

Manny to Missus
(2026) by Abhomine Adfemina

Synopsis: Dan goes from grocery-store stocker to live-in manny for the three children of a widower in basically an afternoon. The kids' deceased mom is still a huge part of the lives of the kids and their struggling dad, and quickly becomes an all-important part of Dan's life, as well. A love story and also a story about love transcending the possible as Dan becomes Daphne without realizing it it's too late to do anything but accept the inevitable.

This story begins in the canned-vegetables aisle.

In one of the ubiquitous, big-box grocery stores that dot the American landscape, a man was on the brink of totally and completely losing his mind. He held a screaming, eighteen-month-old baby girl in his arms. A five-year-old girl had a death grip on his leg, and an almost-four-year-old boy lay on the scratched and stained tiles, throwing the biggest tantrum of his young life.

Dan was stocking shelves nearby, and saw the panicked look on the man's face as he tried to calm the baby and figure out how to do anything but watch the tantrum-throwing boy on the floor. 'Screw the rules,' Dan thought.

Putting down the canned vegetables he was stocking, Dan moved quickly and decisively. He sat down crosslegged on the floor near the boy and pulled him into his lap, facing away from him. Dad gasped.

Dan looked him in the eye with a reassuring smile and said quietly, "It's okay. I got this."

He wrapped his arms around the boy, holding him with firm, comforting pressure, and started rocking back and forth, murmuring into the boy's ear, "It's okay, buddy. I have you. I hear you. I won't let anyone hurt you. You're feeling some big feelings right now, and that's okay. You're safe. You're loved. You go ahead and cry and holler all you need to. I'm going to keep you safe while you do. There we go. Everything's going to be okay."

It didn't matter what he was saying at first, just the tone he was saying it in. Smooth, low, calm, accepting, and more calm. Dan was only there to keep the boy from hurting himself and let him know he was safe. After about ten seconds, the boy had stopped screaming. After thirty, he had his arms around Dan's neck and his head on his shoulder, and was barely sniffing.

Looking at Dad, he pointed at the still-crying baby and asked, "Diaper change or teething?" The little girl was still not having any of whatever nonsense the world was throwing her way. Dad quickly checked the diaper.

"Diaper's fine. Could be teething, could just be needing a nap," Dad said.

"Either of those things could be true. I could use a nap myself. Aisle E6, baby stuff is back by electronics. Small, white box. Dr. Thompson's Teething Gel. Safe for little ones that age. If it doesn't work, we've eliminated one possibility and done no harm. We'll be here when you get back."

The man tried to turn and go in search of the teething gel, but there was a little, blonde-haired anchor still attached to his leg.

Dan saw the next need and said, "Oh, my goodness, Dad. You didn't tell me you had a princess with you today. Hello, Princess! My name's Dan. What's yours?"

"Jessica."

"That's an amazing princess name, Jessica. What's this little guy's name in my lap?"

"Mikey."

"That's a pretty good name, too, but yours is better. Mikey needs some time to rest now. Can you help me let him know he's safe and everything's going to be all right? I'll bet some princess hugs would help him feel better faster."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do."

"Okay."

Jessica let go of Dad's leg and crossed to where Dan sat with Mikey. Behind Jessica's back, Dan made urgent shooing motions to Dad, who took off like a shot. Dan said, "Jessica, do you like it when somebody brushes your hair and makes it feel soooo soft?"

"Uh-huh."

"Me, too! Can you pretend your hand is a brush, and brush Mikey's hair for him?"

The big sister was soon stroking her little brother's hair while Dan alternated between comforting Mikey and praising Jessica for being such a good big sister.

After just a couple of minutes, Jessica giggled softly and whispered, "He's asleep."

"That's because you did such a good job brushing his hair, Jessica. Your dad will be back soon. I can't get up without waking Mikey up. Would you keep me company?"

"Okay!"

They chattered away in quiet voices about what kinds of vegetables Jessica liked -mostly carrots and corn on the cob- and why peas had to be just so yucky and squishy. Dad was back, baby still crying, but box in hand.

"Didn't work?" Dan asked.

"Haven't paid for it yet," Dad replied.

Dan gave him a level look and said, "Fudge the company, Dad. Littles come first. Squeeze a little on your finger and rub all along the gums until you feel something hard or sharp. Then get more on your finger and concentrate there. Stuff for babies isn't very strong, but the rubbing's almost as important."

Within a couple of minutes, the baby finally stopped crying. Dan said, "All your fingers are hers now," and chuckled softly.

Dad looked up at noticing hurried movement in the aisle and said, "Uh, oh. Trouble at your nine o'clock."

Dan looked left, and his supervisor was bearing down on them with blood in her eye. Dan held up one imperious finger, and she faltered. Dan said, "Marjorey, if you wake this child, I will let all the air out of all four of your tires and pour sugar in your gas tank and no one will be able to prove it was me."

In a stage whisper, Marjorey said, "You are so fired, Mr. Moore."

"Yes, but I still have my self respect, Marjorey. Can you say the same?"

The woman huffed and spun on her heel. Jessica had settled on the other side of Dan's lap and was looking kind of sleepy. He looked up at Dad and said, "Take the fingerbiter and finish getting your groceries, then come back for these two."

Dad's chin quivered. Not able to trust his voice, he hurried away with the baby and cart. People passing by Dan, sitting on the floor with two kids in his lap, mostly smiled or gave him a thumbs up. A few people gave him the hairy eyeball, so he gave it right back until they moved on. It didn't take Dad long to get back.

"Did you find everything you needed?" Dan asked, and then groaned at having used the well-rehearsed cashier line.

Dad chuckled and said, "I did. How are you going to get up from there with two sleeping kids in your lap?"

"With your help or not at all. Put baby in the cart for a hot sec and come give me a hand," Dan replied.

The baby whimpered a bit at being put down, but Dad gave her a quick tickle to distract her and then hurried to help Dan struggle to his feet. Once upright, Dan said, "I can manage this for about ten minutes. Let's make tracks. Look for the blue-haired cashier on the far side of self-check-out."

