

CHAPTER ONE

“All right,” I called out from the front door. “If we don’t run to the car, we aren’t going to get there. Ben, where are you?”

My son didn’t show himself. Only his husky voice made its hoarse little way out from behind one of the living room columns.

“I’m not gonna run. I hate running.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” I said. “Tell me something you *don’t* ‘hate’ this morning. *That* will surprise me.”

“I hate –“

“Don’t say ‘hate’, Ben,” Stephanie said. “I hate that.”

My sister stopped rolling her suitcase across the foyer’s fieldstone floor and lured Ben out from behind the column by the hand. Her dark eyes danced down at him. “What are you hating this morning, buddy?” she said. “Tell Aunt Stephanie all about it.”

“Thank you, Steph,” I said dryly. “You’re so helpful.”

“You’re going to miss me and you know it,” she said to me. Then she squatted down to meet the small, inquisitive face at eye level. “Come on, Ben. Dish, dude.”

I didn’t comment that it was no wonder Ben’s vocabulary had gone completely down the tubes the last two weeks. Between Stephanie’s twenty-seven-year-old slang and my mother’s grandmotherly toddler-talk, it was amazing my usually precocious kindergartner could even put a complete sentence together now. But I just shooed both of them toward the front door. At least Stephanie had gotten the scowl off Ben’s face. It was more than I could say for my own ability lately.

“Mama!” I called out over my shoulder. “Let’s shake a leg.”

It was a pointless request, of course. My classy mother never “shook” anything. It was customary for her to float, as she did now, down the steps into the foyer, one set of manicured nails resting lightly on the cherry stair rail while the other balanced a Coach bag on her shoulder.

Every pristine white hair of her fashionable bob was in place, and English Toffee lipstick was drawn on without a hint of feathering in the tiny age wrinkles that fringed her lips. Silk sleeves fell down her arms in cascading folds. I knew she was aware that she was in danger of missing her plane, but the passing stranger would have thought she was making an entrance for a leisurely brunch.

And there I was, shoving my hair behind my ears, wearing wrinkles into my linen pants, and, at only 7:30 a.m., already wishing I’d worn flats instead of pumps.

“Mama,” I said with forced patience, “We have to drop Ben off at school before I take you to the airport. You’re going to need to step it up a little.”

“I was just leaving you a little something upstairs,” Mama said. She didn’t “step it up” by so much as a millisecond.

“You didn’t have to do that –“

“If I didn’t, there would be no end to the whining about your being the neglected middle child.”

“I don’t whine!” I said. I took the bag from her and headed for the door. “Thirty-seven-year-old women do not whine.”

“Children always whine to their mothers, no matter how old they get.”

I looked out at Ben, who was climbing into the Lexus under Stephanie’s supervision. “Wonderful,” I said.

For the moment, Ben was being co-operative, settling himself into the booster seat that had recently replaced his car seat and letting Stephanie help him buckle the belt. I knew the minute he saw me in the vicinity, he’d start wailing about something – anything.

I charged toward the trunk with my mother’s bag, my head spinning once again into the day that lay ahead of me. I had to get Ben to school on time, or he wasn’t going to get the perfect attendance award, and he’d be wailing about that longer than I could listen to him. According to the new regulations, Mama and Stephanie had to be at the airport two hours before their flight left, despite the fact that they were only flying from Nashville to Richmond. They’d probably stand in line at the security checkpoint longer than they’d be in the air. And then I had at least a ten-hour day at the office ahead of me, unless I brought files home to work on after Ben went to bed.

I slammed the trunk and looked at the back of Ben’s dark head through the rear window. At the moment, he was rattling something off to Stephanie, his head bobbing, the crown hair I’d wet down so carefully – under protest – sticking straight up like a paintbrush.

It had taken two hours to get him to sleep the night before, and once he finally drifted off, he was awake two hours later in a wet bed. That happened at least five nights out of seven, so the chances of me actually getting any work done at home in the evenings were slim to none. But I was going to have to. If I continued to stay at the office until I was caught up, Ben would be home with Lindsay, the after-school babysitter, into the evening, which would lead to its own share of crying and carrying on once I came on the scene.

I slid into the front seat and started up the car. When I wasn’t with Ben at home, he pitched fits. When I was with him he pitched fits. The child pitched fits when he was asleep. I was ready to pitch one myself. Hence the plan I was going to present to Jeffrey Faustman this morning.

“I’m giving this posh neighborhood one last look,” Steph said from the backseat as I pulled out of Belle Meade. “Before I go back to my stinky little apartment.”

“Stephanie Lynn,” my mother said, “your apartment is darling.” She looked at me pointedly. “You haven’t seen it, have you?”

“No,” I said, fighting the urge to remind my mother that she had asked me that at least fourteen times over the last two weeks.

“You aren’t missing that much, Toni,” Stephanie said. “Just think about my room at college, spread it over a living room, a kitchen, and a bedroom, and you’ve got my apartment.”

“That bad, huh?” I gave my little sister a grateful look in the rearview mirror. Fair or not, it was her job in the family to keep conversations from taking dead-end turns.

