

An Agreement We Made

SAMPLE CH 1-2

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ISBN: 978-0-578-86978-0 Ebook ISBN: 978-1-0879-5321-2

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CHAPTER 1

I park behind the line of gleaming cars idling at the curb of Columbia Ridge Academy. It's the same as every other day, all the moms and one dad—me—line up to collect our kids. Heaven forbid they get a taste of freedom for even a few moments in the thirty feet they walk from the elementary school door to the backseat. We can't let that happen, now can we?

The three-story, red-brick Gothic revival structure was built in the 1960s but has been remodeled with modern updates several times since. The cost of admission alone is plenty to keep the place in pristine condition. It's covered in ivy and dripping in expectation—expectations of the students, expectations of the parents. I know this building and the people who helicopter-parent around it all too well.

It's 2:50 p.m., and I'm late, even though I'm here ten minutes before school lets out. I'm way back in the line of cars. My carelessness means I've been exposed to the moms who want to chat about room-parent duty, volunteer fundraisers, or which wine bar has the most generous pour. And I'm just not up for it today.

I flip the visor down in front of me in the naïve attempt to hide my face from the group of women assembling on the grass just outside the library. We know them as the 'Stay-at-Home Tribe,' and I'm an honorary member myself. The visor trick is useless and does nothing, of course, to hide my vehicle—a Mercedes-Benz SUV, which at eighteen months, is showing its age compared to the cars driven by the other parents at Columbia Ridge Academy. These are doctors, executives, attorneys, or dare I say, their stay-at-home spouses and a few nannies.

I have half a mind to visit the Mercedes-Benz dealer this week to find a suitable replacement. The lease is nearly up anyhow, and an early trade-in would be nice.

I look up and try to ignore the wave from Christy Woods. She is dressed in nearly identical attire as the other Tribe members, in her stay-at-home-mom uniform of black yoga pants, fitted cotton V-neck top, and white sneakers. I'd say they coordinate outfits, but they wear the same thing every day, so it can't be that complicated.

Christy makes a break for it. Apparently, my ignoring her has backfired. She's now striding toward my driver's side window, adjusting her oversized black sunglasses the entire way. The other women close rank and watch her while desperately trying to act as if they aren't judging her as she saunters over. They are judging, and we all know it.

"James, you're late," she says, tapping her manicured fingernails against the side of my partially open driver's side window. I glance down at the faded pink and orange scars covering most of her left hand as she taps. She burned her hand in a kitchen accident a lifetime ago. Christy used to be a chef, but like the rest of us, she no longer works outside the home. I've always wondered what sort of chef gets burned like that; something about it just never added up. Nonetheless, now she stays home, just like me.

She often keeps her hand covered with long shirt sleeves with thumb-hole cuffs that partially mask the disfigurement. She pulls her hand back when she notices the attention I've paid to it, swiftly tucking it under her arm.

"James, you forced me to make nice with those Tribe creatures."

I roll down the window all the way while staying safely inside the vehicle. "They mean well."

"They do not mean well, and you know it."

I've known Christy since we were kids back in Shoreline, Oregon. And while there was a significant lapse in our friendship after high school, we've been close for the last fifteen years. If I could say so, I'd tag her as my best friend, but we're both married and that just wouldn't fly with anyone.

I've spent quite a bit of time with her and her husband Malcolm, too. Both my older boys played on the same soccer and baseball teams as the Woods' son RJ. And they've all attended the esteemed Columbia Ridge, then went on to public but respectable middle and high schools together. My youngest child, eight-year-old Paige, is in the same third-grade class as Christy's daughter Sophie.

Paige is the lone child I still must ferry to and from school.

"The ladies are still upset you didn't come to the school supply backpack stuffing party at Meredith Stonemeyer's house

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on Monday night," Christy says. "They never miss a chance to tell me I'm the luckiest married woman around, getting to spend such quality time with a hunk like you."

"My wife would beg to differ," I offer.

"Would she? Where is that wife of yours, anyway?"

