

CHAPTER ONE

LAYNE EMERSON opened the oil can and balanced it so it could drain into the motor of her car. She leaned against the fender, brushing a trickle of perspiration away with her finger, barely aware of the streak of oil she left on her cheek. The faded green paint on the fender was warm under the brilliant afternoon sun; she could feel the heat through the brief shorts and low-necked top she wore. It was the end of June and the summer was a hot one.

Across the driveway in the neighboring yard, two small boys wrestled in the grass with a large sheepdog. She watched the trio for a few minutes, then something in their play alarmed her. "Robbie! Tony!" she called. "Don't tease the dog like that!"

One of the boys looked up. "Oh, Mom," Robbie said, "Beast wouldn't bite me." But he got up from the grass, dusted his shorts off, and found a stick which he tossed for the dog to retrieve.

He was probably right, Layne thought. Beast was the gentlest of all creatures, and he had never turned on his owner, but he was so enormous next to her small son that she had to fear for Robbie sometimes. Being a single parent was really difficult, she thought. She didn't know sometimes if there was anything she was doing right. Being wholly responsible for an eight-year-old was a constant drain.

It was, however, she thought, better than being *without* the eight-year-old. Robbie was not only her son, but her sunshine.

Beast brought the stick and dropped it at her feet, his tongue hanging out and his beady eyes sparkling in anticipation. For once, the thick hair that usually hid his eyes had blown back, and his vision was unhindered.

"I'm not the one who throws sticks, dummy," she told him. "I'm just the one who buys the dog food." Beast reared up and put his paws on her shoulders, and Layne got a whiff of the dog's coat. "Robbie!" she called. "This dog needs a bath!"

Robbie came across the driveway and tossed the stick again. Beast romped off after it, and Robbie said, "Sure, Mom. I'll give him a bath tomorrow." Then he gave her a cheeky grin. "You need one too, Mom. You've got oil on your face. Are you almost finished working on The Tank?"

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Layne raised a hand to wipe the oil off, and only succeeded in smearing it further. "Almost. At least I'll have finished everything I can do."

"Do you have to work today?" he asked.

"Mr. Hamburg brought me some more of his life story to type. But it can wait till this evening if you have plans." She smiled at him and ruffled his dark hair. "What do you want to do? Bake cookies?"

"Not today. Will you come to my Little League game this afternoon? You missed last week."

"Yes, I'll come. But you know I had to go to that job interview last week. It was very important."

"It couldn't have been too important," Robbie argued. "You didn't get the job."

"Even if I didn't, I had to try."

Robbie scuffed his shoes in the dirt. "I don't want you to go back to work in some old office. And I don't want to go to day care."

"I know you don't, Robbie. But someone has to hold a job around here to pay the rent and the grocery bill. And eight years old just isn't big enough to stay alone."

"Yeah, sure." But Robbie's voice was plainly unhappy.

Layne didn't try to explain any further. She had tried so many times, and it always seemed to end up the same.

Robbie loathed day care. It was the main reason she had so hated to lose her last job; as the secretary to a high school principal, she had worked much the same hours as Robbie was in school, and she had even had the same holidays. But the funding for her position had run out, and there would be no job next autumn.

She wasn't looking forward to going back to a nine-to-five office, either—but someone had to put the food on the table. Even the school job hadn't left much for extras; they certainly couldn't live indefinitely without a paycheck of some kind.

So she hugged Robbie and ruffled his black hair, and turned to check the oil can to see if it was empty. The Tank seemed to drink oil. But it was transportation, she reminded herself, even if it was old and used too much gasoline and was rusting out.

"Dad's picture was in this morning's paper," Robbie said.

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Layne kept her face turned away and her voice carefully casual. "Was it?" She checked the tension on the fan belt.

"Yeah. They opened North Winds Shopping Mall yesterday. He was the one who built it, you know. Emco had all the contracts." There was pride in his voice.

"Yes, I know." She thought, *How could I avoid knowing?* Robbie had watched the progress of that construction for the past two years. He hadn't missed a single news item about it. North Winds was the prototype of a new approach to shopping mall construction; it was supposed to sweep the country within ten years. So it wasn't surprising that when dedication day came around, the man who had built it would be asked to cut the official ribbon. She should have expected it.

The man who had built everything worth knowing about in the Kansas City area for the last five years. Kyle Emerson, the head of Emco, which, as Robbie had told her so often, was the biggest construction company in the Midwest.

Why, Layne asked herself, had she ever told Robbie about his father? And then she reminded herself that she hadn't actually told him at all. Robbie had made the connection himself two years ago. The fact that a first-grader had been so quick to draw a perfectly accurate conclusion had startled her so that she had confirmed his suspicions before she had even paused to think. If she had only taken that extra moment...

Robbie had been home from school, suffering from a virus. He had been watching the noon news while waiting for the cartoons to start, when Kyle Emerson had been interviewed about his new shopping center project. Robbie had been transfixed, then he had called, "Mom! Come see this guy who looks just like me!"

