



HIS TEMPORARY
LIVE-IN WIFE

SUSAN CROSBY

Cherish



Susan Crosby

His Temporary Live-in Wife

«HarperCollins»

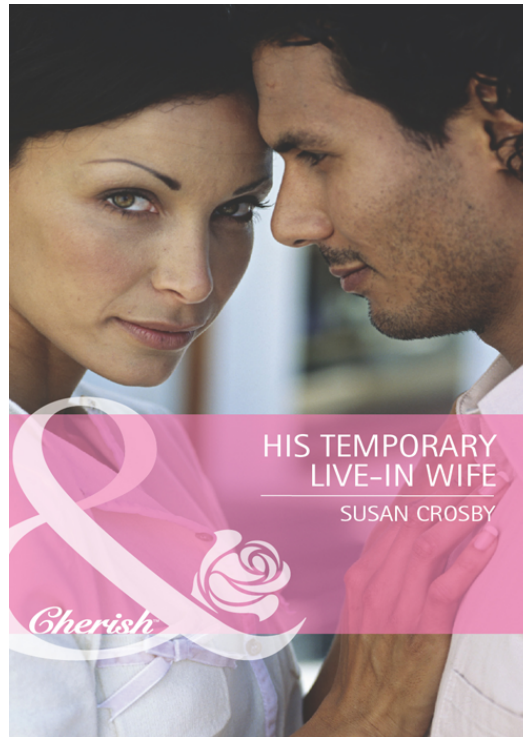
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The Family Plan Marcy's priorities are college and a career first, then a husband and children. And to pay her tuition she takes a job as a housekeeper for a professor – but she soon realises that her new boss might prove to be a distraction from her goals. A very tempting distraction... Eric's ready to start a family – as soon as he can find a suitable wife, that is. But keeping close quarters with independent Marcy soon wrecks Eric's ideas about what he wants for his future...and an unexpected night of passion could change their plans forever.

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“Do you believe in love at first sight?”

Marcy held her breath. She had no right to ask him such a question. He was her employer, even if only temporarily, and she found him incredibly, inappropriately sexy and appealing, but she really shouldn't be so personal.

Still, she couldn't take back the question.

“I don't know,” he said, his gaze direct. “I haven't experienced it myself.”

Which gave her an answer in itself. He hadn't fallen for anyone at first sight, therefore he hadn't fallen for her. A stifling blanket of disappointment dropped over her.

Which was totally ridiculous, she realized. Why should she be disappointed?

“Now, lust at first sight? That's different.” He took a lock of her hair in his hand and rubbed it. “It's soft. I've been wondering.”

“You have?”

“Since first sight.”

“Which was only—” she did some quick calculations “—seventeen hours ago.”

“First sight,” he repeated.

Dear Reader,

Have you ever set a goal for yourself then wouldn't deviate from it—even though you should? Being adaptable can save us a lot of grief through the years, but occasionally it takes a momentous event—like falling in love—to make us realise when we're sticking too closely to a plan.

That describes the heroine in *His Temporary Live-In Wife*. For what she believes are really good reasons, she's working toward a goal but with blinders on, not giving herself a chance to look even side-to-side to see what else might make her happy. Along comes our hero, who's already achieved his goal and is looking for something new. He's learned to adapt.

It's up to Eric to show Marcy that it's okay to veer off course now and then, especially when the new direction could bring a greater happiness than the original path.

I cheered them on as I wrote their story. I hope you will, too.

Susan

About the Author

SUSAN CROSBY believes in the value of setting goals, but also in the magic of making wishes, which often do come true—as long as she works hard enough. Along life’s journey, she’s done a lot of the usual things—married, had children, attended college a little later than the average co-ed and earned a BA in English. Then she dove off the deep end into a full-time writing career, a wish come true.

Susan enjoys writing about people who take a chance on love, sometimes against all odds. She loves warm, strong heroes and good-hearted, self-reliant heroines, and she will always believe in happily-ever-after.

More can be learned about her at www.susancrosby.com.

His Temporary Live-In Wife

Susan Crosby



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Rob and Colleen, who live and love side by side. “Role model” may be a big, lofty title with lots of responsibility attached to it, but you’ve both worn it well.

Chapter One

“You want me to house-sit a vacant home? There’s no furniture? Nothing?” Marcy Monroe asked her employer, bewildered. The request was a first in her four years of working for At Your Service, a Sacramento high-end temp agency. “Who hires someone to do *that*?”

“A cautious man, apparently.” The agency owner, Julia Swanson, smiled in that serene way she had. “I thought since your other house-sitting job fell through, you wouldn’t mind. The client will pay for a cot and sleeping bag.” She handed Marcy a sheet of paper. “Here’s a list of what he’ll need done in the next few days. As you can see, you’ll be busy. He bought it as a foreclosure, so it’s not in perfect shape. The job is much more than house-sitting. He’ll pay double your rate.”

“Tell him to triple it and I’ll do the cleaning, too,” she muttered, perusing the task list. “It’ll save him having to hire a service, and it’ll keep me occupied while I’m there.”

Julia picked up the phone and dialed.

Marcy waved both hands, the paper flapping. “Julia, stop. I’m kidding!”

“You’re kidding about offering to do the cleaning?” Julia asked.

“No, I’d do it, but—”

“Eric, hi, it’s Julia Swanson... ?. Yes, she’s sitting in my office right now. She wanted me to tell you she’s willing to do the cleaning, too, for an extra fee... ?.”

That sneaky Julia, Marcy thought. She couldn’t say no now, and Julia knew it. “I don’t do windows,” Marcy whispered loudly.

“Of course. Here she is.” Her eyes shimmering, Julia held out the phone to Marcy. “He’d like to speak with you.”

Marcy shook her head at Julia but had to take the phone. “This is Marcy Monroe.”

“Eric Sheridan, Ms. Monroe. Thank you very much for accepting the job. I can’t tell you what a relief that is to me.”

She almost sighed. It was obviously a done deal. “I’m glad I can help.”

“You know the house has been vacant for months. It needs a great deal of elbow grease. Plus, it’s one-and-a-half stories, with lots of windows.”

Great, she thought. Just great. “That’s fine.”

He hesitated a beat. “Did Julia show you the list?”

“Yes, and I don’t foresee any problems, Mr. Sheridan. You can relax. I’m quite competent.”

“I was already promised that. I’m leaving New York City today to drive across the country. Feel free to call me anytime you have questions. I’d rather not be surprised when I get there.”

“I will, thanks.”

“If you would put Julia back on, please?”

Marcy passed her the phone and watched Julia laugh at something the man said. He’d been all business with *her*. Marcy couldn’t imagine what was so funny—unless it had to do with her somehow.

After a few seconds, Julia hung up. “He said to hire a window-cleaning service.”

Marcy felt her face heat. “He heard me say that?”

“Apparently. Or he’s clairvoyant.”

“What does he do?”

“He’ll be teaching mathematics for the fall quarter at UC Davis starting next month.”

A mathematician—which probably meant he was a stickler for details and more pragmatic than fun. She’d met several in her past life as a flight attendant. “I’ll only be dealing with him, no one else?”

“Right.” Julia leaned forward. “I know you feel trapped into accepting the job, Marcy, but if you’re really not interested, you can back out.”

“No, I’ll do it. It’s just so weird staying in an empty house, you know? Kind of creepy.”