She gives me a knowing look, of which I disapprove. I can't remember which city Tina is currently in, but I won't tell Christy that. After all, she knows I'm unaware. Tina is away from home more than she's actually home. I keep track on a calendar, but I haven't committed it to memory.

Then I remember.

"She'll be home tonight. We've got big plans for dinner."

"I bet. Good luck with that." Christy nods, noting the difficulties I'm likely to encounter with her return.

Malcolm is a commercial pilot, so he's gone as much as Tina, who's in medical sales for Goodwin Labs. Christy knows the drill—spouse comes home, thrills the kids with tales of adventure, and promptly complains about the state of the house in their absence. An argument ensues and both sides retreat to their separate corners, only to have wild make-up sex the night before the spouse leaves again. Then we rewind and repeat it all over again during the next return home.

The bell rings, and parents hurry to their vehicles to wait for their kids to descend the stairs and run through the iron gates. "We still on for coffee next week?" she asks, backing away from my window. "I want to try that new place in the Pearl District."

"It's your week to pick, so I'll reluctantly drive all the way into downtown Portland just so you can get your fancy osmosis coffee."

"Gravity coffee, not osmosis."

"If you can tell me the difference between the two, I'll buy," I say. "But you have to tell me right now."

Confident that Christy has no idea, I let my offer hang, which she promptly ignores.

"This is why the ladies love you, Mr. Mom. You're so funny," she says with a head tilt as she walks off to her car parked several lengths ahead. She got here on time.

Mr. Mom, ugh.

* * *

Paige climbs into the backseat, tossing her backpack on top of crushed graham crackers and string cheese wrappers on the seat. I make a mental note to vacuum the car. I would hate to let the Tribe see such normalcy. She pulls out her cell phone, not even looking up to acknowledge me. I keep the car in park and wait. And wait. I'm blocking the exit to the street. The car behind me honks once, then quickly twice. I see Paige finally look up at me through the rearview mirror.

"What did we say about the phone?" I ask.

She puts on a deep, annoyed voice, mocking me, "Emergencies only, Paige-bear. You are too young for a phone, anyway. I should have already taken it away from you. Blah, blah, blah."

I've got to admit, it's a pretty good impression, and we both laugh. She reaches up and places the phone on the center console next to me. Tina made me get her that phone, and it's caused nothing but problems ever since. Paige smiles, and I put the car in drive. And all is well in the world again until we hit road construction heading to the freeway. This is a delay we cannot afford.

Today, like every Friday after school, Paige and I race across town and try to make it to her weekly dance class on time. Most days, we're solid and on time, but it's not looking pretty today.

As I weave through traffic, Paige starts to change into her required dance attire—a light pink dress with a short soft skirt. I pretend the dark-tinted windows, blocking out prying eyes, makes this action acceptable. Sure, people can't see in, but at the same time, she's not buckled into her seat, either. I'm not sure what alternative I have—we've got a schedule to keep, and there's no dressing room in this Mercedes.

Paige is genuinely in love with her pink dress. She's had the same one since Pre-Ballet more than two years ago. It's carried her through to Ballet I and now Ballet II. The nylon and spandex mix, which includes a limp skirt at the waist, is Paige's full-time outfit away from school. I've given up arguing with her about it. 'Oh, you want to wear it to dinner? OK. And for bedtime, too? Sure. At the dentist's office? Well, of course, why not?' Don't judge me here. It's not that I've given up; I've just selected other battles to fight, like the phone.

Yet, the biology and growth of my child is no match for the venerable garment. Today, behind the tinted windows, she removes her school uniform—a white button-down blouse and blue pleated skirt—and yanks up the pink dress with a tug.

"Daddy!" she screams as I slam the brakes in panic. "No!"

The thread-bare seam on her right side gives up the fight and splits from under her arm to her hip.

I'm used to frequent, incoherent outbursts from Paige, so I don't crash the car upon hearing her wail. This is the little game we play where she acts like a wild animal and I play our favorite guessing game of 'what's wrong, honey?' This theater

plays out most days. Honestly, we could sell tickets.

