
Chapter 1

Unsettled

Sitting on stools at the kitchen island, Carol Daniels poured a second glass of chardonnay for her daughter Jessica and then another for herself. As Jessica reached for hers and took a sip, Carol watched her. "Are you all right, honey?"

Jessica smiled. Her mother had an uncanny ability to read her. Maybe she should have gone straight home after work instead of stopping by her mom's place. She didn't want her mood to bring her mother down. In the year since her father had died, she had tried to at least touch base with her mother every day, even if it was just a quick text. She was there to comfort *her*, however, not the other way around. "I'm fine, Mom. New job, Eric..."

"To your dad," Carol held her glass up for a toast, "Gregory Edward Daniels; may he rest in peace." She took a sip. "And may *you* find true love and joy." Carol slid off the stool and stood.

Jessica frowned. "Eric and I are good, Mom. Mostly. I don't know why you don't like him. He's just a little..."

Jessica watched as Carol leaned against the kitchen counter and looked out the window. Her mom loved the changing colors this time of year. Soon October's vibrant leaves would fall, the snow would come and then spring again. What a glorious cycle. Her dad had loved the seasons as much as she did. A husband of forty years and a father had been taken too young, in the line of service. A hero, really.

Carol sighed and turned to her daughter. "I do like Eric. What's not to like? He's polite. He's easy on the eyes. He has a job. He's good at what he does. And after two years of me telling him to call me Carol, he still calls me Mrs. Daniels."

Jessica laughed. "He is a little on the formal side. Not quite *Downton Abbey* formal, but yes."

"Is he stiff in bed, too?" Carol threw back her head with her characteristic shriek of laughter. "That didn't come out right. I mean is he *formal* in bed?" Her eyes opened wide in mock apology. "Sorry! It's the wine talking. I just got a mental picture of him showing up at your bedside with a permission slip taped to his you-know-what. 'Eric may have sex today.'"

Jessica squirmed a bit inside despite the fact that she and Carol had always been able to talk frankly. She knew her parents had been disappointed the first time they had realized she was...active...but they had never said a disparaging word. They'd married so young. It was different now. Wasn't it? Jessica threw a napkin at her, but she was laughing as she did it. She loved to hear her mother laugh, especially these days. "Sorry is right! Eric is sweet. And yes, in bed, *Mother*." She only called her that when she was annoyed—or pretending to be. Carol always took the hint.

Carol set down her wine and then busied herself with something at the sink until Jessica was ready to continue the conversation. Every few seconds, though, she would chuckle

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again in spite of herself, and Jessica could imagine just what she was thinking. *Stiff. Oh dear. It has been a while.*

Jessica studied her mother, framed by the setting sun outside the window. Carol's chestnut hair now gleamed with strands of gray, but even from the back, she was attractive, curvy, womanly. Jessica ached for her loneliness. She left both stool and wine to lean her back against the kitchen counter beside her mother. "Eric said he'd go to Rita and Gary's Halloween party with me." Jessica chuckled. "Bit of a surprise, actually. He's not really the party type. I've had my costume for weeks, but all the store had left for him was Darth Vader or this slinky form-fitting superhero thing. I knew he'd never wear *that.*"

"He'd look good in it; I'll give him that." Carol winked at her daughter.

"Mom!"

"What? Just because I'm a widow, I don't notice muscles anymore?" Carol shook her head. "Your dad died, honey. I didn't." She sighed. "Not all the way, anyway."

Jessica put her arms around her, and they stood together for a few moments, silent, remembering and aware of the hole in their hearts. When Jessica stepped back, she grabbed Carol's hands. "I know you miss him, Mom. But it has been a year. You're still—"

Carol stretched her head side to side, a familiar stress reducer Jessica had witnessed thousands of times during her lifetime. "Young? Pretty? Sexy?" She looked at her daughter with clouded eyes. "The answers would be 'no', 'I'll do', and 'that remains to be seen'. I'm not opposed to the idea of finding love again, dear. I'm just not up to making it my life's mission. It's hard to imagine finding someone that wonderful again, and I sure don't want to settle for someone less. That wouldn't be fair to any man, always comparing him to your dad. If love comes to me, well, we'll see."

She embraced Jessica again briefly. "It's you I'm concerned about. Your dad and I had forty incredible years together. We fell in love young and never fell out of it. I know that may be hard to believe, since so many couples drift apart over time." She squeezed her daughter. "We didn't. Right up until the day...." She broke away from the embrace and threw up her hands in surrender. "I just don't see you and Eric like that. I'm sorry. But your life, your business!"

A chime signaled the dishwasher cycle had ended. As Carol began putting dishes away, she changed the subject, much to Jessica's relief. "How's the new job going?"

Jessica bent down to help. How many times had they done this intricate dance in the kitchen, weaving around one another to get to the right cabinet in perfect harmony? Sometimes she wished she'd never moved out on her own. She missed this, even though she knew it had been time. "I'm still getting to know the people at the magazine, but they seem very capable, mostly friendly. There's a girl named Donna about my age, who has the cubicle next to mine. She's a bit of a character, but funny? Oh my gosh. Perky. Yes, that's the word, perky."

Carol's head disappeared beneath the island to put away a roasting pan. "But it's a change and even good changes are stressful," she said, her voice a little muffled.

"Sure, it is, but I'm coping. Yoga, music and," Jessica called pointedly down at her mother, "*Eric*." When Carol stood and rolled her eyes—the response she knew her daughter wanted—Jessica continued. "Maureen, the editor who hired me, has been on vacation ever since. Rumor has it she's out. Took a severance package. No one's speculating about who the new editor might be, if there even is one, but it sounds like someone from outside. There's a new owner for sure, but everything else is just gossip at this point. Should know more soon."

Carol stopped, a platter headed for the top shelf in mid-air. "Isn't it time you get ready for the party?" She laid the platter

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down and put her hands on her hips. "I know you're too old to ask for a photo but maybe just one on Facebook so I can see you in your costume?"

Jessica hugged her mother and groaned. "Yes, *Mother.*" She stood and held Carol at arm's length. "*Mom.* I love you, you know."

"I had my suspicions."

THE WOMEN LAUGHED as Carol walked her daughter to the door and closed it behind her. She stood, leaning against the door, looking around the cozy living room. So many photographs from their high school days, their wedding, Jessica's growth over the years, her graduation. The little shrine with Greg's picture and badge, the citation for bravery he'd never see. She missed him every day, but Jessica was right. She was still relatively young; Greg wouldn't want her to be lonely.

"Maybe one day," she said aloud to his photo. "For now, let's hope Jessica finds true love. And we both know it's not Eric." She shook her head sadly. Nice guy, but he and Jessica seemed more like great friends than lovers. That had been such an important aspect of their marriage; it stood to reason that they'd passed down that bit of DNA to Jessica.

Carol felt a twinge of longing. Greg had been a passionate man, passionate about everything—his work as a firefighter, his family. "And me," she whispered before letting out a deep breath. It was Halloween, and she'd better start getting bowls of candy ready for the children in the neighborhood. November first was as good a time as any to start actively living again. *No more sleeping late, she told herself. No more turning down lunch dates with friends. Time to get back to the gym. Life is short.*