“Invite a friend to stay overnight with you, if you want.” She passed Marcy an envelope. “Here’s the key and some cash for supplies. The utilities have been turned on. Thank you so much for doing this. I think he could end up being a long-time client for other occasions.”

Marcy said goodbye then took the stairs down three flights from the downtown Sacramento office. Julia’s business was often nicknamed “Wives for Hire” because of jobs like this one.

Marcy decided to check out the client’s house before shopping for supplies, so she headed for the town of Davis, a half hour’s drive from Sacramento. She pulled up in front of a quaint Craftsman-style home with wood-shake siding, rock pillars and a wraparound porch, a masculine-looking structure. That was the upside.

The downside was a lawn and landscaping that had died for lack of watering during however long it had been in foreclosure.

And the windows? She counted twenty-four just on the front.

She stepped out of the car, the late August heat hitting her squarely in the face. Today marked the seventh day in a row the temperature had reached one hundred, although the stately old trees that lined the block provided good shade. It was an old, established neighborhood of well-maintained, decades-old houses, the kind of place where kids could play in the street without too much worry.

Grateful she didn’t have to wash the multitude of windows, Marcy was smiling as she opened the front door and stepped inside a wide living room that looked as if it had been a frat house once. Everything needed painting. Walls needed repair. The floors were dirty, but seemed to have weathered the storm well enough.

Like most Craftsman houses, it wasn’t open-concept, but separate rooms. In the dining room she discovered a broken window with glass scattered across the floor, and footprints—human and animal—in the accumulated dust. The half bath was filthy. So was the kitchen. The cabinets were usable but the appliances and countertops old and in need of replacement. Upstairs were three bedrooms and two bathrooms, one within the master suite that must have been renovated sometime in the past twenty years. Overhead light fixtures had been ripped out, and although the walls weren’t badly damaged, they needed paint.

The house would sparkle like a gem when it was clean and fixed up, but it was going to take a lot of effort to get it to that point.

She regretted telling the owner she would do the cleaning. It was a much bigger job than she’d expected.

Marcy glanced at the to-do list. Painters were to arrive starting the next day. An interior designer was on the schedule. The moving van was due on Friday, four days from now. Mr. Sheridan hoped to arrive on Saturday, perhaps Sunday.

Marcy wandered into the backyard, which had a covered deck and built-in barbecue that had somehow survived with only a little weather-related damage. The lot wasn’t overly large, and the neighbors fairly close, but a fence surrounded the property as well as enough greenery to maintain some privacy.

Someone on a bicycle came barreling down the driveway, a teenage boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen years old.

“Hi,” he said, getting off his bike but holding on to it. “I’m Dylan. I saw the For Sale was taken down. Are you the new owner? ‘Cause I’m looking for work, and this place could use it. I know I don’t look it, but I’m strong.”

There was a desperateness about him that drew her sympathy. He was rib-showing skinny, and his hair hadn’t been cut in a while.

“I’m sorry, Dylan. I don’t have any authority to hire anyone. Maybe if you come back next week?”

More than disappointment crossed his face. Despair? Hopelessness?

She dug into her pocket, pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and tucked it into his hand. “Come back next week, okay?”

He didn’t debate about taking the money, which told her a lot. He mumbled his thanks then took off.

She watched him until he was out of sight, then walked the perimeter, checking out the neglected yard. She returned to the house to make a list before calling the new owner.

“Mr. Sheridan, this is Marcy Monroe. I’m at your house. When was the last time you saw it?”

“Call me Eric, please. I saw it three months ago, why?”

“There’s damage in almost every room.” She told him what she’d found. “Was the house in that condition when you saw it?”

“No.” Annoyance coated the single word.

“We should postpone the painters until the walls are fixed, don’t you think? I know it’s going to throw your schedule off, but I don’t see that you have a choice.”

He blew out a breath. “My Realtor didn’t tell me. She should have.”

“Maybe she didn’t know. It’s hard to tell when it happened. I think the first priority is to fix the broken window. And honestly, I don’t want to stay here until I know it’s secure.”

“I believe an occupied house will scare off vagrants and prevent more damage from occurring, which is why I asked for someone to spend the night.”

“But—”

“But I agree about the window,” he said, interrupting her before she got started on her argument. “Go ahead and have that fixed, today if possible. Offer a bonus, if necessary. After that, I’d like you to stay at night, as planned. Unless you don’t want the job now?”

She was tempted to back out, but she prided herself on her reliability. She’d agreed to the job. She would stick it out. Plus, the work involved a whole lot of money, and she wouldn’t turn that down. It would help make up for losing out on the two-week house-sitting job she’d counted on.

“I’m not quitting,” she said. “Actually, I’m used to sleeping in strange houses, although not unfurnished ones. I also wondered if you want me to buy a vacuum cleaner.”

“I have one, but it’s in the moving van. Doesn’t do much good there, does it?”

“I can borrow one. I should get going. There’s a lot to do.”

“I appreciate your checking with me.”

She pushed the end button and stared at her phone. He had a pleasant voice. More than that, really—an enticing voice, deep and clear, although a somewhat-formal tone. She didn’t think students would have any trouble listening to him lecture.

She should’ve asked Julia how old he was. She had no visual image of him. He sounded settled. Professorial. She pictured a man in his sixties, wearing a sweater vest and tweed jacket with elbow patches.

Marcy smiled at the stereotype that formed in her head. She wasn’t anywhere near settled, but twenty-eight and still working toward her educational goals, and then to a career to sustain her through good times and bad.

Her future was something she could ponder forever, but for now she had a job to do—get the window fixed so she could spend her first night in the cave Eric Sheridan called home.

Eric made a final walk-through of his empty co-op. Having some last-minute business to tend to before he could leave town, he’d been staying at a hotel since the movers had packed everything a few days earlier. In a few minutes he would hit the road. He could’ve flown, could’ve had the car moved with his belongings, but had decided he needed to clear his head so that he could start fresh in California. A road trip would do that.

He needed to let go of his life in New York City. A year had gone by since Jamie had been taken from him, and Eric was still stuck in the anger stage of mourning, one he was well familiar with, unfortunately. This time he knew he had to find a way to make quicker work of the other grief

stages and get on with life. He'd been offered a teaching position at MIT, his alma mater and where his father had taught for many years, as well. But a move to the west coast seemed ... cleaner.

He was almost forty, and he was done with the singles scene. He wanted to live near family, not just gather with them for holidays. His brothers were scattered around the country, but his sister lived just north of Sacramento. She was newly married and not bound to leave the area anytime soon.

More important, he wanted marriage and children, and had bought a house suitable for raising a family. He'd been waiting for years to settle down, fulfilling his many other responsibilities before seeing to his own needs. He'd raised his four siblings after their parents died, and he didn't regret or resent what he'd done, but it was his time now.

His cell phone rang, jarring him out of his reverie. He saw it was Marcy Malone again. "Yes, Marcy?"

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"I'm in my empty apartment, making a final pass-through. What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to let you know that the window has been fixed."

"Good."

"However," she added, "I just realized there are no blinds or curtains. Not a one."

"I'm aware of that."

"Have you ordered some? I don't see anything on the list about it."

The nerves he'd heard in their previous conversation seemed more intense now. "The interior designer is handling it. I take it you're afraid to stay there without window coverings?"

There was a long pause, as if she was weighing her words and being careful not to displease the client. "I'm okay," she said finally but in a tone that seemed to indicate she was trying to convince herself.

