card out of his pocket. “If you need to call me for any reason, any reason at all,” he emphasized, “these are the numbers where I can be reached.”

Taking the card from him, Becky glanced at it, then raised her eyes to his. “You move around a lot, don’t you?” she asked, amused.

It took him a minute to realize she was kidding. “Try the top number first,” he said. “It’s my cell phone. Okay,” he added, already walking toward the door. “Any questions?”

“Just one,” Becky told him. Pausing, whether for effect or to gather her thoughts together, she said, “You are coming back tonight, right?”

He seemed taken by surprise that she’d even ask something like that. “Of course.”

She met his response with a broad smile. “Then I’m fine.”

Before he had time to rethink at least part of this situation, Stevi spoke up. “But I’m not.”

“We’ll talk about it tonight,” her father promised, and the next minute, he was gone.

Stevi stood there, her back to Becky, staring at the door even after it had closed and her father had left the house.

Left her stranded.

Judging by the way her shoulders slumped, Becky thought, the girl clearly thought she had just been abandoned. She needed to find a way to reassure Stephanie that she was going to be all right. That *they* were going to be all right.

“I’m going to need a lot of help, you know,” Becky began, still addressing Stevi’s back.

“If you feel that way, you shouldn’t have taken the job,” she answered, in a dismissive voice that belonged to someone older than a girl who was almost turning eleven.

But Becky was determined to make an ally out of her. “No, I meant help from you.”

This time Stevi did turn to face her, but she didn’t look friendly.

“Again,” the girl repeated, clearly hostile, “if you feel that way, you shouldn’t have taken the job.”

Rather than argue the point, Becky said gently, “I’m not your enemy, Stephanie.”

In response, Stevi just glared at her, the look on her face loudly

proclaiming that she thought differently.

"You know who I feel sorry for?" Becky continued. When Stevi made no response, she went on as if the girl actually had answered, asking who that person was. "Your dad."

Stevi's eyes narrowed, all but shooting daggers at this stranger who had invaded her space. The woman had no business talking about her father, even if he had just deserted her, leaving her at the mercy of this intruder.

"Why?" she practically growled.

"Well, for one thing, because your dad feels totally out of his element, trying to raise an almost-teenage girl," Becky answered.

Loyalty had Stevi coming to her father's defense, even though this woman had voiced something that she'd felt herself more than once, if not exactly in those words. "My dad's not out of his element!"

Becky looked at the young girl closely, as if she was actually able to see beneath the layers of anger and bravado. The whole thing made Stevi nervous, though she did her best to cover that up.

"Truth?" Becky asked her kindly.

Stevi shifted from foot to foot, searching for a comfortable stance. "Well," she finally said, backtracking slightly, "maybe just a little."

And then she straightened her shoulders, as if she suddenly felt that she'd admitted far too much. "How would you know anything about that?" Stevi asked, her very tone challenging this

unwanted person traipsing through her home.

"Because I was just like you once," Becky replied knowingly.

Stevi's eyes darkened as she frowned. "Yeah, sure. Just because you're a girl doesn't mean you were anything like me," she retorted angrily.

Becky merely smiled. Stevi's response just confirmed that she was right. "Don't be so sure about that," she murmured.

Stevi fisted her hands on her hips. "Okay, prove it," she challenged. "How were you like me?"

"Well, aside from the fact that I had all sorts of questions about what was happening to my body, questions I couldn't put into words, and even if I could, I think my mother was too embarrassed to answer—"

She could see by the light that came into Stevi's eyes that although she was resisting, Becky had guessed correctly. She continued, confident that there was more to the girl's dilemma than what she had just stated. "—I was also smarter than all the other kids who were my age."

Stevi's eyes widened. She hadn't been expecting that.

Bingo, Becky thought.

"How much smarter?" Stevi asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

"Well, for one thing, I skipped a lot of grades," Becky told her, observing the little girl's face as she made each response.

Stevi cocked her head, as if that would help her judge whether or not this woman was telling her the truth. "How many grades?" she challenged.

This was definitely not a trusting child, Becky thought. But that was all right. Neither had she been at Stevi's age, she recalled. That was because she had endured being teased and ridiculed by kids who were ultimately older than she was and who, scholastically, she had left behind. She remembered being ashamed of how smart she was, thinking of it as a burden and a curse instead of a blessing. She found herself wanting to save Stevi from that.

Becky debated saying anything further to Steve's daughter. When Celia had told her about this job and had mentioned that Stevi was precocious and exceptionally bright, Becky had decided not to mention graduating college at a young age until she'd had a few days to get the girl acclimated to her. But already she was beginning to change her mind.

