

“I’m late. I know. I’m sorry.”

Maggie halted her silent litany of discontent and looked up. Biting her tongue, she reined in the rude response that sprang to mind, but didn’t even try to control the constant drumming of her fingertips against her desk. This was her own fault. She’d taken a chance and hired a web design consultant from a listing in an online directory. Yes, she knew better. Yes, she should have checked to confirm the glowing testimonials on his website were legit, but she hadn’t. She’d taken one look at his work and been sold. Well, she was paying for her hastiness, wasn’t she?

*Caveat Emptor.* Let the buyer beware. Hopefully, at the very least, she’d come out of this with a lesson learned.

Relaxing her jaw enough to speak, Maggie stood and reached out her hand. “Mr. Hanson. So glad you could make it.”

He shook her hand and winced. Likely at the sarcasm in her voice, because while she’d been tempted, she *hadn’t* dug her nails into his hand. *She* was far too professional to do such a thing. *His* professionalism had been in doubt for the last twenty minutes.

Sitting back down, she pointed to one of the chairs opposite her desk in a silent invitation for him to sit as well. Then she waited. Waited for the excuses that were sure to start rolling off his tongue. Because really, seeing as her life had been chock full of irresponsible men, she knew exactly what to expect.

Instead of sitting, he took off his glasses—yes, he had computer geek written all over him—and rubbed his face with his hand. The face he’d apparently forgot to shave this morning. And she didn’t miss the fact his clothes looked as if he may have slept in them.

Yet despite the sloppy appearance, something about his eyes woke something in her. Something Maggie had long ago decided was a waste of energy, so she'd boxed it up and done her best to forget about it. For the most part, she managed just fine.

She swallowed a sigh, squashing whatever it was she felt.

What had she gotten herself into? She had a self-imposed deadline to get her new site up and running and it looked like she'd have to go back to the beginning and start from scratch again.

Before she could suggest he leave, the phone clipped to his belt started to sing. *Oh, this just got better.* What kind of grown man had Scooby Dooby Doo, where are you, as a ringtone? And instead of apologizing again, and turning his phone off, he answered it!

Although his voice dropped a few decibels, Maggie had no problem hearing him.

"Sweetheart, I haven't even been gone an hour. I told you I'd be back as soon as I could."

And there it was again. That inexplicable awakening. Only this time it brought with it a feeling of—what? Discontent? Why would she even care that this man—whom she was having a hard time respecting—had a "sweetheart?"

Maggie stood and started walking to the door. Enough was enough. The man clearly wasn't a professional, and regardless of how brilliant his web design may be, there was no way she could work with him. She prided herself in being reliable and expected the same from the people she worked with.

And besides, he stirred up things better left alone.

Hand on the door, she turned back to him just in time to see him scrub a hand over his face again. "Sweetie, I know you're in pain. And I promise I'll be back home as soon as I can. You know I wouldn't have left you unless it was absolutely necessary."

She rolled her eyes. *Oh, brother!* Maggie liked to believe that not all men were insensitive to the needs of others, but this was ridiculous. What was he, a doormat?

*Wait...what's he saying now?*

“...and I know the pills taste yucky, but do what Grandma says and take it, okay? Daddy will be home as soon as he can. I’ll pick up some of your favorite snacks, and we’ll just hang out for the rest of the day and watch Scooby reruns, okay? I have to go now. Be a good girl, and listen to your Grandmother.”

He hung up and looked at Maggie. “I’m sorry. My daughter broke her leg yesterday. She’s cranky, she’s whiny, she clingy, and she’s in pain. Bad combination when you’re eight. I was up with her all night.”

Suddenly the rumpled clothes, the barely washed, unshaved face disappeared and a concerned, distracted father—something *hers* had never been—took the place of the bum she’d assumed walked into her office moments ago. Well, you know what they say about assumptions, she thought to herself. And hadn’t she just proved them right?

Maggie’s alter ego—the softer, more sentimental Maggie, the one she’d kept under wraps for so long, the Maggie that still had dreams of the kind of man who would be around for her when she needed him—pushed the more pragmatic Maggie aside.

Walking back toward him, sure her body language conveyed a different message than the one it had been screaming moments ago, she said, “Oh, no. I’m so sorry. What happened to her?”

He grinned at her, then put his glasses back on. And oh, my. They did nothing to hide the mixture of love, tenderness, anxiety and merriment that shone from his eyes.

“My baby girl is something of a tomboy. It’s just her and me, so maybe that’s why. Anyway, she had to try to prove herself to a bunch of boys yesterday. Or so she says. Basically, they told her that there was no way a mere girl could outshine them on a skateboard, so she took it upon herself to show them the error of their way. That this isn’t the dark ages. Girls can do *anything* boys can do!”

Maggie made a fist with each hand and thrust them toward him, thumbs in the air. A grin of her own stretched across her cheeks. “Yay, girl power. But it’s not so cool when you get hurt trying to prove a point.”