He should've asked Julia Swanson for information on Marcy Malone. He'd like a visual to put to the voice. She sounded young. "If you're sure," he said, not wanting to have her replaced, but also not wanting her to fear staying in the house alone.

"I'm sure. Okay, then. That's all I wanted to know."

"I'm glad you called," he said. "Don't hesitate, no matter how trivial the issue seems."

"Thanks. Have a safe trip."

He said good-night then wandered to the living-room window, which overlooked Central Park. He'd taken Jamie there. They'd rollerbladed, eaten ice cream and talked a lot—about life and expectations and what mattered most.

His time with Jamie had given Eric insight into the kind of life he wanted. A wife who was calm and soothing, but stable and competent, too. Maternal. Especially maternal.

And willing to put her career on hold until their children were raised, a hopelessly chauvinistic and politically incorrect demand, but he wasn't an idealistic young man any more. He knew what he wanted, what he could live with, and what were deal breakers. He wouldn't settle. He'd earned the right to pursue his own happiness after all he'd been through.

Eric locked the door of his co-op for the last time. Anticipation lightened his step, the same level of excitement he'd felt when his Realtor first took him into the house he'd ended up buying. The feeling was rare for him, and welcome.

He hoped it was a sign of more to come.

By the third day of his drive, Eric had gotten antsy. Talk radio couldn't hold his attention, music only annoyed him. He'd downloaded an audio book, a thriller that should've dug its suspenseful claws into him and made the time pass quickly. It didn't work.

Why had he ever thought that driving across the country was a good way to transition to his new life? He was miserable. He talked on his cell phone to his siblings, old friends, and a few business acquaintances until they made up excuses to get off the phone.

The only one who didn't offer an excuse and rush off was Marcy Monroe, but he was also paying her for her time. He'd come to enjoy his conversations with her a lot.

His phone rang. Speak of the devil, he thought, smiling. "Hello, Marcy."

"Hi. How's it going?"

"I just passed through Lincoln, Nebraska. I found a great hamburger place on the outskirts of the city. What's up?"

"The installers are here with your washer and dryer. I just wanted to double-check that you ordered Zephyr Blue?"

She said it with such doubt in her voice, he grinned. "That's the color."

"Okay. Let me tell them. Hold on a sec. Yes, that's fine. Go ahead," she said to the installers.

"I guess you can't picture me with Zephyr Blue appliances," he commented.

"It's weird because I'm doing all this personal work for you but I don't know anything beyond the fact you're a math professor. May I ask why you're moving here?"

"For the women."

"I beg your pardon?"

He laughed. "I'm looking to get married and have children. I've exhausted New York."

Her response was a little slow in coming. "I know a lot of women. What are you looking for?"

"Do you? Because I don't want to do the whole online dating thing, so a personal reference would be great. She has to want kids, even though this would be my second family. I've already raised four to adulthood."

"Four?" she repeated, a little breathlessly. "Ah, what age are you looking for?"

"She needs to be childbearing age, of course, but not too young. I'm not looking to rob any cradles."

"So, you're divorced? Or widowed?"

"Neither."

"You're a single dad?"

Eric was having way too much fun with her, but he didn't want to explain everything and turn the conversation serious. He was tired of serious. It was one of his reasons for making the move. "It's a long story," he said.

"May I ask you this—did they all have the same mother?"

"Absolutely."

Dead silence followed. "I hope you'll share the story sometime," she said finally.

"That's a date."

"Good. In the meantime, I'll look through my address book and see if I can come up with some names."

"That is above and beyond the call of duty, Marcy. Thank you."

Eric started whistling after they hung up, then he found music on the satellite radio that he could sing along with. He was beginning to feel more than a little hopeful about his fresh start. He even had a matchmaker willing to help.

He rolled down his window and flew down the Interstate singing at the top of his lungs. He couldn't wait to get to California and see who she had in mind.

Chapter Two

Early Friday morning, Marcy dragged herself out of her sleeping bag and stumbled into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face. She stared at her haggard reflection.

“One more night to go,” she reminded herself. It had been a very long week, but Eric was making good time on the road and thought he would arrive sometime tomorrow afternoon. In some ways she was ready to move on, but since her house-sitting job had been canceled, she didn’t have anywhere to go the following week. Usually she stayed at her back-up home, her friend Lori’s apartment, but she had out-of-town company, leaving no room for Marcy. She’d checked with two other friends, but they both had live-in boyfriends, a surprise to her, so that wouldn’t work.

For the first time in ages, she would have to get a motel room.

But whichever way it worked out, a full night’s sleep was in sight for her, for which she was grateful. Eric’s house made noise all night, sounds she couldn’t identify, creaks and groans and clunks. Tree branches scraped against windows. A couple of times she thought she’d heard footsteps, but in the morning there were no signs of anyone having been inside.

She knew she was being ridiculous. Paranoid, probably. In her sane moments, she chalked it up to being in an empty building. Furniture, drapes and carpets absorbed sound, but empty houses echoed, magnifying even a hum into a clatter.

She’d placed her cot and sleeping bag against the locked bedroom door, and had never gotten out of bed to check out a noise.

One more night ...

After the quickest shower on record, Marcy opened the bedroom door a crack and peeked out. She listened. A minute later she left the room and tiptoed downstairs, going from room to room, finding nothing out of place. Daylight vanquished ghosts and lessened fears. She’d relaxed by the time she opened the refrigerator. She’d already stocked it with the items on Eric’s list but had bought things for herself, too, like individual-size bottles of orange juice. She grabbed one, then noticed it was the last.

She’d bought five bottles. This was day four.

Marcy moved food around, not finding another bottle. Had one of the workmen taken one?

She searched a little more but didn’t notice anything else missing. From a cabinet she grabbed a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter, at least a half of which was missing. She’d only made one sandwich.

Marcy dropped the jar to the counter. Half the loaf of bread was gone, too. It wasn’t her imagination.

She shoved both items into a grocery bag then washed her hands. Who could’ve taken the food? What else had they handled? It had to be someone who’d been in the house during the past two days. Who had she left unsupervised?

The drywall repairer had worked on Tuesday and part of yesterday, so it could have been him. And she’d left him alone when the washer and dryer were delivered yesterday. But the laundry room was just off the kitchen, so she would’ve seen him sneak into the kitchen. Several boxes of window treatments had arrived later in the day. The deliveryman hadn’t gone beyond the living room.

That left the painters. No one else had been in the house for long.

What could she do about it? She could call and complain to their boss, but anyone bold enough to steal would also lie. She had no proof, either. Now she would have to do an inventory and replace whatever else was missing.

Plus deal with the creepiness of the whole thing.

She carried the trash outside to put in the bin, but the bin was gone. Two bins, actually, trash and recycling. Then she noticed that the old drywall the workman had tossed outside was also gone.

Marcy followed the driveway to the front yard and spotted the bins. Next to them were the appliance cartons, broken down and stacked on the sidewalk, ready to be picked up. The trash container was filled with drywall scraps.

“We have so much trash today, don’t we, Lucy?” a woman said nearby.

Marcy saw the next-door neighbor try to muscle her trash bin to the curb and carry a toddler at the same time. Marcy rushed over.

“May I help?” she asked.

“Thank you.” She followed Marcy to the sidewalk. “Are you my new neighbor?”

