

“Here’s Gretzky’s water dish and her little supper bowl.” Loretta pulls two fancy bowls out of her enormous flowered bag.

“And here’s her favorite little stuffy-toy for bedtime.” It might be a teddy bear, but it’s hard to tell. One leg and most of its face are chewed off.

Dad, who’s paralyzed in the loveseat, reaches for more smoked salmon. At that very moment, Gretzky launches herself onto the coffee table and polishes off the rest of the salmon. Dad clears his throat and sits back.

“And here’s Gretzky’s favorite dog food. And let’s see what else…” She pulls out a flowered cushion and a pink baby blanket.

“Gretzky likes to sleep on her mommy’s bed. I’m sure you and Mack won’t mind.”

Mom’s face cramps up even tighter. I try to imagine a dog sleeping on her expensive new duvet.

Loretta gazes down at Gretzky. “Mommy’s going to miss her little sweetheart.” Her eyes well up with tears as she crouches down and plants a kiss on Gretzky’s head. Gretzky is too busy tugging on Mom’s Persian rug to notice.

Mom finally squeaks out a few words. “How long are you going for?”

“Just for the weekend. We’ll be home Sunday evening.”

Mom cheers up a bit. “I’m sure we can, er… manage Gretzky until then.”

“Toodle-oo!” Loretta vanishes in a lavender poof out the door.

I look at Gretzky. The edge of Mom’s rug still dangles from between her teeth. Then I remember Mom’s blow-up about the Monopoly game and a really bad feeling creeps into my gut. Mom must be ticking like a time bomb now. Time to make myself scarce.

Chapter One

What Your Teen is Really Feeling. Supporting Your Child's Interests. Enjoying Quality Family Time Together. Those are some of the headlines I've seen in Mom's parenting magazines. The one about quality family time is really messing with my life.

Here's how it goes: The magazine arrives in the mail, then Mom gets weird and thoughtful for

a few days. The next thing I know, she schedules quality family time. Attendance mandatory. First she dragged Dad and me through a bunch of art galleries. Then we had to go out for dinner at a fancy restaurant that didn't even have pizza on the menu. Last month she made me play golf at her and Dad's private golf club. Which brings me to tonight—spending Friday night playing a lame board game at home with my parents. I don't have tons of other options. But still, this sucks.

“How do you feel about the game?” Mom asks as she hands me two hundred dollars of Monopoly money for passing Go.

“Sad,” I say.

Mom looks pleased. She thinks she just scored big points in the parenting world for getting me to *open up about my feelings while sharing some good, old-fashioned fun.*

“Really? What do you find sad about it?”

That's when I stick it to her. “Those dollar bills you're handing me? They won't buy me a *thing!*”

Mom's jaw drops. “What do you mean, Turk? You could buy a railroad.”

“Yeah, Mom. That's the dream of every fourteen-year-old guy. To buy a fake railroad with fake money on a Friday night.”

“I get the message, Turk,” Mom says through gritted teeth. “In other words, you don't appreciate that I picked up a nice new Monopoly game. Or that I planned a lovely night at home together.”

“It sure wasn't my choice,” I shrug. Then I hold up mywad of Monopoly money. “You've got to admit, Dad, if this was *real* cash, it might be worth getting excited about.”

Dad chuckles. Then he catches himself.

Mom's cheeks turn red and blotchy. This is usually a sign for me to shut up. I've learned from bitter experience that if you tick Mom off, it always

catches up with you. But it's like I have a death wish tonight.

"In fact," I say, "why don't you put me in charge of family nights? If you slipped me some money, I'd take care of everything. Then we'll have some real fun! And who knows? I might even have some money left over for myself. Enough dough to update my sound system. Or upgrade my cell phone plan. Now *that's* exciting! As for playing a few rounds of Monopoly..."

"Quite frankly, Turk, I doubt you could do any of those things—even if this *were* real money!" Mom flings her Monopoly money down onto the table. "Not with how quickly you burn through your allowance." Mom's voice is getting higher with every word. I swear her nostrils are flaring too.