But I know her issue this time, it's obvious. Her dress is toast, and I find myself secretly pleased, knowing it will necessitate moving on and buying an updated outfit that will match her ever-growing, but still slight frame. But the timing is not right at all. The class starts at four o'clock, and it's now 3:20. Getting to Ms. May's Dance Studio will take at least thirty-five minutes without traffic, which only leaves me with five minutes to spare. Without the dress mishap, it would have been close, but now we are full-on screwed.

I contemplate purchasing a new dress at the mall, but quickly rule that out. No shopping trip with an eight-year-old, in the history of the universe, has ever taken less than five minutes. I weigh my options. We could skip class, but we had to miss last week because of a parent-teacher conference, and I can't do that again. I know Ms. May would veto Paige wearing her school uniform in class, even if she did have the right slippers on.

Ms. May had booted a sobbing girl from class last spring for not wearing approved attire. It wasn't helpful that the girl's hair was not in a tight bun—as per the Approved Attire Policy, along with pale pink tights and leather ballet slippers with elastic straps. And for heaven's sake, no tutus. For some reason, tutus and nylon slippers are blasphemous and not allowed, either. Don't ask me why. It's Ms. May's policy, and Ms. May must never be questioned. There is no wiggle room with her supreme authority.

So, where does that leave us? Time to improvise.

Ace Hardware is in the same strip mall as the studio. I'd visited it many times after Paige's ballet classes for odds and ends needed for woodworking projects. I cross my fingers as we rush into the store. Paige clutches her ribcage as if wounded on the battlefield. People stare. We ignore them. We are on a mission and have less than five minutes before we are officially late and out of compliance with the holy Approved Attire Policy. One strike against us, we might be able to slide. But two? No way.

I had already ruled out staples or buying a needle and thread and somehow learning how to sew on the drive over. I'm a realist. Thankfully, Ace comes through. Just past the paint aisle, there is an entire adhesive section full of choices. This leaves me with one good option—duct tape. Standard gray is my go-to for just about everything. I like the stuff with the gorilla on it, but when I pick it up, Paige gives me one of those looks that, well... she looks just like her mom. I've seen that look many times over the last twenty-plus years. *Not approved.* I quickly put it back and move down a few feet to the decorative tape section.

Paige doesn't hesitate. She makes a selection, spins on her leather slippers, and heads for the cash register. I grab the tape with the gorilla on it anyway because you can never have enough duct tape.

Three people stand in the line before us. We have three minutes. I kneel beside Paige on the dirty white linoleum floor, peel up a corner of the red duct tape with ladybugs on it, and wrap her up. As she spins, I overlap the tape around her midsection, covering up the rip as best I can without attaching it to her skin. On my fifth pass around her back, we start to attract attention from the other shoppers. Paige loves it.

The older woman directly in front of us is buying one small bag of wood screws. She sees our angst and impatience. With a knowing, grandmotherly look, she nods and allows us to skip her in line. I hold up the empty roll of red tape and my sturdy gray gorilla tape to the cashier and he scans them with his little gun. I see the price, \$11.45. I toss a twenty-dollar bill on the counter, grab Paige's hand, and take off like a bolt of lightning.

"Put my change toward that lady's screws," I yell over my shoulder before we burst through the automatic doors and across the parking lot.

I feel the three rapid zaps of my cell phone in my pocket. A text message alert. I know it's my seventeen-year-old son Mason without looking. I set up a particular vibration for my most frequent contacts, and my pocket buzzes a lot. I ignore it for the moment. We have more significant problems.

Paige keeps up as we traverse the lot. We make it to the door of the studio with seconds to spare. I turn to Paige to give her the once-over before going in. Paige's eyes are wide.

"Dad," she pants, "I can't breathe very good."

She is taking in shallow gulps of air. Her chest is moving in and out rapidly. In my haste to cover her exposed side, I must have wrapped her up too tight.