“No, I’m just helping to get the house in order before the owner comes.” She put out her hand. “My name’s Marcy.”

“I’m Annie and this is Lucy. She’s two. Say hi, Luce.” The woman was tall and slender, probably in her early thirties, with straight blond hair to her shoulders. And no wedding ring.

The little girl lowered her chin but looked up flirtatiously, making Marcy laugh. “It’s very nice to meet you, Lucy, and Lucy’s mommy.”

“We’ve been looking forward to having the house occupied.” She glanced toward it. Her own place was more Victorian in design, as true to the era as Eric’s.

“I would feel the same. By any chance, did you haul my trash to the street? I got up this morning and found it done.”

“Wasn’t me, but we’ve got a block full of helpful neighbors. You’ll probably find out who did it sometime today. We’ll, we’re on our way to mommy-and-me swim class. I’ll talk to you later.”

Check, check, check, Marcy thought. Annie might be slightly on the young side, but she was the best candidate so far for Eric. Marcy would try to get more info on her later today. Of course, being next-door neighbors could be too complicated, especially if they dated then it didn’t work out.

When Marcy got back to the kitchen she stopped and stared. She hadn’t noticed earlier that the dishes had been done. There hadn’t been many, but the counter was clean. It shouldn’t have been.

Which meant someone had been inside the house. During the night. While she slept.

The doorbell rang, heralding the arrival of the window washers, who planned to be there for hours, as would the painters, finishing up two upstairs rooms. She welcomed the distraction. The moving company had called yesterday to say she could expect the van to arrive around ten. Marcy had contacted the interior designer, passing along that news.

Everyone should be gone by the time she headed to her regular weekend waitress job. Even being on her feet all night would seem like a vacation after this week.

On the other hand, her checkbook was going to be very happy, especially her tuition fund.

A couple hours later, one of the window washers pointed out a broken lock on a dining room window, not the one she’d had repaired, but the window next to it. She’d never noticed. It appeared locked, but actually wasn’t latching into anything, a section of the latch having been broken or cut away. The window slid up and down with little effort.

One more item for her to-do list. One more thing to worry about on her last day and night.

She examined the dining-room floor, looking for evidence that someone had broken in. Since she’d been watering the yard every day, it was muddy outside the window now. Anyone who climbed through the window would’ve had mud on their shoes. She found nothing, however.

How could she possibly come back here after her shift tonight? It would be well past midnight, and the house dark and empty, and easy to break into. Apparently *had* already been broken into. Would Eric be angry if she didn’t spend the night?

Probably, especially now that his personal belongings would be delivered.

Okay then. She would just have to stay awake. She had a cell phone and a can of pepper spray. She could handle anything.

Eric had come to appreciate his GPS more than ever on his trip across America. Not only did he know where he was going and how to get there, he also easily found hotels, gas stations and restaurants.

But also because of the unit's efficiency, he knew exactly how many hours of driving he had ahead of him. Which tonight prompted a big decision. It was ten o'clock. He was three hours out of Davis, California, his ultimate destination. He'd been on the road most of the day. Usually by now he was settled into a hotel room and asleep.

It's only three hours. You could sleep in your own bed tonight.

But could he stay awake? Was it worth the exhaustion?

Yes. He would be home. He would be too restless if he went to a hotel now, anyway.

He dialed Marcy's phone but only reached her voice mail. Maybe she'd already gone to bed. She'd had a long, busy day, he knew.

"Marcy, it's Eric," he said. "I just wanted to alert you that I'll be arriving around 1:00 a.m. Didn't want to catch you by surprise. When you get this message, please call me back. Thanks."

A little under three hours later, he pulled into his driveway and parked in front of his detached garage, assuming Marcy's car was inside it. The house was dark. She hadn't returned his call, so he figured she was asleep.

Hesitant about giving her a shock, he approached the front door quietly, key in hand. He checked his phone in case she'd called back and he hadn't heard it ring, but there weren't any messages.

Should he call her again now, before he went inside, so that if she woke up she wouldn't think he was an intruder? What if she kept a gun for protection?

He dialed, figuring it was better to startle her out of sleep than come face-to-face with her. They'd never seen each other. She could scream, wake the neighbors, get the police involved....

Still no answer. He hung up without leaving a message.

He slid his key into the lock, opened the door slowly. He didn't turn on any lights, a streetlamp in front of his house and his porch light offering enough illumination to see where he was going.

His furniture was in place but boxes were stacked to one side. He walked down the hall and into the dining room, stopping cold when he saw one window partially open.

She'd gone to bed with the window open? What an idiotic—

A slight noise reached him. He spun around. Someone was nearby. Marcy? No, she wouldn't tiptoe....

Was she all right?

He rushed from the room and down the hall in time to see someone reach the front door. Eric picked up speed. The person flung open the door and ran out ... and crashed into someone—Marcy, Eric decided, hearing a woman yelp. Knocked to the ground, she'd slowed the intruder's escape long enough for Eric to grab him and slam him against the side of the house, driving his shoulder into him to prevent him from going anywhere. A kid, Eric thought. A teenager, maybe only seventeen.

"Eric?" Marcy asked breathlessly, warily. She stood up and backed off at the same time. She was looking at him as if he was the bad guy.

The kid tried to wriggle away. Eric pushed him harder into the siding and grunted. "Yes, I'm Eric," he said to Marcy, who looked nothing like he'd expected. He'd imagined her as young and petite. She was close to thirty, he decided, above average in height, with generous curves and long, wild, auburn hair.

She smiled a little, shaky but sassy, too. "Welcome to California." She pointed at the boy. "That's Dylan. He's looking for work."

"You know him? You invited him to stay in my house without asking me?"

"Of course not. I have no idea how he got inside."

"Through the window you left open," Eric said.

She frowned. "What window?"

“In the dining room. Wide open.”

“I didn’t, I promise you. The lock—”

“Let’s take this inside.” He would deal with her incompetence later. He didn’t want his new neighbors observing this scene as their introduction.

Eric maneuvered the teenager into the living room and onto a chair then stood over him. Marcy followed, turning on lights. The boy was tall and skinny, with dirty brown hair and eyes teeming with belligerence.

Great, Eric thought. Just what I needed tonight.

“Do you want me to call the police?” Marcy asked, leaning against the front door.

“Not yet. So. Dylan what?” Eric asked the kid.

He glared back silently.

“You’re telling me or you’re telling the cops. Which is it?”

A flash of hope sprang in his eyes. Eric had already come to some conclusions about him.

The boy remained silent. Eric reached for his cell phone.

“Anthony,” Dylan said in a rush.

Eric wondered if that was really his name. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“Prove it.”

“I can’t.”

“Where do you live?”

“Nowhere. Everywhere. Here, for a while. It got complicated once she—” he jerked his head toward Marcy “—moved in.”

“You ate my peanut butter,” she said.

He lifted his chin, gave her a dark look. “You don’t look like you’ve missed any meals.”

“Knock it off,” Eric said. “You want to save your hide, be respectful.”

Dylan looked at the floor.

“I gave you money, and this is how you repay me?” Marcy asked.

“I didn’t ask you for anything except a job, lady. And I did stuff— Never mind.”

“Are you hungry?” Eric asked, knowing the answer. They could sort this out when everyone calmed down.

“Wait,” Marcy said. “You did what stuff?” she asked Dylan. “Finish your sentence.”

He shrugged.