Recalling times from her own childhood, times when she’d wished her dad was interested enough to cancel whatever he had going on to be with the daughter that sometimes desperately needed him, Maggie asked, “Did she want you to stay with her today?”

Mr. Hanson—Brian—nodded. “Yeah. And I would have too, but our meeting was for nine and I didn’t want to just leave a message on your voice mail saying I wasn’t coming. If we had an established business relationship, I would have pressed upon your compassion and asked to reschedule. Either way, when we spoke, you indicated a fairly tight deadline, so I didn’t want to just leave you hanging. ”

He gave a little humph of laughter under his breath, and shrugged his shoulders. “Given the first impression I’ve likely just made, I doubt it matters anyway. I really *am* sorry.” He spread his hands out toward her in a gesture of pure supplication. “But what else could I do? I got away this morning as soon as I could with the promise that I’d be back home to in just a few hours, but she’s never been hurt like this before. She was scared. I was scared. I’m fairly sure we’re both still scared.”

Maggie suppressed the snort that threatened to explode. What could he have done? He *could* have walked away from his daughter without a care for her needs. He *could* have made it quite clear to her that his job was far more important to him than she was.

Unwilling, unable, to rob his daughter of her father's attention, Maggie said, "Listen, why don't we reschedule. You go be with your daughter. She needs you more than I do."

Frowning, he said, "Are you sure? What about your deadline?"

Maggie waved his concern away. "Not meeting that deadline won't impact anything but my sometimes anal scheduling. Nobody even knows that this is in the works. So, why don't we check our calendars and see when we can meet again? Do you think in about a week? If you need more time, please, just tell me."

Once again, off came the glasses and he scrubbed his face with his hand. The first time he'd done it, she'd thought it was because of tiredness, now she wondered if it was his own version of a nervous tick. If he habitually did it when he was uncertain about something. It was kind of cute, in a geeky sort of way.

"Are you sure? You're really okay with this?"

"Absolutely. I know what it's like to need your dad around. You give her whatever time she needs."

He was already inching toward the door, as if he thought he should vamoose before she had a chance to change her mind. Which she had absolutely no intention of doing. On a purely cerebral level, she knew there were good fathers out there. But since she chose not to get to friendly with family types—why torture yourself with a constant reminder of what you didn't have?—she rarely got to see one in action. She wouldn't hinder him in any way.

“I’m sure. Listen, I won’t hold you up any longer. Give me a call later and we’ll work out a time to meet, okay?”

Another smile spawned, this one aimed directly at her. And while his first smile, when he thought of his daughter, had set off some very girly, very sentimental feelings of one sort, the feelings that spread through her now were of an *entirely* different sort.

He stuck out his hand, silently asking her to shake. “Thank you. From both of us.”

Maggie gulped as they shook. *Hoo boy!* More girly feelings!

Brian—she didn’t want to stop and think of why he was suddenly Brian instead of Mr. Hanson—leaned over, picked up his laptop case from the floor and headed for the door. However, before he made it, he stopped and swung around.

“I forgot...” He opened his case and pulled out a sheet of paper, which he handed to her. Maggie briefly glanced at his letterhead, and the list of names, numbers and e-mail addresses on it.

She raised a brow at him.

“It’s a list of references. They’re on my site, but I didn’t know if you’d checked them or not. I always like to give a perspective client that list. Just so you can do your homework.”

Sucking in her cheeks to control the guilty smile begging to escape, she said, “Thank you. We’ll talk later.”

And then he was gone.

The following Wednesday, at ten to nine, an IM from Maggie’s receptionist popped up on her screen. It read, “I’m sending Mr. Hanson in.”

Trying to look cool and poised, Maggie stood and waited. She dearly hoped the fact that she'd spent far too much time in the last week daydreaming about Brian Hanson showed nowhere on her countenance. She was excited about seeing him again, and it wasn't entirely due to the job she was about to hire him to do. No, there was a whole passel of other reasons. And it was so unlike her, it was making her a little jittery.

Then there he was, standing in her doorway.

And there it was, like before. A smile that lit up his face. Lit up her heart.

“Hi.” *Oh, that was professional, Maggie.*

But he came back with a “Hi” of his own, and she relaxed a little. Until she got a good look at him. Then she started feeling jittery again. Wow. He cleaned up real well.

He walked toward her, the smile still in place. “Before we get down to business, I have a request.”

Maggie cleared her throat, hoping to dispel the squeak that had shrouded her voice the last time she spoke. “Oh?”

Okay, somewhere she'd turned into a monosyllabic teenager.

“My daughter and I would like to know if you're busy on Saturday. We'd like you to come over for dinner. It's our way of saying thanks, and apologizing. At least that's the official reason.”

He stood at her desk, the two of them face to face. His gaze slid across her and she was glad she'd taken extra care getting ready this morning. Then he took off his glasses and ran his hand across his face. He cleared his throat.

“Unofficially...” He didn't continue that thought, just raised a brow then continued with, “So, will you come?”

Maggie felt like doing cartwheels across her office.

Try and keep me away!

Oh, oh. Had she said that out loud?

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