She wasn't ashamed of the fact that she'd been so young when she'd achieved so many milestones, and she didn't want Stevi to feel ashamed of that, either.

"Most people graduate college when they're twenty-two or twenty-three—" Becky began.

"I know that," Stevi said, cutting in. And then, pressing her lips together, she eyed her with curiosity more than suspicion. "How old were you when you graduated?"

The girl had realized where she was heading with this, Becky thought. Most ten-year-olds wouldn't have. She was right; they had more in common with each other than the little girl thought.

"I was eighteen," Becky stated.

For the first time, Stevi's bravado slipped just a little, allowing the young, vulnerable girl beneath to show through. She looked at this new housekeeper, clearly impressed. "Really?"

"Really," Becky responded.

Stevi fell silent for a moment and Becky thought that maybe she didn't believe her. The look on her face was nothing if not suspicious.

But then, after a moment's hesitation, the girl asked, "Um, did the other kids—the older kids," she clarified. "Did they make fun of you?"

"Some of them did," Becky admitted. "A lot of them, in fact. When I got older, I realized that was because they didn't know what to make of me. Later on, some of them admitted that they felt bad that they couldn't keep up to me, but you know, everyone's different and everyone has a different talent inside of them, a different gift.

"They just needed to concentrate on that instead of being angry at me because I got better grades than they did and I could finish tests faster." Becky paused for a moment, letting the words sink in. When she saw the furrows on Stevi's brow, she decided to delve a little into her life. "Do other kids make fun of you?"

"No!" Stevi answered quickly.

And then, because it was a lie, she relented a little. "Maybe."

Not feeling comfortable with that answer, either, she finally sighed deeply and then grudgingly admitted, "Yes."

Becky nodded. "You realize that they're acting angry at

you because that's a lot easier to do than finding fault with themselves."

Stevi regarded her doubtfully. And then, because Becky wasn't backing off, she asked uncertainly, "Really?"

"Really," Becky told her with solemn conviction. "Trust me. Years from now, if any of those kids have a brain in their heads, they're going to realize that they were being very unfair to you, when what they should have been doing was studying harder so that they could get those grades they were so envious of. Or better yet, studying with you and trying to find out just how you were able to manage doing so much better than they did.

"Right now," she continued, "you probably feel like you're all alone, but that's going to change, I promise. And most of all, you're going to be the girl who makes it, who becomes *somebody*, while they, if they don't start changing and actually applying themselves to their schoolwork, are just going to wind up fading into the background, while you do great things."

She could see by Stevi's expression that the girl *wanted* to believe her, but still wasn't sure if she could, or if this was just a lot of talk this new housekeeper was trying to sell her.

"You think so?"

Without a single shred of hesitation, Becky stated, "I know so."

Stevi still wasn't 100 percent sold on what she was saying. "But if you were so smart, how come you're a housekeeper? How come you're not doing something...*bigger*?" she finally said,

for lack of a better word to describe what she was trying to get across.

"Well, I wasn't always one," Becky confided. "You know what I was before I decided to take a break and become a housekeeper?"

Confusion and curiosity furrowed the girl's brow again. "No—what?"

Becky smiled. Her past life seemed like a million miles away now. "I was an engineer."

"Really?" Stevi questioned, a little unclear on how the woman she was talking to could have been one and then the other. The two professions seemed light-years apart.

"Really," Becky assured her.

"Can you do that?" Stevi asked. She was thinking about her father. "Can you just stop being an engineer and become a housekeeper?"

"I did," Becky responded.

"But *why* would you do that?" Stevi demanded. Her father was totally dedicated to doing what he did, sometimes to the point of staying at work for long hours and coming home after she'd gone to bed. "Didn't you like being an engineer?"

"In the beginning, I did. Very much so," she told Stevi. "But after a while I decided that maybe the pressure was too much. I found I was always working and that it wasn't fun anymore, not like it used to be. So I decided to take a break for a bit and just smell the roses."

“So is that what you did?” Stevi asked, doing her best to understand what this adult was telling her.

She liked the fact that Becky was talking to her as if she were another grown-up rather than just a little kid. Too many adults treated her as if she couldn’t understand things. Her father wasn’t like that, but lately, communication between them hadn’t been going very well. Like an old train with a faulty wheel, it kept breaking down.

“Did you go smell roses?” she pressed.

“Yes,” Becky answered. “I took time to enjoy the things around me.”

“And being a housekeeper lets you do that?” Stevi was still somewhat unclear about the concept.