"Hold on, honey, I got this."

I pinch the tape under her arm and cut a four-inch slit. She lets out a massive sigh of relief as the pressure releases from her chest.

"That's better," she says, sucking in a big breath.

Now we are ready to go in. We aren't late.

I admire how some children aren't fully aware of embarrassing situations. At some point in childhood, that changes, right? Anxiety or fear takes over, and they close themselves off, afraid to move forward or try new things—just like adults. Most kids, at least ones Paige's age, don't know any better yet and forge head-on into the world. So, my daughter, wrapped up like a little red burrito covered in ladybugs, is oblivious to how ridiculous she looks right now. She should be oblivious because it

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doesn't matter, and she's eight. It's just something that adults can't help but notice. Children, on the other hand, have the privilege of not seeing it.

I think she likes being different anyway, so this is okay. She admires her red tape and folds down the corners of the tape and says she's ready for class.

I turn to hold the door, only to be met by Ms. May herself.

Crap.

* * *

"That's quite an outfit, young lady," Ms. May says in that condescending tone that can only come from a large woman who wears a skin-tight leotard and shimmery tights five days a week.

"Thank you," Paige replies.

"It was an emergency," I offer. "She'll have a new, policy-approved outfit by class next week."

Her eyes narrow in concentration. Her expression is pained but condescending all the same. "Yes, next week. That's what I'd like to talk with you about."

"Is there a change to the schedule?" I ask.

"Only for you," she says flatly.

"I don't understand."

"These classes aren't free, Mr. Bell. You do realize that, right?"

"Of course."

"Then, we're on the same page?"

"I'm still not clear what we're talking about. I know the class isn't free. That's why we pay you."

"As I've told your wife several times, I'm a reasonable person, but I'm not here for my health. This is a business, and I require my students to pay for these lessons."

"Are you saying we missed a payment?"

"Two months of payments," she says.

My eyes widen. "Two months? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I've spoken to your wife several times," she whispers, then glances first left, then right, as if what she is about to say next is a state secret. "I'm not about to get in between a man and his wife. I know your situation is... well, unique."

I ignore the jab at me for being a stay-at-home dad.

"I'm sure this is just a misunderstanding," I tell her. "Paige has been coming here for over two years, and we haven't had any issues before. I'll get this straightened out right away."

"That's all well and good, but I'm afraid I can't let Paige into class today without payment. You see, this is a business and I require—"

"Payment. Yes, I get it. What do we owe?" I ask, pulling out my wallet.

"Your balance is \$425, but I will require you to pre-pay for the rest of your daughter's Ballet II class."

"Fine, and what will that be?"

She pulls a folded, moist piece of paper from the bra latched around her massive bosom.

"It'll be \$925 in total."

"No problem."

I hand her my faded MasterCard, which I use for all our household needs and purchases. I follow her inside the studio, and Paige frolics over to her classmates on the floor, who have just begun stretching.

Ms. May inserts the card, punches in the numbers, and waits for it to connect.

"Declined," she growls.

Confused, I say, "Try it again, please."

This has never happened before. We have never missed a payment on anything that I know of, but I don't handle the finances for the family. Tina brings in the money and organizes our finances. She gives me a monthly budget to manage, and this was not over that budget. This has to be some misunderstanding.

"Declined again."

I glance away from Ms. May's stern look to see that Paige has joined the line with her classmates. She's twirling around, happy and wrapped in red tape. I pray that Ms. May doesn't yank Paige out of line and cause a scene. Paige would never forgive me.

After a brief lecture on financial responsibility, Ms. May lets us slide.

"Just this one time. Don't make me regret it, Mr. Bell," she says before commencing the class.

Paige's face is beaming as the class moves through the various arm positions and basic movements. I've seen this simple instruction dozens of times, but I smile despite myself while trying to ignore the churn in my stomach about the credit card.

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That shouldn't happen... not to people like us.