Starr saw them coming and understood the assignment immediately. She flew through the customer's items already on the belt, far faster than her usual pace. Dan used the handle of the cart to take some of the sleeping kids' weight off of his already aching arms while Dad loaded up the belt and Starr bagged stuff up like it was an Olympic event.

While Dad was fiddling with the card reader, Starr said, "I wondered what had Marjorey all puffed up and red in the face." She scrawled something on a piece of receipt paper and stuck it in his apron pocket, saying, "Keep in touch, Dan. You're good people."

It didn't take too long for the two adults to get the kids and groceries into the minivan. Dan was turning to head to the store when he found himself grabbed in a bearhug.

"Thank you so much for your help, Dan," Dad said. "I was about to start crying right along with the baby until you stepped in."

"No worries, Dad, happy to help," Dan replied.

"Dad?"

"You forgot your nametag."

Dad laughed way too hard at that, still obviously stressed even if the crisis of the moment had passed. He pulled out his phone and said, "Give me your number."

Dan reeled off the digits, and in a few seconds got a text that said, "Chris Anderson here. Good to meet you."

Aloud, Chris said, "As soon as you get done in this store I'll never visit again, please call me, okay? Like as soon as you're done. Do you have a car?"

Dan nodded and said, "I do. Okay, Chris, I'll call you. Knowing this place, it'll probably take an hour to do ten minutes' worth of work."

Only forty minutes later, Dan was a former employee of the retail mega-chain, and texted Chris to let him know. Chris sent back an address. Was

he . . . inviting Dan over? One way to find out. He started his twenty-year-old Corolla and told his phone to give him directions to the address. Fifteen minutes later, he pulled up in front of a fairly good-sized house with a three-car garage. He parked on the street and tentatively knocked on the door.

Jessica opened it, with Chris supervising his big girl from a few feet away. The girl turned to Chris and chirped, "Dad, it's Dan from the store!"

"I can see that, honey. Why don't you invite him in?" Chris prompted.

Jessica turned back to Dan and said, "Dad says you can come in."

"Thank you, Jessica," Dan replied with a grin.

Chris said, "We're in the kitchen. Come on through."

It was a nice house with an unsurprising floorplan. Most of the action took place on the ground floor, as was apparent from the number of toys, kids' books, and baby supplies scattered all over the living room. In the kitchen, the baby was in a high chair scattering dry cheerios everywhere in the process of moving ten percent of them to her mouth. Mikey and Jessica were coloring at the table.

"Thanks for coming over," Chris said. "Get everything sorted at work?"

"If by sorted you mean cleaning out my locker, turning my work stuff in, and sitting through a ridiculous exit interview on the phone with an HR drone in another state, then yes, I did," Dan said with a chuckle.

"What was that about, anyway? Why'd you get fired?"

"I touched a child not my own while on the clock and it wasn't to render first aid. Instant termination. It's in bold all-caps in the handbook."

"But that's . . . Okay, no. I get it. So when you came over to help me with Mikey, you knew you were about to lose your job for it?"

Dan shrugged, "It needed doing."

Chris asked, "You smoke? Do drugs? Criminal record?"

"None of those things," Dan replied. "Why? Is your company hiring?"

"No, I am. Be my nanny."

Dan blinked several times, cocked his head to the side while staring at nothing, and took a few moments. Finally, he said, "I'm not fundamentally opposed to the idea, but why me? I'm a twenty-five-year-old man with a high school diploma and a sad history of customer service jobs. Plus, you only met me like ninety minutes ago."

"Because you understand kids, you do what's right even when it costs you, and if I don't get back to running my company soon there'll be nothing left to run."

Dan turned and looked at the family photo visible on the living room wall and back at Chris, whose eyes were damp and threatening to overflow.

"Six months," Chris said quietly. "Breast cancer. She refused treatment while pregnant with Melissa here, and then it was too late."

"I'm so sorry," Dan said, a little misty-eyed himself.

"Thank you. So. Here's the offer I've made to a few applicants so far, none of whom turned out to be interested in a live-in position. Five hundred a week before taxes, room and board, health and dental fully paid. There's a mother-in-law suite above the garage, accessible from the

upstairs hallway. Has its own bathroom, mini-fridge, and microwave. I'll pay your cell bill, insure you on the minivan, and give you a credit card. You'll have a limited power of attorney for the kids' activities and medical needs. Sundays off, and most of Saturday. I work long hours Monday through Friday and often go in on Saturday morning to play catch up. I have a maid service, but you'd be handling meals for yourself and the kids, and basically parenting them when I'm not here. I'll want an NDA from you and a renewable, one-year contract."

Dan asked, "When would you need me to start? I don't need to give notice at work, of course, but if I were to be living here, I need to get out of my apartment, put stuff in storage."

"Quick as you can manage it. I'll pay off your lease and pay for the storage locker."

"That's a lot of cash to throw around," Dan observed. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm managing partner at a small law firm. Mostly corporate and tax law."

Dan looked around, imagining himself living here, taking care of these children, as a full-time job. Jessica was kneeling on one of the dining room chairs, her arms wrapped around the back of the chair, watching and listening to the two men talk. Dan asked her, "What do you think, Princess Jessica? Your daddy thinks I could come live here and take care of you, Mikey, and Melissa. Do you think I should tell him, 'yes'?"

The little girl regarded him with big, blue eyes for a moment, then nodded vigorously. She slid off the chair and came to where Dan was sitting. Putting her little arms around Dan's arm, she said, "Please? Daddy's really tired. And Mommy's . . ."

Jessica's eyes welled up, and Dan instantly shifted position to give her a hug and stroke her hair. He didn't say anything, just let her feel what she needed to feel. He looked up and Chris was watching them with a sad smile on his face. Dan just nodded, and Chris already had his cell phone in his hand, giving orders to someone on the other end of the line.

It turned out that Chris was one of those guys who knew how to efficiently marshal human and physical resources when a task needed doing, and who wasn't afraid to throw money at a problem until it stopped being a problem.

At nine in the morning on the second day after Dan accepted the job, he found himself unpacking a few boxes of personal items in the nicely furnished suite above the garage. It was a Friday morning, and he was going to spend most of the weekend getting to know the house and the kids with Chris still on hand. His new boss would return to his day job on Monday.

Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, after the kids were in bed, the two men shared beers and talked. Dan quickly realized his new boss had been intensely lonely for a long time. His and his wife's families had helped out during the hard, sad end of Sandy's illness and for a little while after her passing, but they had their own lives to live and none lived close by. They kept in touch for moral support, but assumed Chris had the resources to handle his family's care himself. Dan knew how that felt, to some extent, as his parents lived far away as well, and were too busy to do much more than text or email from time to time.

One of the things Dan asked Chris to explain is how he wanted Dan to frame the topic of the kids' missing mother when talking to them or answering their inevitable questions. Chris nodded and said, "They're too young to truly understand the permanence of death. Mikey and Melissa probably won't have any memories of her at all by the time they're teens that aren't dependent on photos and video. We're not particularly religious, but I just tell them that Mommy lives in Heaven now, and isn't coming back. Jessica's asking less often. It's finally sinking in, I

think. Mikey still asks at least once or twice a week where Mommy is."

Chris started to choke up on that last sentence, and Dan's hand instinctively went to his boss's shoulder. Dan said, "You really love her a lot, don't you? I don't know what I think about Heaven or an afterlife, but if there is one, she knows that. How often are you seeing your therapist?"

Chris shook his head and said, "There hasn't been time."

"Fix that, sooner than later. You need to talk to someone so you can work through your grief."

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?"

"I don't count. I'm good for listening empathetically. I'll even give you a hug if you need it, but you need a trained professional who's detached and objective."

"You're okay with hugging another guy?"

"Are you kidding? Hugs are the best thing in the world, followed closely by naps, hot buttered toast, and freshly baked chocolate chip cookies."

"Can I have a hug, then?"

"No, you ruined it. It has to be spontaneous."

"Oh."

Dan said, "That was a joke. Bring it in, boss." It wasn't a handshake hug or a back-slapping hug. It was a comfort hug, from someone who didn't mind giving those to someone who badly needed it. Chris shook in Dan's arms, and the new nanny felt hot, silent tears on the shoulder of his shirt.

Chris was a little over six feet, so a couple of inches taller than Dan. He was definitely wider through the chest and shoulders than Dan, and had the kind of lean muscle that said he stayed active but didn't lift. Dan was the opposite, not yet pudgy per se but definitely flabby.

Taking care of three little ones turned out to mostly be about schedules. When to wake up, when to eat, when to take Jessica to kindergarten and when to pick her up again. When to get everyone down for naps and frantically clean up before they woke up again and undid it all. When to let them watch just a little TV -but not too much. When to start dinner, followed by baths and pajamas and story time. The upstairs featured enough bedrooms for each kid to have their own, but that could wait until they were older. Melissa got the smallest room as her nursery, while Mikey and Jessica bunked together. The master bedroom was the last door on the left, and a few feet later stood the door to Dan's rooms above the garage. Not the whole garage. It wasn't that spacious. It was about as wide as two cars' worth, though, which was plenty for him.

They settled into a comfortable routine and the kids got used to Dan always being there for them. He read constantly in his spare time about how to properly nurture young minds and hearts. One evening when Chris had come to Dan's room to ask him a question, he caught sight of the several shelf-feet of child-rearing books, he laughed softly and said, "Wait. You're actually studying how to be the best nanny you can be?"

"Of course! The kids deserve the best I can give them, don't they?"

Chris left and came back a few minutes later with two heavy boxes. He said, "Sandy was the same way. You might as well add hers to your library." He gave Dan an odd, searching look, and left again, never having asked about whatever he'd come to ask about in the first place.

Alone again, Dan dove into the boxes. Some of the volumes were duplicates

of ones he already owned, but not all. When he discovered Sandy's handwritten notes in most of the books, he quickly replaced his copies with hers.

Days turned into weeks turned into the winter holidays fast approaching. The week before Thanksgiving, the strangest thing happened to Dan. He was reaching for an irregularly used item on a shelf in the kitchen and couldn't quite grab it. He could have sworn he'd easily reached that shelf recently. He'd noticed a step-stool in the pantry and fetched it. With the boost it provided, he easily reached the shelf. Deciding that was darned handy, he slid the step-stool into the spot between the cabinets and the big, stainless-steel refrigerator. The next day, Chris saw the step-stool and froze. It was back where Sandy had always used to keep it. Without her heels on, she was only five-four, and there were shelves in the kitchen she couldn't reach. Dan was five-ten, though. He should have been able to reach anything he needed. Right?

Sandy's parents were scheduled to visit for a couple of days at Thanksgiving, though they insisted on getting a hotel.

The weekend before, Dan and Chris sat over beers on Saturday evening, as had become a routine for them. They'd both decompress from their busy weeks and catch up on any household business that needed discussing.

Chris asked, "Are you sure you don't mind cooking Thanksgiving dinner?"

Dan laughed and said, "I started cooking dinners most nights for my birth family when I was still in middle school. I'm not planning a gourmet feast, but every dish on the menu is something I've made before. A lot of it can be prepped ahead. I picked up a countertop roaster for the bird so I can have the oven for other things. Plus, Jessica's really looking forward to helping. Since she turned six, she's bound and determined to show what a big girl she is."

"Alright, honey, I trust y . . ."

Both men stopped and stared at the other. Chris had just called Dan "honey!" They both burst out laughing at the same moment, nearly falling off their chairs. The baby monitor sputtered to life and they both got serious for a moment. Chris said, "You're off duty. I'll get her."

Dan couldn't resist a teasing, "Thanks, sweetie!" and both men fell out laughing again. They got enough control of themselves to go up the stairs together. Chris peeled off into the nursery while Dan continued on to his own bedroom.

Sandy's parents, Ed and Susan -never Sue, please- showed up the day before Thanksgiving. Dan had a times and temps spreadsheet printed out and taped to the refrigerator, and the bird was already brining. Pies were baking, and the house smelled wonderfully, if perhaps being a bit messier than usual with kids' stuff with Dan occupied in the kitchen. Chris had taken the day off, thank goodness, and was happily playing with Mikey while Jessica "helped" in the kitchen.