“Well, until now, I’d come to different houses, race around cleaning them up and then go home. This will be my first live-in position. So, like I said earlier, I’m counting on you to help me navigate this whole new career change. I’d like to be the best housekeeper that I can be,” she confided. She looked at Stevi. “So, can I count on your help?” she asked, holding out her hand.

Stevi looked at it, and after a moment, she grinned broadly and put her hand into Becky’s, shaking it.

“Yes!” she declared, doing her best to sound grown-up. “You can.”

Chapter Four

Steve left work early, which was to say that he actually left on time. As usual, there was enough work on his desk to keep

him busy until well after seven o'clock, but since things were still up in the air at home, he thought he should be there at a reasonable time—just in case. After all, this was Rebecca's first day with Stevi and he didn't want to take any chances on things going wrong.

If he were being honest, Rebecca was not the only one who was on trial here. He felt as if he and Stevi were on trial, as well. Quite frankly, both sides were scrutinizing and sizing each other up, seeing if they met the other party's standards and vice versa.

As he drove home, he *really* hoped that Stevi was on her best behavior. He loved his daughter to pieces, and at bottom she was a really good kid, but she could be trying at times, and not everyone—obviously—was up to dealing with a half child, half fledgling woman. He had been through three other housekeepers to prove that, and even the last one, who supposedly left because her daughter was having her first child, had never seemed completely comfortable around Stevi and her endless barrage of questions.

And Stevi, he knew, had never really taken to the woman, either.

Finally pulling up into the driveway, Steve released the breath he hadn't even been conscious of holding until this moment. When he'd turned the corner toward his house, he'd seen Rebecca's car parked at the curb. That meant that unless the woman had been so terrorized by Stevi that she'd fled on foot, unable to stand being in the same house with her a second longer,

Rebecca Reynolds was still in his house.

There was hope.

The second he opened the front door, even before he walked in, Steve was aware of an exceptionally tempting aroma swirling around him. He felt his taste buds salivating.

"Ste—phanie?" he called out, remembering at the last moment to use his daughter's name of preference. He looked around the empty living room. "Ms. Reynolds?"

Following his nose, he made his way into the kitchen. And that was where he found both his daughter and his new housekeeper.

Becky reacted as if she was expecting him. She looked up in his direction. "Dinner will be on the table in a minute," she promised.

"You made dinner?" he asked. He hadn't expected that. Not yet, anyway.

She noted his surprise. "Isn't that what a housekeeper is supposed to do?"

"Then you're taking the position?" Steve made no attempt to hide how relieved that made him feel.

Becky looked at him, a little bemused at his question. "I thought we already settled that."

He cleared his throat, taking in all the activity in the kitchen. She'd obviously made dinner, but there were no telltale signs of chaos. Every time he cooked, it seemed to generate five or six pots and pans, no matter how small the meal turned out to be.

"Well, we did, but I wanted to leave you the option of changing

your mind," he told her. "I mean, in case you felt, after spending some time here, that this wasn't going to work out," he added tactfully, slanting a glance in his daughter's direction. "What are you doing?" he asked, when he realized that Stevi's arms were filled with a couple of dinner plates.

Although he thought of Stevi as precocious and definitely on the brilliant side, she didn't have a domestic bone in her body. He was to blame for that, because he'd never attempted to give her any chores that were remotely domestic in nature. The closest he had ever come to making her do chores was to get her to make her bed, which she reluctantly did. The rest of her room looked as if it was home base for a twister that kept passing through on a regular basis.

"I'm setting the table," Stevi informed him, in a voice that indicated he should have figured that out on his own.

After arranging the plates in the small dining room, Stevi doubled back for the silverware. As he watched her, fascinated, she folded napkins, then placed a knife on each one, on the right side of the plates. She put the forks on the other side.

Becky nodded her approval at Stevi's progress. "Don't forget the glasses," she reminded her.

"I'll do those," Steve instantly volunteered, envisioning a sudden shower of falling shards of glass if his daughter tripped while carrying the glassware.

Becky took everything in but said nothing. Turning off the burners, she drained and then transferred the linguine from a pot

to a large serving bowl. She did the same for the beef Stroganoff she'd made, then picked up the first bowl and carried it to the table.

"You made Stroganoff," Steve suddenly realized. He smiled broadly at the dish on the counter.

"Stephanie told me that was your favorite," Becky explained. "I thought it might make a good first meal to serve you."

He had a soft spot in his heart for Stroganoff. It was the first dish that his late wife had made for him after they married, although he had to admit that the scent he'd detected back then was of something burning. It had taken Cindy a while before she got the hang of cooking.