“It was *you*. You broke down the boxes and put them out for recycling. You put the trash out so the drywall could be hauled off. You even did the dishes!”

After a few seconds he nodded, not making eye contact.

Apparently there was a lot more to this kid than appeared on the surface. He hadn’t just stolen.

“Marcy, would you please fix Dylan a sandwich or something,” Eric said. “Whatever you’ve got on hand.”

She sighed. “Would you also like one?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“Oh, no. I’m here to serve,” she muttered as she strode into the kitchen, although “marched” might be a more accurate description.

Eric pulled a chair close to Dylan and sat. “Tell me about living here. How’d you do that?”

“Opened the window. Climbed in.”

Eric dug for patience. “Be more specific.”

“I saw the place was empty. I needed a place to stay.”

“Did you break the window?”

“It was already broken.” He finally made eye contact, although only briefly. “I broke the lock on the other window so I could get back in, in case someone fixed the glass.”

“How long did you stay here?”

He shrugged.

“Days? Weeks? Months?”

“When I needed to.”

Eric waited, his gaze steady. Silence usually brought discomfort and therefore answers, but this kid handled empty silences well.

“Go wash your hands before we eat.” He reckoned the boy was hungry enough not to climb out the window. “I think you know where the bathroom is.”

Dylan had perfected the teenage saunter. He didn’t act scared or nervous, but Eric figured he was plenty of both.

Eric joined Marcy in the kitchen, planting himself where he could see if Dylan tried to escape. She glanced at Eric then returned to fixing what looked to be turkey sandwiches and chips.

“The boy’s cleaning up,” he said.

“I could hear your conversation.”

“Need help?”

“No, thanks.”

She went silent but he noted how stiff-backed she was. “You don’t approve of me not phoning the police.”

“At first I thought you should, but now that I know he’s been my secret helper, I’d be more hesitant to turn him in. He seems desperate, and not all bad.”

“Don’t be too quick to make that kind of decision. He’s no innocent.”

“He’s no hardened criminal, either.”

Her hair had fallen along the side of her face, hiding her expression, but also giving him a moment for a longer glimpse of her.

Dylan’s comment about her not looking as if she missed meals wasn’t accurate. She was just curvy, very curvy, top and bottom, but with a small waist, proportionately. A perfect hourglass. She wore a low-cut T-shirt with the word “Score” blazoned across it, and skin-tight jeans. Too many questions came to mind. He was trying not to jump to conclusions as much as he had in the past.

“Where were you tonight?” he asked.

“I wait tables at a sports bar on Friday and Saturday nights.” She faced him. “I didn’t know the window lock was broken until today when the window washer pointed it out. As you’ll see for yourself, it’s not immediately evident. I made arrangements for it to be repaired, but the guy couldn’t come until tomorrow. Today.”

“You should’ve offered a bonus to come today. If you’d called me about it, I would’ve told you to do that. You should know that about me by now.”

“Apparently money solves all your problems,” she murmured.

Annoyed at her tone, he came up beside her so that Dylan wouldn’t overhear any more of their conversation. “Most of the time, yes. You didn’t turn down the extra pay I offered.”

“True.” After a minute, she said, “What are you going to do about him?”

“I haven’t decided, but he needs to learn there are consequences for his actions.”

Dylan stepped into the room then. He swallowed as he eyed the sandwiches. He also looked ready to take flight.

“I know all about consequences,” Dylan said, looking as if the world was one big heavy weight on his shoulders.

Eric saw Marcy become a puddle of sympathy. He figured the kid had learned survival techniques, one of them being to figure out who might be the softest touch. He would probably zero in on Marcy now, because she’d played her hand already. He knew she cared about what happened to him.

“What would you like to drink?” she asked.

“Milk. If you’ve got it.”

“I think by now you know what she’s got,” Eric said. “You’re not eating?” he asked Marcy as she passed their plates to them.

“I ate at work.”

His long day of driving, followed by all he’d been met with here, combined to deliver him a one-two punch of exhaustion. He wasn’t even hungry anymore. He just needed sleep. And no problems to deal with for at least ten hours.

So much for starting fresh somewhere else. Welcome to California, indeed.

“You can sleep in the living room,” he said to Dylan, deciding that if he hadn’t taken anything other than food the last five days, he wasn’t likely to do so now. “I expect you to be here when I get up in the morning, even if that’s not until noon.”

Dylan said nothing. He just ate, taking big bites, devouring the sandwich.

Eric glanced at Marcy when Dylan refused to answer.

“What? You plan on ordering me, too?” she asked, challenge and humor in her eyes.

“Where have you been sleeping?”

“On a cot in your bedroom. Your furniture was set up today, and your bed is made, by the way. I’ll just move into one of the spare bedrooms for the night. I’m sure we’ll have business to discuss in the morning. Good night.”

She was a lot more lively in person than on the phone, and she wasn’t acting much like an employee. Not that he minded, except that his perceptions of her were all wrong, and that usually wasn’t the case.

He watched Dylan eat. Eric had seen what could happen to teenagers on the streets of New York. Things might not be as dire in the university town of Davis, but everyone deserved better than being reduced to scrounge for food and shelter. And everyone he knew who’d gotten involved with a homeless person had gotten bitten in some way.

He wanted to trust his instincts about the kid, but he knew he should keep his guard up. “Want another sandwich?” he asked.

“She made chocolate-chip cookies today, but I’m guessing they’re for you,” Dylan said, pointing to a plastic container on the counter.

Eric leaned back in his chair, grabbed it and set it in front of the boy. Dylan didn’t hesitate. He yanked the top off and pulled out a handful. Eric went to the refrigerator to get the milk again, deciding to give up asking questions. The kid would talk when he was ready.

After a few minutes Marcy materialized in the doorway. “I made up a bed for Dylan on the sofa,” she said, then disappeared as quickly and quietly as she’d come.

They rinsed their plates in the kitchen sink then walked into the living room. The sofa looked welcoming. Because it was a normal hot August night, she hadn’t added a blanket, only sheets, but she’d turned down the top sheet invitingly and put a chocolate mint on his pillow.

Eric smiled at that. She may not trust Dylan being there, and she may even harbor resentment for his sneaking into the house under her watch, but she still recognized he could use a little comfort.

“Are you gonna call the cops?” Dylan asked, scuffing his toe against the hardwood floor.

He was too tired to deal with it. “We’ll talk about it in the morning.” He dragged his hands down his face.

Dylan sprang into action, making a quick side step around Eric, running to the door. He was already to the front sidewalk by the time Eric made it to the porch.

He should’ve anticipated that, but he’d figured Dylan would be grateful for the food and the offer of a place to sleep, although Eric had fully expected him to leave before sunrise.

Eric locked the door, then climbed the stairs. He could probably find something to wedge into the window jam, making it impossible to open, but he didn’t bother. If Dylan changed his mind, he would have a way in.

When Eric reached the second floor, he didn't see a light on under either guest-room door, so he didn't know which room she'd taken. His bedroom door was open, however, and a lamp on. He stepped over the threshold. His quilt was folded at the foot of the bed, leaving only sheets for him, too. The house was warm even with the air conditioner on.

And there was a mint on his pillow.

Even though she was wary of having Dylan in the house, and had borne the brunt of his own anger for the window lock not being fixed, she'd turned his room into a retreat for him.

He dug out shorts and a T-shirt from his suitcase and climbed into bed. The sheets felt crisp and smelled fresh, as did his room. He'd had housecleaners all his adult life, but that's all they did—clean house.