Ed and Chris soon wandered off to talk, and Susan came to the kitchen.

She looked at this super-nanny she'd heard so much about and sniffed. Who'd ever heard of a man working as a nanny?

"Well . . . Danny is it? You certainly seem to have everything well in hand," she said.

"Just 'Dan,' ma'am, and with Jessica's help, I think we're right on track," Dan answered.

Jessica beamed and said, "I'm helping! Dan's letting me cut the pie lettuce to go on top!"

Susan said, "That's 'lattice,' Jessica. Well, just be careful not to cut

yourself, Jessica!" and suddenly the little girl who'd been doing just fine was tentative and scared, setting down the pizza cutter she'd been using and grabbing onto Dan's arm.

Dan immediately hurried to comfort her, saying, "Hey Princess J, remember? I bought this just for you. It'll cut pastry but not princesses." Giving Susan a forced smile, he said, "It's plastic. The edge isn't any sharper than a butter knife. I'd never put an edged blade in a six-year-old's hand."

Susan moved to inspect the spreadsheet on the refrigerator, sniffing again. She'd just turned back towards the living room and saw Mikey climbing up on the back of the couch, clearly in preparation for jumping off of it. Susan put her hands on her hips and shouted, "Michael, get down from there this instant!" This startled the almost-five-year-old boy and caused him to lose his balance, arms windmilling wildly.

Dan, meanwhile, had actually kicked off the front of a cupboard door to give himself a running start the instant he'd seen where Mikey was standing. As Mikey started to tumble forward, Dan was already in a kneeling slide across the hard, laminate flooring behind the couch, catching Mikey on the way down. Now thoroughly frightened both from being yelled at and from falling, Mikey burst into tears. Dan held him tight, murmuring reassurances.

"Hey, there, little man, hey. I got you. Look at you being all brave and climbing up there. We've talked about that, and we'll talk about it again, I'm sure. No climbing on the couch, remember? It's okay, Mikey-Mike. I've got you, buddy," and just as in the grocery store months earlier, it didn't matter what Dan was saying, just the tone of his voice and his warm arms holding tight onto the frightened boy.

Dan called out, "Princess J! We have an emergency situation! Mikey-Mike needs a cookie and a hug! Stat!"

"On my way, Captain Dan!" the little girl chirped, hopping down from her stool and opening the cabinet where treats were kept. She pulled out one of the emergency chocolate chip cookies from its container and hurried to where Dan was comforting Mikey. She added her delicate little arms to the hug and stroked Mikey's hair, which always calmed him down fast. When she handed him his treat, Mikey started to smile.

Susan started to say something about rewarding bad behavior but found herself facing a fully enraged nanny in mama-bear mode. The look on Dan's face left her stammering and backing up against the refrigerator.

Dan said in a stage whisper from a few feet away, "Children that age can't BE bad. Their behavior can't BE bad. They don't know right from wrong. All they know is exploring the world. They will have misadventures doing that. Bellowing at them when they do something risky just leaves frightened, traumatized children. They need a safety net, not a prison guard."

He turned away then, going back to making sure Mikey was really okay. He was. His big sister was taking care of him. No harm, no foul. Dan's knees ached from his slide across the floor, but he tried not to let it show. Susan's mouth was working soundlessly, unable to refute a word Dan had said and feeling unaccustomedly abashed. Across the room, Chris and Ed stood in the doorway, having seen the whole situation unfold.

Ed was enjoying seeing his pushy wife summarily put in her place for once. Chris only had eyes for Dan, for the slight limp, for the fierce protector, for the brave smile and reassurances, for the man teaching Jessica to be a loving care-giver by example, and literally putting his body on the line to keep his son from harm. Chris felt an odd stirring in his chest he hadn't felt in a while.

Thanksgiving dinner wasn't going to earn any Michelin stars, but it was good. Very good. Everything had come together almost flawlessly and just

when it needed to. At Dan's suggestion, a couple of people from Chris's office whose families lived far away had been invited to eat with them. There were adorable little grace notes and garnishes in many of the dishes that Jessica was proud to say she'd helped with, and everyone praised her contributions lavishly.

The office guests had been briefed by Chris ahead of time. He'd told them, "I have the world's most amazing nanny, and she's- sorry, he's worked his ass off to bring this special meal together while taking care of my children and corralling my wife's parents. He's the reason you were invited; I wouldn't have thought of it, I'm ashamed to admit. When the meal's over, you will insist with every bit of persuasion you learned in law school that he put his feet up and relax while you clear up and do the dishes. Make it convincing. If I see suds on his hands, you'll be doing lease reviews until you're old and gray."

The ploy worked, and Dan was soon reading a story about a very brave turkey to Jessica and Mikey while Melissa tried to "help" turn the pages, and two highly-educated, law-firm staff rolled up their sleeves and washed a mountain of dishes.

Susan and Ed sat nearby, frankly astonished at the display of domesticity in front of them. In a private moment later, Ed took Chris aside and said, "It's okay if you love him."

Chris was so startled at this that he physically jumped. He asked, "What do you mean?"

Ed said, "Dan, your nanny. He's one of the most capable parents I've seen in a long, long time, and he's clearly madly in love with your and Sandy's children. I've seen the way you look at him. It's okay, Chris. It's the twenty-first century. Susan will fall into line. She's already a fan, believe it or not, at least of how Dan's raising the children. Just follow your heart."

Chris didn't know what to say to this. Being a very good lawyer, he chose silence over putting his foot in his mouth. Later, when the kids were all tucked in and guests had left, Dan said, "Goodnight, boss," in a sleepy voice and headed up to his own bed, leaving Chris in the living room with a nightcap, watching Dan climb the stairs. There was that strange feeling in his chest again. He made a mental note to schedule a checkup. He had a family to live for.

With Thanksgiving out of the way, the joyous madness of the Christmas season was in full swing. The main living area gradually transformed into a magical wonderland of Christmas cheer. The pile of gifts under the tree threatened to displace the tree itself. Chris's parents were coming to spend a week visiting their son and his children, expecting to need to console him during his first Christmas without his beloved wife.

