

Meant To Be

by Beverly Butler & Sue Warhaftig



*Sometimes
giving in doesn't mean
giving up*

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CHAPTER ONE

Sprawled on top of the king-sized four-poster in her perfectly decorated master bedroom, Judith McCoy was trying to stop the sobs and flow of hot tears. Mascara dripped down the side of her face, threatening to stain the cool mint green duvet with splotches of brown.

Today should be one of the happiest days of her life.

The party was scheduled to begin in just a few hours and Judith knew she had to get herself under control. She tried to think rationally; maybe that would lessen the ache of defeat and humiliation. She inhaled a deep breath and thought of the long strange path that led her to where she was now: disappointing daughter, ineffective mother, and obviously awful wife. A misfit. Her sobbing started again when she thought about Rod and how much they'd lost since their marriage twenty eight years ago. Why did she have to see that picture in his e-mail? And especially, why today?

Judith took another breath, sighed it out and got up. She slumped into the chair pulled up to the antique vanity that filled a corner. This was her favorite room in the house and she was pleased with the redecorating results from last year's big splurge. The muted ivory and green Lori rug balanced the busier multi-colored throw pillows on the bed. The matted and matching framed artwork, mostly the girls' drawings from elementary school, looked perfect against the lightly textured wallpaper. She always kept a vase of fresh flowers near her side of the bed, which were now *both* sides of the bed. It was her dream bedroom and sometimes she would come up the stairs and just sit on the loveseat, looking out the window over her orderly and colorful garden below.

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Judith rubbed her eyes, looked in the mirror, and realized she had made a mess of her face. She was alarmed to notice that with her disheveled hair and slightly puffy eyes, she resembled her mother. Not that Dolores wasn't an attractive woman for her age. 'For her age.'" Now that was a phrase Judith was learning to loathe. Two people during the last few months had used it in reference to her. The first was her OB/GYN, the second was Rod.

Today Judith turned 50 and that fact absolutely shocked her. Inside she felt the same as when the girls were toddlers, but the outside was a different story. Her hair had remained thick, long, and lustrous but unruly coils of gray intertwined with the brunette strands. Her hazel green eyes, always her best feature, were now bloodshot and sad, with crow's feet stamped like a permanent tattoo. Lots of the local moms had found redemption with Dr. Herbert Phillips, MD, a plastic surgeon who held Botox parties at the local wine bar. Judith had never partaken of the needle even though she had accompanied several friends there and quaffed multiple glasses of complimentary Pinot.

The picture of Tammi and Rod that she'd discovered by accident, looking so happy together, burned in her brain again, but she forced the image and the sinking feeling in her stomach, to leave. The vodka she had guzzled earlier had helped. She sighed and thought, 'Life has to be different.'

If Judith could change just one thing about her appearance it would be how much she weighed. With the girls now in their teens, the excuse she used to herself and others, about carrying excess baby weight, seemed sad and ridiculous. The exercise program she'd resolved to begin each January would peter out by mid-February. Driving for class trips, lessons and swim meets, volunteering to help write and publish the monthly school

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newsletter, serving as PTA co-president, and being a mom didn't leave her much time for the gym. Plus the house, garden, and laundry were nearly a full-time job. For Judith, time was her enemy in more ways than one. Invariably running late, she would regularly grab a bag of chips and a Coke at the 7-11 next to the high school, a place she found herself several times a day. Her 5'6" frame was hauling around an extra thirty or forty pounds.

Rod had suggested they hire a housekeeper or at least a cleaning lady that would come in once a week. But Judith felt that would be indulgent. Maybe it was her Maine upbringing but she didn't feel comfortable having a stranger in the house seeing all the intimate and untidy details of their existence; bathroom trash, dirty clothes, and the mess the dog makes; especially now that it was warmer and he was shedding what seemed like a few pounds of hair a day. Besides, Judith didn't mind the housework. She enjoyed the mindless chores and immediate gratification of cleaning. It was something she did well and she clung to it.

The doorbell sounded downstairs and Cathy, her high school freshman, yelled up that she'd get it. Probably the balloons for the party, Judith thought. She knew she should go downstairs and make sure everything was set up in the right place but Cathy and Vivian had insisted that THEY were putting on the birthday party for their mom and half of the neighborhood, it seemed. The girls had arranged for an ice cream cake, pizzas of all different varieties from Reggio's, and Rod was picking up a keg on his way home from golf. The three of them had even shopped for matching plastic plates, cups, napkins, paper Chinese lanterns, and birthday cake-shaped cardboard centerpieces. It was sweet that they were doing all this but she felt it was more *their* idea of a fun party than hers. In an hour or so fifty friends, neighbors, kids and dogs would be invading her neat home,

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spilling drinks, dropping pizza sauce on the rugs, and messing up the order of her life. She smirked to herself because her life was anything but orderly. FedEx delivered twenty berry pies that her mother had sent from the farm. She knew that she would have a massive clean-up job tomorrow. A birthday gift that kept on giving.