Marcy had already made him a home.

Chapter Three

Marcy jolted straight up in bed when the doorbell rang, followed by someone pounding on the door. She flung back the covers, grabbed her cell phone to check the time—3:30 a.m.—then rushed out of the bedroom, pulling on a summer-weight robe.

From the top of the staircase Marcy saw Eric open the front door. Two uniformed officers stood there, Dylan in front of them, looking hostile.

“We caught him as he dropped out a window out back,” one officer said. “Neighbor phoned it in that she’d seen someone climb inside. He was carrying this.” He held up the plastic container of cookies Marcy had baked. “Says he knows you.”

“We’ve met,” Eric said, his arms crossed, his eyes drilling the boy.

“You want to press charges?” the cop asked.

“I don’t know. Do I want to press charges, Dylan?”

Marcy saw the boy’s hostility transform into fear. Scared, he looked even younger.

“It’s just cookies,” he muttered.

“And breaking and entering,” Eric pointed out.

“The window wasn’t locked,” Dylan said, cockiness not just in his voice but his stance.

The look Eric gave him would’ve reduced Marcy to a quivering mass, but Dylan challenged him right back with his eyes.

The look might not have backed Dylan down but he did respond to it. His hostile expression smoothed out, and he stood a little taller, waiting for a verdict.

“Charges, sir?” the now-impatient officer asked.

“No. Let him go.” Eric started to shut the door.

“Wait! Give him the cookies,” Dylan ordered the cop. “I’m sorry.”

Marcy watched Eric close his eyes for a few seconds and then assume the stern-parent look before he reopened the door. The officer passed Eric the container. He and his partner strode off.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t move,” Eric said to Dylan as he stood on the porch, then Eric caught up with the police officers, entering into a discussion for a couple of minutes before returning. He walked past Dylan, went inside, then turned at the threshold. “Do you have anything to say?”

“I know I was stupid to do that,” Dylan said right away.

“You think?”

“I’ve been on my own awhile. I’m not used to someone being nice to me.”

“Cut the crap,” Eric said, shocking Marcy. Dylan had seemed genuinely sorry.

“Maybe that works on some people, but not me. There’s no reason for someone your age to be homeless, not with all the public options available. You’ve chosen to be. I don’t know if you’re running or hiding, but I expect other people have been *nice* to you.” Eric leaned close to him. “You’ve heard of the three-strikes law?”

Dylan nodded.

“You’ve got two in my book. Good night.” He shut the door in the boy’s face.

Marcy’s heart caught in her throat. He was just a kid, a scared kid. “You’re sending him out there again? In the middle of the night?”

His face looked cold, so very cold. “Coddling is not going to help this boy, even though he could use a whole lot of that, too. If he wants help, he’ll knock. He needs to be a man. Someone hasn’t taught him that.”

“But you will?”

“I don’t see anyone else stepping up, do you? But he has to want it. Look, those cops already knew him. I told them we were thinking about letting him stay with us, so they were straight with me. He had some trouble at one of the shelters and got booted out, but the cops think it wasn’t his

fault. He hasn't gotten into any trouble that they know of. Keeps his head down and his nose clean. That's high praise in my mind. They gave me a couple of people to check with. That and my own gut feeling says we can let him stay here for now."

A quiet knock came on the door.

Eric didn't make him wait long before he pulled open the door.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Eric asked.

He drew a shaky breath. "Breaking in. Taking the cookies. Not being cool after you tried to help me."

"Apology accepted."

They faced off, one more question hanging between them. Dylan gave in first. "I'd like to stay the night, if the offer's still good."

"It's good." Eric backed away, letting him in. "Don't do anything that deprives me of sleep for the next six hours or so." He passed Dylan the cookies then headed up the staircase without looking back.

Marcy resisted the temptation to hover over the boy, even though the look on his face just about broke her heart. "You know where the milk is," she said. "Good night, Dylan."

"Night." His voice was tight, as if he was fighting tears.

She touched his arm. "You'll be all right," she said, her throat burning, her heart aching. He wasn't a hardened criminal but a kid who'd somehow lost his way. "Mr. Sheridan seems like the right person to trust," she added.

He nodded. She patted his arm instead of hugging him, as she was tempted to do, then she climbed the stairs and got into bed.

Sleep eluded her. So much had happened in the past few hours that it seemed like a whole day. Taking center stage in her thoughts was what a surprise Eric had been. She'd expected a man decades older, but she doubted he was forty. He was at least six feet tall, and his temples were graying, but otherwise his hair was light brown, cut not so short as to look severe but not long enough to fall into his face. His eyes were a deep, rich, penetrating brown. And he was built like a football player, sturdy and solid. Sexy, actually. Strong, too. He'd dealt with Dylan on the porch earlier swiftly and powerfully but without hurting him.

Eric didn't seem to have much of a sense of humor, but he hadn't exactly walked into a situation allowing or requiring one—and he was a mathematician, after all. He was probably logical to a fault. At the moment he must be wondering about his decision to move to Davis, especially now that he seemed fated to become responsible for a stray with criminal tendencies.

Marcy smiled at the ceiling. She was a big believer in fate, which had led her down some interesting paths in life. And she couldn't shake the feeling that fate had just dealt her the most important hand of her life when her last-two-weeks-of-August, regular-as-clockwork, house-sitting job had fallen through for the first time in four years, leaving her free to take this job.

She had nowhere to go tomorrow, and she felt a strong draw to the man in this crazy scenario. Would he ask her to stay? Would he be her hero?

She didn't usually have such fantasies. She had goals to accomplish, after all, and promises to keep—with no time to slack off, not even when it involved a gorgeous math professor who summed up a situation and took control immediately and well. And who made her heart flutter with just a look.

Nope. No time for that at all. It was better if he didn't need her to stay. Safer.

But then safer wasn't always better, was it?

* * *

The next morning, Marcy lay in bed listening. It was almost 10:00 a.m., but she hadn't heard any sounds of movement in the few minutes she'd been awake. She wondered if Dylan was still asleep or had flown the coop. Or cleaned out the refrigerator.

She'd slept well, having relinquished responsibility to Eric.

Prepared for another hundred-degree day, Marcy pulled on shorts and a tank top, then left her room. Eric's bedroom door was closed. She slipped into the guest bath, cleaned up, and made her way downstairs.

The sofa was empty, although the sheets were jumbled, so Dylan had slept there at some point.

Disappointment washed over her. She'd hoped not only that the boy would realize Eric would probably continue to help him, but also that Dylan would prove himself worthy of Eric's trust.

She heard the shower in the master bath come on and headed for the kitchen. She would fix a nice breakfast before she left, wanting to end the job on good terms. She was curious, too, about his reaction to Dylan being gone.

She fixed cheese omelets and wheat toast, filled a bowl with grapes and cantaloupe. She was just about to slide the plates into a warm oven when she heard the creak of the stairs as Eric made his way down. He didn't pause but came directly into the kitchen.

"He's gone," she said when he stopped in the doorway, looking rested, but wearing jeans and a polo shirt. He'd find out soon enough what summer in Davis was. She hoped he owned shorts. She'd bet he had great legs. And shoulders, and—

"I heard him go out the back door not too long ago," he said. He came into the room. "Good morning."

"The same to you. Breakfast is ready."