Christopher (Senior) and his wife Sarah, arrived with a rental car full of presents and a keen curiosity to see who this nanny was that first Chris and now Sandy's parents had told them so much about.

They found a short man, only five-four or five-five, who clearly hadn't had time for a haircut in a while, and who moved with grace and poise through their son's home. Their grandchildren were now six, four, and almost two, and they clearly adored their nanny and were adored in turn. The family home was bursting at the seams with love and holiday cheer.

The night of their arrival, when the house was quiet. Dan and Chris were the last ones in the main living area of the house. Chris with his nightcap was sitting and staring at the family portrait hanging on the wall. It was taken before the diagnosis, when Sandy was just starting to show with baby Melissa. Setting his glass of wine down on the coffee table, Dan sat next to Chris on the couch, but tentatively.

"Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah. Just thinking."

"First Christmas. Totally okay to be way conflicted and sad right now."

"That's what the therapist you found for me said. The two of you comparing notes?"

"Nope. Just observant."

"Can I get one of those patented hugs now?"

"Anytime, boss. Anytime at all."

Dan moved close, bringing his feet up behind him and snuggling in for a good, long, comforting hug. Chris's arms settled around him, returning the gesture and feeling a knot in his belly he hadn't realized he'd been carrying slowly unravel. They just sat like that for several minutes.

Dan said, "I love looking at that picture. The four of you -five of you if you count the baby-bump- look so happy. She's beautiful, glowing."

"She was already sick and didn't know it."

Dan sat up abruptly and lightly slapped Chris's chest. He said, "Don't you dare! Look at that photograph. Look at that woman! She's amazing, beautiful, and full of joy. Don't you dare take that away from her! So's the guy next to her! Don't ruin that memory by thinking of her only as someone about to be terribly sick. Remember how you felt posing for that picture."

"The kids were being total brats."

"Kids are like that sometimes. Not their fault. But look! The photographer caught a moment when you were all happy and smiling!"

"You don't know how many proofs we weeded through to find that one."

Dan gave Chris a look. He said, "Okay, I get it. You're having big feelings right now."

Chris laughed, one guffaw, a bit strained, at being handled just like his young son.

Dan didn't relent. He said, "Have those big feelings. You're allowed. The love of your life isn't here to share this joyous holiday with you-

Dan had to stop talking because Chris was kissing him, and he didn't hate it. After a few seconds, though, he pushed the bigger man away. "That was sweet. Thank you. Now's not the time for this. You. Need. To. Deal."

Chris looked hurt, rejected. Dan's heart went out to him. He stood his ground anyway, saying, "Your kids need you Your parents need you. Sandy needs you to honor her memory."

Chris looked away, obviously hurt. Dan did something he rarely did. Somewhere along the way these several months, his voice had unconsciously shifted into something lighter, softer, higher, more nurturing, that the kids responded to well. Now, though, he dropped into his baritone range and said firmly, "Hey!"

Chris looked back up at him, surprised. Dan said, "I'm having feelings I don't understand, too, okay? And now's not the time. You'll regret not honoring the Sandy-shaped hole in your life if you don't deal with these feelings head on. It's bittersweet work and it needs doing. Give her this. Give you this. I'm going to take my wine and go to bed now. Tomorrow's a busy day. Sleep well, if you can."

Dan picked up his wine glass, and Chris watched him go. The man on the couch wondered whether Dan was even aware of how much and how fast he was

changing. He missed most of it himself, until something jumped out at him. Dan hadn't mentioned it, though, so Chris kept his own counsel. Then the whole notion just slipped away from him as it always did, and Dan was just Dan again.

Christmas was an unqualified success! The breakfast, the presents, then much later, the dinner. There was cocoa and carols. Dan, who expected no gifts under the tree, found himself with a lapful. Jessica had picked out a beautiful brush, comb, and mirror set, and Mikey had helped choose a collection of barrettes, clips, headbands, and hair ties. He hugged the kids and thanked them before asking the other adults, "Has my hair really gotten that long?"

Their unison, "Yes!" left no doubt. Picking up the hand mirror, Dan noticed for the first time that his hair had not only grown, but grown by a LOT. At least twice the amount of growth one would normally expect in the time he'd been in the Anderson home.

Just before they left for the airport, Sarah sent Christopher to occupy Dan and the kids with some grandpa nonsense. She pulled her son off into a quiet room, alone, and asked, "Is there something you need to tell me, son?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Don't play coy with your mother, dear. I've been seeing through your lies since before you were potty-trained."

"I'm a lawyer, Mom. You're going to have to be more specific."

"Fine. Make me spell it out. I'm talking about that adorable little nanny you're making eyes at."

"Dan, Mom. As in Daniel. A man. I'm not shtupping my manny."

"Why ever not?"

"He's a man."

"Only physically, and not by much. She loves your kids and seems pretty into you, too. And the only time you take your eyes off of her is to look at your kids. Don't worry about labels. You should . . . what's the saying? . . . put a ring on it?"

"Okay, this conversation is over. Thank you for your advice, Mom. Love you bunches."

Sarah sighed as he walked away. Men were so stubborn!

Chris, meanwhile, was remembering kissing Dan a few evenings earlier. How naturally and easily it had happened. And how pleasant it felt. Dan had pushed him away, though. Hell, his nanny could sue him. Chris was Dan's employer, with a legally binding, fixed-term contract no less. There was boilerplate language in that contract that specifically put Chris in the crosshairs of a sexual harassment suit if Dan chose to pursue it.

There were definitely a number of very good reasons why "put a ring on it" was ridiculous advice for his mother to give. So many reasons. He'd make a list of them. Any minute now.

Chris had never really been one to celebrate New Years Eve unless work obligated him to make an appearance at some party or another. Dan had talked him into inviting a few friends over, parents of Jessica's school friends. The kids could have a sleepover and the grownups could drink champagne and watch the ball drop on the big-screen TV. Nothing loud or big or outrageous, but still some grown-up time. Dan assumed he'd be partying with the kids, but as the plan came together, one of the visiting kids' big sisters was roped into that role. Suddenly, Dan was going to be going to the party he'd set up for Chris to have some non-

kid, non-work fun.