She'd been working pretty hard at it during their stay. I suspected she'd go home to her "stinky little apartment" and collapse.

"Am I gonna be late?" Ben said.

"No," I said. "Do I ever get you there late?"

"Almost."

"Almost doesn't count."

"Other kids get there *way* early."

"So – you're here a *little* early." I swung into the tunnel of about-to-blossom dogwood trees that arched the driveway of Hillsboro Private School and snapped my seat belt open. "It's the best I can do, Pal."

Ben squirmed out of his booster seat, his face puckering as he eyed the front door. "I'm late," he said. "I can feel it."

"Did you give Aunt Stephanie and Nana a kiss?" I said. "you aren't going to see them for a while."

Ben's attention immediately shifted to his grandmother's face, and I groaned inwardly. His honey-brown eyes were narrowing into accusatory pinpoints.

"Why?" he said. "Why aren't I seeing them for a while?"

"We have to go home, buddy," Stephanie said.

"Why?"

"Because I have to go to work."

"No!"

"Ben, I have to take them to the airport," I said, pulling gently at his sleeve. "You'll see them again."

"When?"

"Soon," my mother said. She leaned over the backseat and tilted Ben's chin up with her fingers. "You remember what we talked about."

Ben nodded sullenly.

"You'll see us before you know it – and for a long time."

"But I don't want –"

I gave the sleeve another tug, which was obviously one tug too many. Ben snatched himself away from me, both elbows swinging.

"I don't want to go to school! I hate school!"

"You do not," I said. "You love school, Kiss Aunt Stephanie good-bye. They have to go."

"No! I hate Aunt Stephanie!"

"Benjamin!" I said.

"Love you, too, buddy," Stephanie said.

Ben didn't appear to hear her as he struggled under my hands, which were dragging him onto the sidewalk. He wrenched himself away from me and stood, arms folded across his narrow little chest, gaze hard on the ground.

"You know you're going to be fine as soon as you get in there," I said. "So I don't see why we need to go through this every day. Here's your backpack."

I produced the Power Rangers pack, stuffed with lunch and crayons and an odd assortment of accessories Ben couldn't live without. He smacked it out of my hand and refolded his arms. It was all I could do to squat in front of him, rather than jerk him up by the arm and haul his little backside up to the front door.

“If I knew why all of a sudden you don’t want to go to school any more, I could help you,” I said. “But since you can’t tell me, all I can do is get you here.” My eyes narrowed as I went for his mental jugular. “But if you don’t go inside, you aren’t going to get the perfect attendance award, because you’re going to be late.”

The arms sprang away from his body like surprised springs, and he snatched the backpack.

“You made me late!” he shouted – for every Belle Meade mother in the parking lot to hear. “I hate you!”

I’d heard those three words countless times over the last several months, but I still felt as if I’d been shot every time they came out of his mouth. I even put my hand flat against my chest as I watched his lanky figure tear up the sidewalk for the door. What had happened to the precious little preschool chunkiness – and the so-alive eyes – and the sweet, chirped-our words, “I love you”?

As I climbed back into the Lexus, I hoped my mother and Stephanie hadn’t heard Ben’s parting shot, but the distress etched into Mama’s face dashed that to the dust.

“He’s just upset because we’re leaving,” Stephanie said even before I got the car into reverse.

“There’s a lot more to it than that,” Mama said. “And, Toni, you know it.”

I gritted my teeth, overbite and all. Somehow we had made it through two weeks without getting into this. There we were on our way to the airport, and she had to start in. We only had to get to I-40 and we’d practically be at the terminal. If I wanted to get a word in myself, I was going to have to cut right to the chase.

“You’re thinking that if Chris and I weren’t separated, Ben wouldn’t be acting this way.”

Mama’s eyes sprang open a little. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. And I think it’s worse because you’ve moved him five hundred miles from his father so he barely gets to see the man.”

“Chris was just here the week before you came. They went to Disneyworld.”

“That was a vacation,” Mama said. “That doesn’t constitute a relationship between a father and a son.”

“It’s something, though,” Stephanie said. “I think Toni’s doing the best she can –”

“Chris should’ve thought about his relationship with his son before he slept with another woman,” I said. I’d already hit I-40. I had to move on.

“For heaven sake, Antonia,” my mother said. “Can’t you forgive the man one transgression? It’s not as if he was a drunk or into drugs – something he was refusing to change. Chris isn’t going to make that mistake again.”

I took my eyes off the Mercedes in front of me long enough to give her a look. “How could you possibly know that? I don’t know it. I don’t know that I can trust Chris now. He did it once – why wouldn’t he do it again?”

“Because you would work on your marriage. But you won’t even try. You refuse to go to counseling –”

“I don’t believe in letting some third party who has no idea what I’ve been through tell me what to do.”

I gunned the motor and slipped in front of a semi in the right lane. Maybe it was a good thing that most of the heavy traffic on I-40 was headed into Nashville while we headed out. This trip couldn’t be fast enough at this point. As I checked to make sure the

trucker I'd just cut off wasn't going to rear-end me. I caught Stephanie's face in the rearview mirror.

She was sucking in her bottom lip, accentuating the Kerrington overbite. A tiny line