CHAPTER 2

I have never been offended by being called Mr. Mom. It would be an insult to moms everywhere if I, a father of three, took offense to being likened to a woman who displays an undying love for her children. Most moms are invisible superheroes hidden away, because when mom's around, everything works and everyone else's life is more comfortable. Moms do so much more than they ever get credit for. And yes, I know the irony of me—Mr. Mom—making this claim, but so be it. It's true.

In my family, the central parental figure, or primary parent, isn't a mom. It's me. Yes, I'm a man, and I'm not special because of it. I volunteered for this role as a stay-at-home dad, and I don't feel stuck—regardless of what most people assume.

When Jaden was born, followed two years later by his brother Mason, I left the "working" world and became a homemaker. This was nineteen years ago. OK, homemaker sounds antiquated. Did I stay at home? Yes. But anyone who says having kids means you "stay home" is out of touch. If you stay home alone with your offspring for too long, you slowly devolve into a madness of PB&J and cartoons on repeat. That's not fair to moms or me.

The first few years were a breeze, just me and my two boys. We did 'boy things' like playing tag, shooting rockets in the park, tossing the baseball around, and building forts out of blankets and couch cushions. We also created one truly epic tree fort in the backyard, then built an addition onto it. It was the envy of the neighborhood, dare I say.

We frequently had peeing-distance contests in the backyard, too. We're in stay-at-home dad territory here. It's much harder, but I imagine not impossible for a female to win a peeing-distance contest—sorry, moms. I'd like to see that, but not in a creepy way. Just that it's a feat I think deserves some special attention, but obviously, some privacy, too. I would sometimes let the boys win the contest, because let's face it, I had a distinct advantage over the wee lads.

Back then, I was just a cool dad who was super involved. I volunteered in their classrooms and for school committees. I coached their soccer and baseball teams. The parent association usually assigned me tasks like building carnival booths or schlepping a U-Haul full of boxes of purple licorice to be sold to the sugar-deprived children at Columbia Ridge. I didn't mind; I had found a niche and I enjoyed it.

I was labeled Mr. Mom when Paige came along eight years ago. There is something that people just don't get about a father being the primary parent of a little girl. I've made tutus and painted pictures of unicorns and didn't bat an eye. We also built birdhouses and flower boxes in the garage. That's what we do. But the first time I was called Mr. Mom was by Meredith Stonemeyer, who was responsible for the Girl Scout Troop Paige had begged me to let her join.

Meredith had a bad habit of not preparing for the meetings or she would just not show up. She was one of the few moms at Columbia Ridge who had a full-time job outside of the house. *Gasp, the horror*. Her absence from the meetings occurred twice before I took any action. So, on the third no-show, in front of 13 seven- and eight-year-old girls, I stepped in.

In truth, I was just looking to fill the time, but the girls were excited by the project that I had proposed. We were in the multipurpose room of the county library, and just outside the hall were rows and rows of white cardboard boxes that had previously stored books. I put my construction management skills to the test and challenged the girls to build a small castle with the boxes. Had this build been for boys, it would have been called a fort, but when in Rome, right?

The moms sitting along the back wall snickered amongst themselves as I took charge, but I wasn't deterred. I enlisted the help of a terrified-looking dad who had to break away from some game on his phone to help bring the boxes inside the room. He did his job and returned to his phone, glad to be free. The moms watched, first for a laugh, but then slowly, they decided this wasn't the worst idea ever and joined in. Maybe a male could provide some value here.

Someone opened one of those insanely large boxes of colored markers, and soon each girl was decorating a square of our makeshift castle. I tied the boxes together with some yarn and a hole-punch left behind by the last group in the multipurpose room.

Was our castle structurally sound? Not a chance. But we weren't preparing for hurricane winds; we were just killing time. But then Meredith Stonemeyer abruptly entered the room—twenty minutes late—wearing the sensible business attire of a

working professional. I like to call it a costume because people act differently when they wear it. She also wore the strained expression of an over-subscribed adult as she dragged little Maggie Stonemeyer by the arm toward the front of the room.