He didn't have a thing to wear, he realized. Taking care of three small children needed him to be comfortable, flexible, and practical. He tended to wear loose, drawstring lounge pants and simple, snug t-shirts most of the time. He had a small collection of long, soft cardigans for when there was a chill in the air. For his early morning elliptical session in the garage, he usually just reached for yoga pants and a form-fitting tank top.

'Oh, well,' he thought, 'surely the other parents aren't going to be dressed up for a casual get together like this. They all know I'm just the nanny, anyway. They won't be expecting anything from me.'

When he finished his workout and shower on the morning of the party, he went to his closet for clothes for the day and found a dress hanging on a hook on the inside of the closet door, wrapped in plastic from the dry cleaner's. As soon as he'd dressed in his usual comfy-casual style, he plucked the dress hanger from the hook and took it downstairs with him. Chris was also an early riser, and was already sitting at the breakfast bar with a cup of coffee for each of them.

The two spoke simultaneously: "Why did you put this in my closet?" and "Why do you have one of Sandy's dresses?"

A beat later, they did it again: "You still have Sandy's clothes?" and "It was just hanging in your closet?"

Chris held up his hand and said, "There are two closets in my room. I had Sandy's things cleaned after she passed, and left it all hung and folded the way she would have, and I've never opened it since."

Dan said, "I was needing to get dressed for the day and also thinking about how I have nothing to wear tonight, for the party. I opened the closet, and this was hanging on the robe hook inside the door."

"And you've never looked into or been into Sandy's closet?"

"Chris, I've never even stepped into your bedroom. There's never been a reason to go in there, and you keep your door closed most of the time. I swear I've respected your privacy. You didn't leave this for me to find?"

"No. I swear it. No one else could have or would have. The cleaning ladies technically could have, but they'd have no motivation to do so. Jessica wouldn't have and Michael couldn't have, and if my parents had, you'd have noticed it before now. They left two days ago."

"I've definitely opened my closet before now and since they left."

Dan hung the dress off the back of one of the dining table chairs, then picked up his coffee. The two men drank their coffee and thought their own thoughts. Jessica chose that moment to wander into the kitchen, still groggy. She went straight to her dad to give him a sleepy hug.

Chris said, "You're up early this morning."

"I had to go potty. Then I didn't feel like going back to sleep. Dan, can we have pancakes for breakfast?"

"Absolutely, Princess J. You want to help, or just eat 'em all up 'til you're big as a house?"

The little girl giggled and said, "I want to help AND gobble them all up."

"Fair enough. Chocolate chip?"

"Ooh, yes, please." She let go of her dad and saw the dress on the chair. "Is that your dress for the party, Dan?"

Dan and Chris shared a look. Setting everything out for the pancakes, Dan asked carefully, "Jessica, why would I need a dress for the party?"

"Cause it's a party! Parties and dresses are like peanut butter and jelly."

"Maybe that's your daddy's dress, then!"

Now Jessica really cut loose with the giggles. Dan had to hold her up so she wouldn't fall off of the chair she was standing on to help mix the batter ingredients as Dan added them. When she had recovered but was still smiling hugely, she hugged his neck, kissed his cheek, and said, "You are Captain Silly Dan today. Daddy's a boy. Boys don't wear dresses. Kayla says they can if they want to, but most boys don't."

Again, Dan looked to Chris, who shrugged and gestured for him to continue. Dan said, "Jessica, sweetie, I'm a boy, too, just like your Daddy."

She actually turned and looked him over from feet to face, then brought her flour-covered hands up on either side of his face, looking into his eyes with absolute focus and seriousness for several seconds. Finally shaking her head, she said, "Nuh uh. I thought I remembered you being a boy, but I misre- misde- I think I was wrong."

"Misremembered," Dan supplied.

"That word. I misremembered."

Dan was actually trembling. He gestured frantically for Chris to come to them, and the dad hurried over. Dan whispered, "Watch her for a sec . . ." as he used the counter for support until he could hop up onto one of the breakfast bar stools.

Chris took over the pancake production seamlessly while Dan took deep, slow breaths, eyes closed. An awful lot of little things suddenly fell into a neat column on a spreadsheet in his imagination. He stood carefully, carrying himself as if he might shatter at any moment. Climbing the stairs, he heard Chris ask from a huge distance away, "Dan, you okay?" but Dan didn't answer. The upstairs hallway stretched for miles, his bedroom door tiny in the distance, and he reached it with one step. The closet door stood open, and Dan closed it carefully to stand in front of the long mirror on its back.

He brought the spreadsheet open in his imagination again.
Wearing women's casual wear without realizing it? Check
Working out in women's workout clothes? Check
Working out regularly without remembering having decided to? Check
Six inches shorter than he'd been a few months back? Check
Wildly sped up hair growth? Check
Speaking in a higher, softer voice? Check

He peeled off the t-shirt, looked at the tag (Everyday Essentials Size S) and dropped it on the floor. He untied and stepped out of the stretchy, flared-leg lounge pants, looked at the tag (Aerie OG Size Medium) and dropped them on the floor as well. A trembling hand rose to cover his mouth, as if he might need to stifle a scream.

Smooth, whiskerless face? Check
Smooth, hairless everything else? Check
Actual hips? Check
Bikini style panties with lacy waistband hugging those hips? Check
Suspiciously flabby chest when the rest of him was quite nicely toned? Check

The strength went out of Dan's legs, and he sat down before he could fall down. God! Why had he sat down where he could still see the mirror? Why couldn't he make himself stop staring at it? So many tiny memories

resurfaced. The stepstool. The hair supplies for Christmas. Changing his usual paths through rooms so he'd quit bruising his hips on sharp corners. Adjusting where he reached to find the lightswitch in the dark. Forgetting to check his face for whiskers after enough days in a row of finding nothing but smooth skin. His underwear drawer being slowly taken over by items more suited to his new shape. Shorter, thinner socks. Buying new shoes because the old ones were rubbing up and down on his heel and giving him blisters.