Judith's idea of a perfect birthday would be Rod taking her out for sushi at the new place downtown that got the great review, coming home to drink a little champagne, opening a few small gifts with the girls, and then watching a movie that she'd chosen; maybe Camelot or Gypsy. Rod hated musicals (which was odd because he loved music and he loved theatre) but he would watch it because it was her birthday and they'd all have fun, laugh, and eat popcorn. But not this year. It was nearly four o'clock and she needed to get dressed for 'her' party.

That damn email. Could her day get any worse? She wondered if Rod had left it open on purpose. Did he want her to see that picture, she wondered? How cruel.

Judith pushed her chair away from the vanity or the 'beauty booth' as the girls used to call it when they were little. She took a few strokes with the brush through her hair.

Judith remembered how, when they were first dating, Rod would love to play with her hair after they made love, when she was naked and sitting up in bed. The whole world seemed to melt away. He was so gentle, brushing her hair up from around her ears, then away from her forehead, gathering it in his hands and letting it fall, and starting all over again. He would take half an hour and slowly stroke the back of her hair, parting it and arranging it over her full breasts. She loved those moments with Rod, when he was slow and sweet. There hadn't been any moments like that in a long time...in fact, God,

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it's June, Judith thought. She couldn't remember making love this year. She suddenly felt like crying again. Judith put away the hairbrush and, with it, her memories of a happier time.

It was only an hour ago that Judith's world, already shaky, had completely fallen apart.

Rod and the girls had sent invitations to all the usual people and Judith needed to check the computer to see whether the start time was six or six thirty. If she had an extra half hour she'd freshen up by taking a shower and blow-drying her hair, even though she'd showered after walking Woof, the family's old semi-Golden Retriever this morning. She had gone across the hall into Rod's study to look at the party invitation on his computer to see the actual starting time. Vivian and Cathy were good naturedly arguing about whether the karaoke machine should be set up in front of the fireplace or moved out onto the covered part of the patio. The deliveryman was connecting the speakers and the high-pitched squeal of a microphone being too close to an amplifier set Judith's teeth on edge causing her neck to tighten. She knew one of her headaches was coming on. She made a note to take a couple Aleves after she looked at the invitation for the party, not that anyone except old Mr. Allen, the widower from two doors down, would actually be on time.

To her surprise, Rod's email was open. He was usually so good about closing programs. She hoped finding the party invitation would be easy; maybe it would be parked right on the desktop. The machine came alive at the touch of her fingertips.

She immediately saw an email marked PARTYPARTY and clicked on it. Instantly, a photo appeared of Tammi TeWinkel, a young, vivacious Account Executive

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at the firm, sitting on Rod's lap. They each held half-full margarita glasses and Rod had his arm casually slung over Tammi's slim, bare shoulders. A banner in the background read 'Happy Cinco de Mayo – Wycoff-McCoy Advertising'.

Cinco de Mayo, just last month. Judith blinked in disbelief. Rod always told Judith about office parties but he hadn't mentioned this one. May 5...May 5...that date was familiar in the way past PTA potlucks and school art shows were familiar. Then she remembered: it was the Middle School talent show and Cathy had done a group dance to a song by the Buena Vista Social Club. Much of the show was a Mexican theme and Judith made Cathy's costume—and most of the other girls' too—using yards of bright red, green and gold satin for the ruffles on the skirts. Rod couldn't be there because he had a big client visiting; a manufacturer of 'green' building supplies that was close to landing a slot at Wal-Mart. But this picture was evidence that Rod was focusing on his own talent show that night.

Judith's face felt hot and her head hurt. Her brain began to race. She pushed the chair away from the desk and went back to the bedroom and got out two Aleves from her pillbox in the bedside table. She took them dry. Judith sat on the bed staring at the way the afternoon shadows were beginning to play off the glass on the photograph of her and Rod on the day they were married so long ago.

Her heart was pounding and she wanted to scream at someone or something. She went back into the study and walked quickly over to the computer. She had so many questions and she searched the picture for answers. Was it just a quick after work get together before the client meeting? That there was a silk-screened banner showed it was premeditated. Maybe it was from last year. She knew the crew at Rod's company and

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they were big partiers; mostly single, young and without kids. And attractive. It seemed like everyone at the firm had been plucked off the pages of ELLE or GQ and deposited into their ergonomically correct, true black, high-end Aeron chairs. Judith imagined them at staff meetings being witty, satirical, and brilliant. New-age Algonquians fueled by designer spring water.

Judith hated them.

That's when she returned to her room and collapsed on her bed, feeling the crushing weight of a life without a future, a present without meaning and a wasted past.



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