Such was not the problem here.

And then, as he looked again at the table, Steve saw that there were only two places set, not three. He thought it was an oversight on his daughter's part.

"There's one place setting missing, Stephanie," he prompted quietly, not wanting to embarrass her.

"Becky told me to only set two places," she answered defensively.

He turned to look at Becky as she set the second serving bowl in the center of the table. "You're not eating with us?"

"I can't," she told him. "I have to go home and do some packing. When Mrs. Parnell told me about this job, I didn't realize that if I accepted it, I'd be living here," she confessed.

"But you will be back in the morning, right?" he asked

uneasily. Now that he'd found someone who was acceptable not only to him, but to Stevi, he didn't want to take a chance on having her change her mind.

Becky smiled. "Right."

Because he had wound up skipping lunch and had basically subsisted on a candy bar he'd gotten out of the vending machine when his stomach's growling became too loud to ignore, he was extremely susceptible to the aroma wafting up at him. In short order, he ladled both linguine and a large serving of beef Stroganoff onto his plate as he talked.

He sat down with his dish. Unable to resist, he took a forkful of linguine and Stroganoff and slid them into his mouth. Whatever he was about to say to Becky instantly slipped his mind as the flavor seized his attention and took him prisoner.

Wow!

This woman really was perfect, he couldn't help thinking.

"We haven't talked salary yet," Steve said, after chewing and swallowing. He didn't want to lose her on that technicality, and all but sighed as the next forkful disappeared between his lips. "Name your price."

Becky laughed, pleased at the compliment he was paying her. "That's actually something for you and Mrs. Parnell to discuss and decide," she told him. "And just so you know," she added, "I had help with the meal."

A touch of disappointment nudged him. "You ordered out?" he asked. Takeout had been the meal of choice for his last

housekeeper, and the go-to move for the other two more often than not. He'd begun to think that cooking was a lost art—until now. "This has to be from someplace new," he guessed, because he couldn't remember having his taste buds tantalized this way before.

"No," Becky corrected. "Stephanie and I went grocery shopping together—you hardly have anything in your refrigerator beyond breakfast food," she explained. "And then we cooked together."

"You and Stephanie?" he repeated incredulously. Was she serious?

"Yes."

Only his presence of mind kept his mouth from dropping open. He looked at his daughter in complete astonishment. Stevi had never expressed the slightest interest in cooking before.

"You helped with this?" he asked in amazement.

"She most certainly did," Becky told him. There was a note of pride in her voice that took him by surprise. "If you ask me, I think she's a natural," she concluded, winking at his daughter.

Stevi seemed to beam. For his part, Steve was at a complete loss for words.

He was still speechless minutes later, as Becky left the house.

* * *

"So, how did it go?" Celia asked, doing her best to keep the eagerness out of her voice.

Becky had hardly had time to walk into her apartment and

lock the door behind her before her cell phone began ringing. Dropping her purse on the floor, she glanced at the caller ID on the phone's screen before she answered. All she had time to say was "Hello" before Celia asked her the all-important question.

"Very well, I think. And you're right," Becky added with a smile as she sat down on her sofa. "His daughter does remind me of me when I was her age."

Celia immediately got to the heart of the matter. "Did you have any trouble getting along with Stephanie?"

Celia wanted to make sure that Becky was happy with this choice. Even if she felt she had brought the right two people together, she didn't want to impose her will on either of them, especially not on a young woman she had grown particularly fond of over the last three years.

"It was a little awkward at first," Becky admitted. She tucked her legs under her. "I think that's because she's had a few less-than-satisfying relationships with the housekeepers her father hired in the past. But it didn't take me much time to get her to open up just a little. More will take a while," Becky freely admitted. "After all, the process does require time, but I feel like we've made a really good start."

"I'm so very glad to hear that," Celia told her. "But to be honest, I also hear something else in your voice."

Becky wasn't sure she understood what the woman was getting at. She didn't want to jump to any conclusions. "Mrs. Parnell, I don't think that I under—"

“I hear some hesitation in your voice, Becky,” Celia told her honestly. “Is there anything wrong?”

The woman’s concern was gratifying, Becky thought. But she was quick to set her mind at ease. “Oh no, not with them,” she assured her employer.

“Well, whatever’s wrong is certainly not with you,” Celia responded. “But I can tell that there’s something bothering you...”

Becky sighed. Since the woman was asking, she didn’t try to put her off. That would be lying. “To be honest, it’s about my apartment.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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