Far away in another country, Chris got the other kids up, fed them breakfast, got them dressed. It was full daylight now. The TV came on. Dan rarely let the kids watch TV in the morning, when they were full of energy. A light, hesitant tapping on Dan's door. He said nothing and it opened anyway.

The spell or whatever it was broke in the face of Dan's distress and Chris's feelings for him. Chris said, "My God!" and . . .

Reality crashed back in on Dan, hard, fast, and vicious. Chris saw Dan's face fall apart and rushed to him, fell to his knees next to his friend, and pulled him into a firm, warm hug.

Dan choked out, "Pillow! Fast, Chris! I can't hold it in!"

Chris yanked the pillow from the bed and Dan ripped it from his hands, buried his face in it, and screamed into it while Chris sat down behind him, holding Dan with arms and legs both, and starting to rock back and forth. Dan screamed, again and again and again, his whole body wracked with the force of it, while Chris whispered in his ear, "It's okay! I've got you, honey. Let it out. Every bit of it. Just let it out. I'll be right here. Not going anywhere. I've got you. Let it out, Dan."

Finally, the screaming turned to wails, then to sobs, then to just crying, and Chris never let go, never stopped rocking the man he loved, gently whispering into his ear.

Dan pulled the sodden pillowcase off the pillow, tossed the bare pillow onto the bed, and used the case as a handkerchief/towel as he tried to get his face clean of tears and snot. He took several deep, slow, breaths, looking in the mirror, at himself, small and safe in Chris's arms, and tried to find acceptance for this person who wasn't him anymore. Was barely a "him" by any definition, though the panties still held a small bulge.

Voice raspy and hoarse, Dan said, "It's okay, Chris. I don't think I'm going to break again today. I hope."

Chris's arms loosened, and Dan turned within the circle of his legs, coming up on his knees to face his boss. He put an arm around Chris's shoulder, the other around his neck, and with no hesitation planted a soft, tender kiss on Chris's mouth. Then another. Then another, and this one lingered, grew, deepened, and their tongues were dancing.

They came up for air and just looked into each other's eyes in wonder. Something clattered downstairs and Dan gasped. "The kids!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

Chris said, "I'll go. You're a mess, and also mostly naked." Dan nodded his agreement.

Stopping before he closed the door, Chris said, "Just so you know, I think I'm falling for you."

Then he was gone, and Dan said to the closed door, "Oh, Chris. I already fell."

Then he picked himself up off the floor and walked to his ensuite bathroom, noticing now how his hips swayed of their own volition when he walked, how his legs took smaller steps, how his feet came awfully close

to choosing a straight line without him having to think about it. Putting his hair up and tugging on a shower cap he didn't remember buying, Dan stepped out of his panties, gave his diminished, hairless manhood a sad look, and stepped into a cool shower. He let the water run over him, not really washing, just cooling off his face and body from the extreme meltdown it had just gone through.

When he started to shiver, he turned off the water and dried himself, then got dressed again. Picking up one of the hair ties Mikey had given him for Christmas, he pulled his thick hair into a high ponytail, wondering idly how he'd look with bangs. Then he wondered less idly how he'd look in Sandy's dress at the party that night.

The rest of the day was a blur of preparations, decorating, child tending, and a delicious dance taking place between Chris and Dan. The genie was out of the bottle now and wasn't about to go back in.

They worked together to manage the day, as they often had, but now there were tender glances, little touches as they passed, new endearments being tried on for size and fit. Neither of them noticed Jessica noticing, but she was an uncommonly bright child, and she was thrilled to see two of the people she loved the most in the world loving each other.

Dinner was catered, and very good. The kids were kids, doing what kids do at such events, which was wait impatiently to get away from the grown-ups. One of the spare bedrooms had been set up with a TV, a few snacks, and toys for the siblings too little to care about the animated film being screened. Dan found the teenager tasked with watching the littler kids sensible and kind, so he excused himself to his room. He'd stayed in his nanny clothes until the baton had been passed, and now he stood in front of the pretty, black dress, freed from its plastic cover. The neckline was high, but it was sleeveless and backless, with a knee-length skirt and a gathered waist. One side of the skirt was slit several inches up the thigh, while the other side featured a pattern of red roses on green vines that climbed up around one breast.

In a daze, he walked to his dresser and found a lacy black panty that called to him. His sock drawer yielded thigh high, dark, holdup stockings. Slingback pumps with a kitten heel had appeared on the floor of his closet. In the bathroom, he took down his ponytail and brushed his hair until it shone, watching in amazement as it took on thick, graceful waves as if he'd done more than merely brush it out.

His hands gracefully applied a light smoky eye, with slightly winged liner. He could see foundation on his skin that he hadn't applied, and his eyebrows were nicely shaped. A touch of blush to his cheekbones, a few swipes with a mascara wand, and then he was lining and filling his lips with a smudgeproof dark wine color.

The trembling threatened to take him again as it had that morning. This was too much! Too fast! Too many changes! There was a strange woman in the mirror looking back at him. Why was this happening to him?!

Invisible arms circled his waist, holding him tight. A high, soft voice whispered, "For him. For them. Accept this for them. You have the most amazing heart, so kind and generous. Be this woman for them, Daphne."

Daphne took a deep breath, and the trembling passed. She smiled at the presence she could feel and hear but not see, and nodded once, not quite trusting her voice. The encircling arms withdrew.

Time for the dress. Daphne put it on over her head, tugging the stretchy material into place over her hips. It hugged her waist like it was made for her. She'd noticed them, but hadn't touched them yet, hadn't acknowledged them. Now she reached into the dress and lifted her breasts tenderly into the lined, built-in bra that was part of the dress. Looking in the mirror at her own flesh filling the bra cups, Daphne whimpered and bit her lip, but she fought the trembles back down. Then she ran back to the bathroom to make sure she didn't have lipstick on her teeth.

She stood just inside the door, breathing hard. Opening that door was going to change everything. She knew it, could feel it in her bones. Then she heard a thump from where the kids were gathered and the beginning of a child's cry of pain and shock, and she nearly tore the door off the hinges. Mikey was on the floor. Jessica had him, though. Even though he was nearly as big as her, she'd pulled him onto her lap and was rocking him, stroking his hair. She looked up at Daphne and shook her head.