"I see that. Thank you. It's a nice surprise." He took a seat. "Did you sleep all right?"

"Dead to the world. How about you?"

"Half dead." He smiled. "Kind of a lot on my mind."

She put their plates on the table, feeling his gaze on her. She was used to men taking second looks at her, especially at her weekend job, wearing what she wore. Eric took one look ... that lasted a long time. And unlike with most other men, she was not only flattered but wishing she could take a good long look at him in return.

"Coffee?" she asked, distracting herself.

A couple of seconds passed before he answered. "Yes, please. Black." He stared at something on the counter, leaned back and grabbed the plastic container with the chocolate-chip cookies. He shook it. Empty. "He feels no qualms about eating and running, obviously."

She shuddered. "It's just creepy knowing that someone can come and go while you sleep and never know it."

"Survival instincts. He's probably gotten good at not making noise."

"Are you going to file a police report?"

"No."

"Good." She sipped from her mug, studying him over the rim. Easy on the eyes, she thought again. She opened a notebook she'd brought downstairs with her. "Here's a list of all the work that's been done, what I think needs to be done, and the contacts I've gathered. The receipts are in an envelope taped to the inside back cover."

"You've been very efficient. I very much appreciate all you did. Including fixing breakfast," he added, toasting her with a forkful of omelet.

"If there's anything else you need before I go, just ask." She held her breath, not knowing if she wanted him to ask her to stay or let her go.

"Do you have another job to get to?" he asked, choosing a cluster of grapes.

"I did have, but it got canceled."

He tossed a grape in his mouth and chewed, looking at her thoughtfully. "Do you live in Davis?"

"I live everywhere. Davis, Sacramento, Folsom, Rose ville. You name it."

"What does that mean? Are you homeless?" He sat back, looking shocked.

“Technically, but it’s entirely my choice,” she insisted. “If I don’t have a house-sitting job, I bunk with a friend in Sacramento. I always, well, almost always have a place to stay.”

“Is that where you’ll go today?”

“No. We thought I’d be house-sitting, so she invited her parents to come for a week.”

The doorbell rang before she could add something that didn’t make her sound pathetic.

“That’s probably the guy to fix the window lock,” she said as Eric left the table, taking a piece of toast with him. She grabbed a cluster of grapes and followed, notebook in hand to remind herself of the man’s name. It wasn’t the handyman, however.

“I locked myself out.” Dylan stood on the porch, his hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders hunched, staring at his feet.

“Make eye contact, Dylan,” Eric said. “Talk to me man-to-man.”

The teenager fought it for a few seconds, then put his shoulders back and lifted his head. “I didn’t want to wake you up, so I went for a bike ride to kill time. I wasn’t running away.”

“Are you hungry?” Eric asked.

The boy looked startled, then he nodded.

“Even after eating a dozen chocolate-chip cookies?” Eric stepped back so that Dylan could come inside.

“Three dozen,” Marcy said, torn between hugging the kid and shaking him.

“They were good,” Dylan said, offering the barest smile. “Best I’ve ever had.”

She sighed. “Do you like omelets?”

“I’m not picky.”

“Go wash up.” She headed into the kitchen, ate the last few bites on her plate then went to the stove. She could hear them talking in the living room but, unlike the night before, she only caught words now and then. Soon Eric returned and sat at the table to finish eating.

“You didn’t look surprised to see him,” Marcy said quietly to him.

“Having taught for a long time has given me insight. But also, starting when I was twenty-two, I raised my four younger siblings. I got pretty good at reading teenagers.”

She stared at him, surprised, although after thinking about it, she realized she could see him in that role. Some people were born to be parents, were born protective and paternal.

“Is that what you meant when you said you’d raised one family?”

“Yes.”

“You had to know I would think you were at least fifty, if not sixty, years old.”

“I was having fun with you.”

And she’d started hunting for a woman for him, someone age appropriate, as he’d said. This changed everything—

Well, maybe not. There was still Annie, next door.

“Have you ever been married?” she asked.

“No. Have you?”

“Guess.” She smiled.

Dylan came in and took a seat.

“Grab yourself something to drink,” Eric said, refilling his coffee mug before Marcy could wait on either of them. Then Eric’s phone rang. He looked at the screen, grabbed Marcy’s notebook and pen and left the room.

“You can butter the toast when it comes up,” Marcy said when Dylan had poured himself a glass of orange juice.

He moved close to the toaster, leaned against the counter and gulped down the entire glass of juice then refilled it.

“Where’s your stuff?” she asked.

“Stuff?”

“Change of clothes. Toothbrush. Stuff.”

“In my backpack. Out in the yard, with my bike.”

“If you’d like to use the washer and dryer, now’s the time.” She slid the omelet onto his plate as he buttered the toast.

He dug into the food as he had the night before, barely tasting it, just shoveling it in.

She filled her mug and sat across from him.

“I’ve never seen hair like yours,” he said, catching her off guard, his mouth full. “Not red but not brown either.”

She ran a hand down it. She’d let it grow to the middle of her back, only occasionally pulling it into a ponytail when it was going to get in her way. “Is that a compliment?”

He shrugged. “It’s nice.”

“So you weren’t raised by wolves.”

He laughed, bits of toast flying.

“How did you know when to break in?” *By watching me?* she thought, realizing he had to have done so.

“There’s no curtains. You were always working. Cleaning. I only watched the house to see when you turned out the lights, then I waited a while before I came inside.”

“Where’d you sleep? There wasn’t any furniture until yesterday.”

“On the floor in the dining room.”

“When would you take off?”

“First light.”

“Why’d you take care of the cardboard and the other stuff? Why’d you do dishes?”

“I was paying for my keep where I could. You shouldn’t ever hire that drywall guy again, by the way. He should’ve cleaned up his own mess.”

“I’ll remember that, thanks. I’m Marcy, by the way.”

Eric returned. He set his cell phone and the notebook on the kitchen counter. “Change of plans. I’m starting work on Monday instead of four weeks from now. One of the professors had emergency heart surgery. They need me to fill in for the remainder of the summer session.”

“Teaching what?” Marcy asked.

“Vector analysis.”

She exchanged a look with Dylan. “Which is what?”

“Simplified, it’s multivariable calculus.”

“That’s simplified, huh?”

He almost smiled. “I could give you a few paragraphs of further definition, but I thought to spare you that.”

“Thank you,” she said dramatically, making Dylan laugh. She looked at her watch. “I should probably get going. I’ll do the dishes first.”

“Dylan will do the dishes,” Eric said. “He obviously knows how.”

“I don’t mind—” She stopped at his I’m-in-charge-here expression. “Okay.”

Eric eyed them both. “Here’s the deal. I’d expected to have a month to work on the house. I wanted to do a lot of the work myself, to have that personal satisfaction. Now I’ll be gone three-to-four hours a day, Monday through Thursday, plus prep work, plus I have my fall classes to prepare for.”

“Guess you couldn’t turn down the job, huh?” Marcy asked.

“I could have, but it seemed wiser to say yes. Goodwill adds up, especially when you’re the new guy.”

“I understand that,” she said. “Sometimes we have to do what we have to do.”

Eric studied her, trying to keep his eyes on her face. Ever since he’d walked into the kitchen earlier and had seen her standing there wearing shorts and a tank top he’d been forcing his gaze above her shoulders, with only occasional success. He’d always been drawn to slender, athletic, quiet

women. Marcy laughed easily and with open pleasure. She wore her hair down, untamed, and was all tempting curves. He wouldn't mind running his hands—

Someone kicked him under the table, yanking him out of his fantasy.