Displeased, Meredith surveyed our work. I ignored her but couldn't help smiling at the finished product. It was a fairytale; a lopsided jumble of decorated boxes that might transport young minds into a land where princesses attended elaborate balls and the basic economics of feudal land-holding society was overlooked.

The girls continued working on the project, which was probably what upset Meredith the most. She had arrived, and she was supposed to be in charge. How dare someone try to usurp her?

"I've got it from here, Mr. Mom," she said with scorn. "We have an agenda for the meeting. It's not just playtime."

And there it was. "Mr. Mom" was a bad thing, and forever tainted by the icy words of a real working mom who didn't like a man entering her tightly choreographed world of cookie sales, yoga pants, merit badges, and shaming stay-at-home parents.

I looked at the other moms, who were still actively participating and maybe enjoying themselves at these unbearable meetings for the first time. They looked ashamed and afraid. Was it because they agreed with her, and they were embarrassed for me? Or were they toeing the line as not to offend this Mamma Bear? Maybe it was a mixture of both.

What did Meredith Stonemeyer have that I didn't have? I can tell you one thing—I'd beat her at a peeing contest, for sure.

* * *

We're nearly a year removed from the Mr. Mom comment, and I've had time to reflect on it, and I get it, somewhat. But I'll get into that later.

I've gotten a little ahead of myself. My name is James Bell, and I am a stay-at-home dad. I haven't held a steady, paying job outside the house for nearly two decades. I'm in charge of raising the kids and running the place. That's my job. Yes, it's a real thing that men do—they just don't talk about it. When would they talk about it? At the office with their co-workers? Obviously not. At the Mommy-and-Me playdates? Again, no. We don't get invited to those.

If a man stays home, it means his wife wears the pants. She makes the money, and you—the man—are subservient to her. This is why nobody, especially men, talk about it. But it's just a gender swap, that's all. Families choose to have one parent at home quite often; it's just usually a mom.

Please don't get me wrong, I'm not here to judge parents who both work full-time. Lord knows we can only afford this lifestyle because Tina works a lot and earns more. She's always out of town, but her work allows me to be the primary parent to our kids.

This life is not exactly what I had envisioned for myself. I used to be a professional project manager for a construction firm. You might have caught that with the whole castle-made-of-boxes thing. But I have a great life. Sure, it can get lonely, but thankfully, I have Christy to pal around with. And that's all it is, despite the gossip in the Tribe. We're providing each other a healthy outlet for human interaction. We're both married, and our spouses know that we're friends.

This loneliness is something the stay-at-home moms and dads don't talk about outside their circle. Who would feel sorry for us? For feeling lonely and needing friendship? You wouldn't understand until you're in it. You're alone, devoid of other adults, except for those loons on TV talk shows, which serve as company and background noise while you work around the house. Trust me, you don't want to get hooked on those shows—it's a downward spiral from which you can't come back.

I've heard stay-at-home parents say their kids are their best friends. Um, no, thank you. I love my three crazy kids, but not like that.

Jaden, my firstborn, is nineteen and away at his first year of college. He's at the University of Oregon in Eugene, which is not far from our home in Lake Oswego, outside of Portland. He's a full-grown man and on scholarship for the baseball team.

Mason, whose text message I need to return, is seventeen and attempting to finish his junior year of high school. It's been an uphill battle with that one. There's always one, right? If video games were graded, I'm confident he'd be a valedictorian. But they aren't graded, and he's not on any honor rolls. Having money to provide your kids with a good education doesn't mean they will automatically get smarter. I think they fight it more. Is it privilege? Possibly.

So, my co-workers at home are my kids. It's not a manager-employee relationship. We're on the same team, but I can't fire them. I read something once about servant leadership—how good leaders serve others to help them succeed, which lifts the whole group—and I think that applies here. Not just a servant. Not subservient. Servant leader.

OK, we are moving on now. This is my life.

End of sample. Please consider reading and reviewing An Agreement We Made by Dan Kolbet. Thank you!