"Nothing to worry about, Captain Daph. He jumped off the bed like he thought he was going to fly. Again."

The teenager said, "I'm sorry, Miss Daphne! We were just-"

Daphne put her finger on the girl's lips. She said, "He does this at least once a day, and twice on Sundays. It's kind of his thing. Now that you know that, you'll watch for it, though, right?" The girl nodded. Daphne said, "Good girl." She turned and started to leave.

The girl said, "Miss Daphne? That dress looks amazing on you!"

She smiled back at the teen and said, "Thank you, dear!"

Daphne hurried down the hallway and started down the stairs. No one really noticed her entrance except for the one man who she desperately needed to notice. His jaw was practically on the floor, and his cheeks flushed with color as he watched her stop and then slink down the stairs with a wiggle that was purely for his enjoyment. He stood frozen as she walked to him, kissed him tenderly on the lips, then hugged him as she turned to survey the rest of the room. His arm automatically went around her waist and pulled her to him. Most of the guests were busy with their own conversations, but a couple of the women were giving Daphne small smiles, acknowledging that she'd just claimed her man in public for the first time.

Leaning down, Chris whispered, "Why do I think the name, 'Daphne' when I look at you now instead of 'Dan'?"

She whispered back, "Because that's what Sandy named me just now, upstairs in my room."

His eyes went wide. "You saw her?"

"No. Felt her hug me, though, and whisper a message just for me in my ear. I'll tell you later. We have guests."

Snagging herself a glass of champagne, Daphne wrapped the ice cold bottle in a tea towel and started making the rounds with it, topping up glasses and chatting pleasantly with everyone, being the perfect hostess.

Conversations flowed, mostly about the kids who'd been the links that brought them together here tonight. Chris noticed that when Daphne had an opinion or suggestion about anything related to children, the other parents shut up and listened respectfully. As the evening wore on, the talk grew lighter and the laughter louder. Daphne excused herself at intervals that seemed right to her, shepherding one child after another into their pajamas and into a sleeping bag or bedroll in one of the three bedrooms. Finally, only the evening's babysitter was left awake, though she was looking a little tired. Daphne had brought half a flute of champagne with her on this last trip. She handed it to the teen, whose eyes went wide.

Daphne giggled and said, "Don't tell on me, now? Pinkie swear?"

The girl giggled in answer and pinky swore. Daphne said, "When you've finished it, set the glass on this shelf right here and get ready for bed. I'll collect the glass in the morning, and no one will be the wiser. If you'd like, come to the top of the stairs for the ball drop in half an hour before you turn in."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you!"

Daphne hurried back downstairs and into Chris's arms, joining in the grown-up merriment once more. Just before the ball drop, the girl came to the top of the stairs in an oversized night shirt, cheeks rosy from the unaccustomed alcohol. As the ball started its drop and people paired up in anticipation of the New Year's kiss, Daphne turned fully into Chris's arms, her arms going up around his shoulder and neck

By the time everyone yelled "Happy New Year!" neither of them heard it. Their whole world had shrunk to just the two of them. Their bodies melted into each other and their lips locked with a passion that had been building for weeks, maybe months. When the first intensity of their union had finally eased up enough for them to notice anything but each other, the door was just closing behind the last guest.

They looked around, astonished. Chris looked at the clock, which read a quarter past midnight. The others had seen that their host and hostess needed privacy, and had quickly left them to it.

Chris asked, "Can I take you to bed now?"

Daphne shook her head with a rueful grimace and said, "Afraid not, boss. We have a houseful of strange littles who are going to troop down those stairs in the morning, and they can't come down to bottles and glasses everywhere. You grab the trashcan and I'll start on the glasses and stemware. By the time they'd made the downstairs kid-friendly again and Daphne had set out the shelf-stable ingredients for an epic batch of chocolate-chip pancakes, it was after one and they were both sagging.

Chris looked vastly disappointed at how the evening was ending, but Daphne kissed him and said, "Christopher Anderson, Junior, Esquire, there's no rush because I'm yours. I will share your bed, joyfully, but not tonight. Just remember as you drift off: I'm yours. All of me. For as long as you'll have me."

"So, forever then?"

"So forever, darling."

Cut to a huge hall at the local university, many years later. Chris, Jessica, Mike, Melissa, Brandon, Miley, and Georgia unfurled the homemade paper banner between them, holding it up high and waiting. Georgia was basically hanging off the bottom of it, barely able to reach, while Chris and Jessica held the ends.

The voice bellowing over the loudspeaker said, "Daphne Elizabeth Anderson, Master of Science in Human Development, granted with distinction and the Simmons Prize for Best Terminal Degree Thesis or Dissertation of this academic year."

The last of what he said was drowned out. With the word "distinction," the Andersons and a crowd of their many friends absolutely lost their minds, screaming and whistling and shouting: "Daphne! Way to go, Mom! That's our mom! Way to go, Daphne!"

The mother of three and mom of six beamed with pride as the head of her advisory committee hooded her and draped a golden cord around her shoulders before the Dean handed her the scroll that represented her degree. They shook hands and turned to the photographer, and Daphne walked off the stage. The uproar in her cheering section never let up until she was down the stairs. She waved at them and took her place back among the others being honored.

When the ceremony was finally over, she rushed to her family. That was her way, her gift, the one constant in her life. No matter what else happened, the moment she was free to do so, she hurried to her family. Jessica and Mike were college students themselves now. Daphne had taken

her time, never willing to compromise on what was most important to her. There were some strands of well-earned grey in Daphne's hair, and quite a bit more than strands in Chris's.

They mobbed her, of course. The thing about building a life around pouring every bit of your heart into the people you love is that it tends to flow back to you even stronger.

Through the chaos of jumping, screaming kids, and back-slapping well wishers, they found each other. Brandon said, "Oh, here we go again. Have a seat everyone. Get the popcorn out. This can take a while.

"Forever then?"

"Forever, my love."

Daphne reached up and Chris leaned down, and it was just the two of them in all the universe, again, always.