"Dude," Dylan said, looking embarrassed.

Had Marcy caught him staring, too? "Sorry. Too much on my mind. I lost my train of thought."

"You were about to offer me a job," Dylan said, angling toward him as if persuading him with body language alone.

"What makes you think that?"

"Your hands are soft. Do you know anything about remodeling or yard work?"

Marcy leaned both elbows on the table and pressed her mouth against her fists, her eyes sparkling.

Eric looked at Dylan again. "Do *you*?"

"More'n you, I bet."

Eric wondered what had brought the kid out of his shell. "You might be surprised. I've been living in New York City for the past twelve years, but before that I did plenty of home repair and yard work." Which wasn't entirely true. He'd made his siblings help, too. Building character, he'd always told them. "What experience do *you* have?"

"I've earned my keep here and there. You planning on remodeling in here?"

"I expect to gut the kitchen and all the bathrooms. Kitchen first. Bathrooms as I have time."

"I'm a hard worker." Desperation overrode Dylan's usual attitude. "I don't know much about plumbing or electrical stuff, but I know what tools do what. Maybe I don't look strong, but I am. I can demo the kitchen, haul everything out. I could do that while you're at work, no problem."

How long had the boy been on the streets? Long enough to become a hustler? Would the cops have known that about him?

Marcy didn't interrupt the conversation, but she was obviously interested.

"You said you don't have another job lined up," he said to her. "And nowhere to live."

"Just my regular Saturday job tonight."

"Wait. You're homeless?" Dylan asked.

"Not in the way you are, but technically, yes."

He frowned, as if the concept was beyond his comprehension.

Eric took charge again. "Here's what I'm proposing. Dylan, I could use you to do exactly what you just said—demo the kitchen, but also work in the yard. It would save me from hiring a gardener for the cleanup. Do a good job and you'll have a reference to use when you apply for work elsewhere."

Dylan's mouth tightened. "You ever try to apply for work when you don't have an address?"

"No, I never have. Maybe we can figure out a way to deal with that. Marcy, if you would stay on, too, I could use you to supervise the work people and also pitch in where you can. We'll discuss wages later. Would that be possible?" He wasn't sure how well he was going to deal with having her around all the time when he wanted to sleep with her. But she was a hard worker and a known quantity. He just needed to keep a rein on his hormones, which had sprung to life in a big way since he'd first seen her last night.

"We'll talk," she said.

"If you stay, so can Dylan. Sorry," he said to the boy, "but I don't know you well enough to leave you here alone all day."

Marcy's expression said it all—she knew he was playing on her sympathies for the teenager. "We'll talk," she said again, more coolly.

He respected her for not letting him ramrod her, but he figured she would end up saying yes, anyway. He'd learned a lot about her sense of responsibility during their phone calls as he'd driven across the country, plus he saw she had a soft spot for the boy.

He also figured he would be helping her out, because she didn't have another house-sitting job to go to. Win-win.

Dylan stood. "You go talk. I'll do the dishes."

"Shall we?" Eric asked Marcy. "Upstairs?"

She sighed but she went with him, leading the way up the staircase, her hips in his direct line of sight. He wished they were going up more than one flight.

They went into his bedroom, the only upstairs room containing furniture. He shut the door, then offered her the bed to sit on. She perched on the edge. He went to stand by the window, looking out at the tree-lined street. He hadn't lived in a neighborhood like this since his sister, Becca, had left for college and he'd sold the family house and moved to New York to teach at NYU.

"It's a pretty neighborhood," Marcy said. "I hope you like kids, because the block is full of them. It can get noisy. Although that'll change when school starts again."

"I do like kids. I intend to have a few of my own. How about you?"

Her brows arched, as if questioning his right to ask that—or perhaps at the fact he wanted a few, not a couple, of kids.

"Not anytime soon," she said.

"Why not?" He put up a hand. "Sorry. None of my business."

"It's fine. I'm only twenty-eight, and right now I have goals to meet. Finish college, decide on a career. That's critical to me. And, no, I haven't been married."

He couldn't have said why, but he hadn't pegged her for a career woman. She seemed to be a nurturer, a stay-at-home-mom type. Maybe he'd read too much into their conversations.

"Your neighbors are looking forward to meeting you," she said.

He'd lived in the same co-op for years and had known only one neighbor to speak to. The personable Marcy had already paved the way for him here not just to meet neighbors but make friends.

"What did you tell them about me?" he asked, moving away from the window.

"I had nothing to offer. For all I knew, you were a doddering old man looking for a nubile young wife to give you a second passel of kids to prove to the world you were still virile."

He laughed. "I hope I've got a long way to go before I hit that stage."

She cocked her head. "You should laugh more often. It takes years off you."

So she *did* think he seemed old? Was an eleven-year age difference that big?

"I shared nothing with your new neighbors, not even your name," she said, getting back to business. "I figured you would tell them what you want to."

"Thank you. So. What do you think about staying on here?"

"I think you shouldn't have asked me in front of Dylan, because if I say no now, he's going to hate me."

Eric continued to admire her refreshing directness. People tended to tiptoe around him, although he had no idea why. He didn't think he was intimidating. "I apologize."

"That didn't sound very sincere."

He liked that she didn't mince words. For some reason, he found it incredibly sexy. "I admit I should have waited, but I was caught off guard by the phone call from the university. I was in solution mode."

"Now *that* I can buy." She gestured for him to sit on the bed. "I don't like having to look up at you."

He did as she asked.

"What do you see as my role?" she asked.

"Obviously Dylan can't work alone here. He's not a professional. What if something happens? Plus we know little about him."

"You need me to supervise?"

“Yes, but not just Dylan. I’ll be hiring out some work I would’ve done myself. I need an adult here to oversee.”

She seemed to consider it. “I could do that, I guess. I start my new semester of college on Tuesday, but they’re online classes, and I could do that work at night, at whichever friend’s house I land in. As long as I have my laptop, I’m good to go.”

“Um. I guess I didn’t make myself clear. I’d like you to stay here.”

“Stay here? You mean *sleep* here? Why?”

It hadn’t occurred to him she wouldn’t spend the night. “If you’re willing, I’d like you to take on the role of cook. I want to work on the house as much as possible and not worry about the day-to-day home details.”

“You’re not going to have a kitchen, remember? Isn’t that your first project? To demo the kitchen?”

Actually, he’d forgotten. “The truth is I want to give the kid a break, all right? This is the best way I can think of to help.”

“And you’re willing to pay me to stay so that you can do that?”

“You’d be earning your keep.” He must be losing his touch. He could usually talk a person into doing something without a whole lot of effort.

“So, what you’re looking for is a wife. Someone to watch over the house and the kid.”

He’d already told her that was exactly what he was looking for—and not just temporarily. Maybe she hadn’t believed him. Maybe she thought he’d been kidding around about that.

“My understanding is that Julia’s agency has been nicknamed ‘Wives for Hire,’” he said as an answer. “There must be a good reason for that.”

After a moment, she eased off the bed and went to stand where he had earlier, looking outside. He waited her out. The more he watched her, the more she appealed to him, especially physically.

“Here’s the deal, Eric,” she said finally. “You have to promise not to back me into a corner again. If you want something, ask me privately.”

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