"So what if I ask for the occasional loan? What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that it's not just occasionally. You apparently don't appreciate how lucky you are.

And you certainly don't help out around here in return."

"You've gotta be kidding!" I say. "You mean work? You know I don't believe in breaking a sweat." I shudder.

"Yes, your imaginary allergy," Mom says.

"Hey, can I help it if I'm allergic to my own sweat?" I laugh.

Mom stands up and pushes her chair back—hard. "You two can count your fake money together. I'll go get the snacks."

Dad springs from the loveseat. "Let me help you, honey."

Good kissing up, Dad. That must be how you landed the vice president's job.

From the lounge, I can hear Mom chewing Dad out at top speed in the kitchen. Dad's agreeing with her nearly as fast.

When they come out a few minutes later, Mom is carrying a plate of smoked salmon and crackers.

Dad has two glasses of champagne and a glass of iced tea on a tray. Apparently none of Mom's parenting magazines mention that teenagers like pizza and Coke for snacks. Or that popcorn works too.

Mom still looks pretty ticked, so I don't say anything about her choice of snacks.

She turns to Dad. "Mack, I think you should tell *your* son why he needs to manage his money better."

Dad chews his smoked salmon slowly, like a man who's on death row. "It's like this...er, Turk..."

Just then, the doorbell rings.

"Saved by the bell," I laugh.

Mom stomps off to the front door. Then she does that thing that always blows me away. In the blink of an eye, she switches into her favorite role: the vice president's wife.

As she opens the door, Mom sings out, "*Loretta!* Goodness, *Loretta!* How delightful to see you!"

Loretta. The president's wife.

I picture Mom planting pretend kisses into the air on both sides of Loretta's plump cheeks.

Then I hear something else. *Yap! Yap! Yip!*

"Loretta," Mom says, "I haven't met your little friend."

"This is Gretzky," Loretta yells over more puppy yips. "She's a cockapoo. A *female* cockapoo. But Vincent insisted on naming her Gretzky. My dear husband never got over Wayne Gretzky leaving Edmonton."

Loretta and a yapping puppy! I'm out of here!

But there's no escape. Loretta has just flung herself into the living room in a cloud of flowery perfume. Gretzky, a yapping coffee-colored hairball, is nestled against the lavender frills on Loretta's enormous chest.

"Hello, Turkingtons," Loretta blares.

At that moment, Gretzky leaps from Loretta's arms and bounces into my lap.

“You want a little playsy-waysy with Winston, do you?” Loretta says with a tinkly laugh.

I cringe. Winston is my real name and I can’t stand it. So everyone—except Loretta, that is—calls me Turk. It’s short for my last name, Turkington.

“Sorry. I’m on my way to bed. I’m all playsy-waysied out for today.” I try to nudge Gretzky off my lap. No luck.

From the corner of my eye, I catch Mom’s warning look.

“Look at how frisky she is now that she’s found a new playmate,” Loretta gushes.

“Playmate? Me?” I say.

“Why yes.” Loretta turns to Mom. “Remember when I told you I was getting a puppy? You told me that you and Winston love puppies. You said you were considering getting a puppy yourself.”

“News to me,” I mutter.

I’ve never stopped to think about whether I like dogs or not. But if I did, I’d probably decide they’re

okay, but only at a distance. And as for this hairball that’s yapping like crazy on my lap—

“Gross!”

She licks my chin again. What if she just drank from the toilet? And I swear, if she tries to sniff my crotch—

“And that you’d love to help out with Gretzky any time at all,” Loretta says.

“Why...why, yes. I mean, I...suppose I *might* have said something like that.”

Why won’t this dog get off me?

“Vincent and I are heading out of town,” Loretta continues. “Just this morning, I took Gretzky to a kennel that I’d heard wonderful things about. But I took one look at those—those *cages*—and I couldn’t leave my baby there. Then I remembered your kind offer. And now to see Gretzky so happy here with Winston—well, I know I did the right thing.”

As I try to swish Gretzky off my lap again, I glance at Mom. Her face has a serious cramp in it.