

DANI-GIRL'S GUIDE TO GETTING EVERYTHING RIGHT

Gay Degani

THE MINUTE THE NOSE OF MY HONDA CIVIC POINTS north on the 5, my hands begin to sweat, my breath goes shallow, and somewhere down in my lower intestinal tract I feel a rumbling similar to distant thunder, just not as pleasant. *Don't Go Home* is the first cardinal rule in Dani-Girl's Guide to Getting Everything Right, and after a lifetime in Lomita with my German-Irish father, Rule 1 is easy to follow. After all, most of our communications begin with him grumbling, "Can't you get anything right?"

My mother is beautiful in a Meryl Streep way, quirky and sweet-faced, but not stunning like, say, Michelle Pfeiffer. This morning she woke me out of my end-of-finals stupor, the phone buried beneath my chemistry notes, her voice filled with fits and starts. "He... I need... Please..."

The unspoken rule in Dani-Girl's Guide: *If Mom Calls, GO.*

The thirty-third cardinal rule is *Don't Smoke Dope on The Freeway*. This rule came about the usual way. The cops pulled me over because of the peace sign on my back window, me with a joint sizzling in my diet coke. I vowed never to light up in a car again, but if I'm breaking Rule 1, I *have* to break Rule 33.

Mom waits for me on the cement porch, her faded sweat suit too big, her blond-gray hair uncombed. As soon as she spies me, she hurries into the street and yanks the car door open. I stumble out to feel her damp face against my cheek.

My father is ill, but that isn't what brings me home. He's been ill for three and a half years, and yes, he is dying, but he's been dying for longer than that. It's the Irish battling the German in him that's landed him on the couch for decades. And the beatings his father gave him when he was young.

A car whooshes by, too fast for our short street. We look up, caught in the pull of its wind, both a little shocked. Then I worry she can smell the marijuana on my clothes and push her gently toward the dead hedgerow in front of the porch.

Halfway across the lawn she grabs my shirt, wadding it into her hand.

"He's upset," she says, her sharp cheekbones reminding me of me. I wait. She turns away, her shoulders shaking.

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The unspoken rule in Dani-Girl's Guide:
If Mom Calls, GO.

I take hold of her. "What is it? What's happened?"

"He's..."

She slips through my hands, onto the yellow crabgrass, to her knees. There is nothing in Dani-Girl's Guide to help me get this right, and I go down onto the ground with her.

"Is he dead?" I ask.

"He wants to tell you something, Dani-Girl. Something I..."

The buzz of distant cars along the 101 reminds me of bees. Dust from the grass itches my nose. My right ankle, caught under me, throbs, and I shift it out, kicking up dandelion fluff. Across the way, a door slams as the Carlson kids pile onto their lawn. The older one, Josh, taller than I remember, takes a step toward us. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," I say, and nod. The boy waves his siblings away from us, throwing back an uncertain glance as they disappear around the corner.

I take my mother's arm. "Let's go inside."

"I don't want him to tell you."

"Then you tell me."

The desperate grip she has on my arm cracks open my heart. "Tell me," I whisper.

She leans close. "It isn't true. He's crazy. He's... he's never trusted me. Ever." Her eyes search my face. "I don't want you hurt."

The Guide helps me avoid mistakes, so I say, "He can't hurt me any more."

"You just think that."

My throat dries up. I tug at my neck. Wait for her.

"He... thinks I slept around, but I never did. Never."

The idea that my mother had lovers almost makes me laugh, but I don't.

She lets out a sob. "He's going to tell you you're not his child, but it's not true."

I leave my mother sitting at the Formica table with a cup of coffee and cinnamon toast, and creep down the hall to the den where my father sleeps all day and all night in his adjustable hospital bed. I hesitate at the threshold, pushing my shoulder blades together and chanting to myself, *Get in and Get Out*, the

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rule for dealing with my father whenever I happen to break Rule 1.

The shaded room smells of medicine, bleach, and anger. The bed is on a diagonal so he can see television and the door.

“Oh,” he says. “It’s you.” And turns his head.

I move to his bedside. My heart thuds. “Mom says you want to see me.”

For a moment, I think he’s gone back to sleep. Then he mumbles into the wall, “Did she tell you?”

“Just who do you think my father is?”

Now he shifts toward me, his red face mapped with lines from the pillow, his eyes cold as arctic water. “You’ll have to ask your mother that.”

She steadies herself against the refrigerator and almost pulls me to the floor. “I’m sorry. He threatened—”

“It’s okay, Mom. I believe you, not him.” I pat her shoulder. “How can I not be his child?”

When we walk out to my car she says, “You’re going to be all right?”

“Actually, Mom, I feel relieved.” I was never *Dani-Girl* to him, not even *Danielle*. Just *you*. Yet in my gut, I know I’m his.

Her forehead wrinkles. Her voice softens. “Oh, Dani-Girl.”

“It’s a good thing,” I say, and climb into the Civic. “I’ll come up in a couple of weeks.”

Surprise flickers in her eyes. She reaches out and squeezes my fingers, then lets me go. Rule Number 1 doesn’t seem to matter anymore. 🌀

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