And as Layne, without any warning, found herself face to face with the image of Kyle Emerson, Robbie had said, "His name is Emerson, too. Is he my father?"

And Layne had murmured, "Yes, Robbie."

She could kick herself now, of course. If she could have foreseen what Robbie would do, she might have lied to him. For instantly he had become a TV news freak and the youngest steady reader of the Kansas City *Star*, searching for the next mention of Kyle Emerson for his scrapbook.

Robbie's playmate had gone back into his house next door, and now his mother leaned out of the casement window above her kitchen sink and called, "Hey, you two, I just took chocolate chip cookies out of the oven."

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“Can I go have some?” Robbie asked. “Clare makes the best cookies.”

“Better than ours?” she teased.

“Heck, no. But next best. And she makes them more often.”

Layne laughed. “Sure, Rob. Tell Clare I’ll be there in a minute.” She checked the battery, and fingered the cable connections, and wished that she had told Robbie that there were hundreds of men named Emerson in Kansas City, and that she’d never heard of one named Kyle.

The casement window opened again. “You’d better hurry, Layne,” Clare Reynolds called. “Your coffee is poured.”

Layne slammed the hood of The Tank and crossed the driveway. Clare was already sitting at the kitchen table with her coffee. She pushed Layne’s cup and the plate of cookies towards her.

“The boys took their snack to the rec room,” she said. “Which leaves you free to tell me what that gloomy expression on your face means. What’s wrong, Layne?”

“Nothing. Everything.” Layne bit into a cookie, and still-melting chocolate chips oozed out. “There are no job prospects yet, and it’s really beginning to bother me. I thought I had it all planned, and we’ve been careful what we spent, ever since I found out I’d be laid off. But it just takes more money than I figured on.”

“It has a habit of doing that,” Clare said. “Is there any possibility the school district will call you back?”

“Perhaps. But I’m afraid to count on it, Clare. What if they don’t have an opening? They won’t, unless someone retires or takes another job. And there just aren’t many secretarial positions in the schools.”

Clare nodded. “I know. What about the private typing business?”

“It’s picking up. I even made a hundred dollars last week on a book manuscript.”

“Only a hundred?”

“It was a short book. That helped to pay for the repairs The Tank had to have last month. And there’s always Mr. Hamburg’s life story. It must be going into the third volume.”

“Now if he’ll just pay you,” Clare said dryly. “I put up some more flyers yesterday when I was shopping.”

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“I keep thinking that perhaps we can make it through the summer on what the typing will bring in. After all, the bills aren’t as big.”

“Come to think of it, I have a friend who belongs to a writers’ club. I’ll call her. It might not be a book a week, but there should be something.” Clare stirred her coffee moodily. “Robbie seems happy to have you at home.”

“Of course he is. He hates it when I go for interviews or even talk about getting another job. It’s one long continual battle.”

“Having you home so much has spoiled him.”

“That’s not all—it spoiled me too. Being off work at three every afternoon was awfully nice. I don’t want to go back to a regular job any more than Robbie wants me to.”

“Layne, is something bothering him?”

“Nothing more than the idea of going back to day care, as far as I know.” She sipped her coffee and added reluctantly, “He’s talking about his father again.”

Clare got up and refilled her cup. “He’s a boy, Layne. And he’s old enough to realize that even the kids who have divorced parents see their dads once in a while.”

“So does Robbie,” Layne muttered sarcastically. “In the newspaper, which he reads word-for-word every day.”

“Robbie doesn’t understand why he never actually sees his dad. So he talks about him to prove that Kyle isn’t just in his imagination.”

“You make it sound so simple, Clare.”

“Did you see the picture?” Clare reached for the newspaper on the counter.

“No. I can live without the experience.” But Layne took the paper anyway.

The story was at the top of the front page, with a banner headline; North Winds was an important development, and it had received nationwide publicity. She didn’t want to look at the photograph, but another part of her couldn’t look away. There in living color on the front page was Kyle, his black hair ruffling in the breeze as he cut the ribbon across the main doors of the North Winds Mall.

He hadn’t changed, Layne told herself. Oh, that might be a trace of white in the hair at his temples—it was difficult to tell in the grainy newspaper photo. And

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there were two deep lines between his eyes as he frowned over the wide red ribbon. But otherwise, everything was the same. He was still just as handsome as he had been nine years ago.

And there was another thing that hadn't changed, Layne told herself as she looked closer at the photograph. Beside him was Jessica Tate, one hand raised to keep her wide-brimmed hat from fluttering off in the breeze, the other under Kyle's on the big shears. She was smiling, and she was beautiful.

The agony of that last afternoon at Wheatlands swept over Layne in waves. That afternoon that Jessica Tate had told her the truth...

Layne pushed the hurt to the back of her mind and read the caption. Jessica owned a string of boutiques, including a new one in North Winds Mall. To most people, it would explain why she was beside Kyle, acting as if she belonged there. Layne knew better.

Clare propped her hands on the table and rested her chin on them. "Why don't you call Kyle?" she asked gently. "I can't believe that he would want you and Robbie to be living like this. And he can certainly afford to pay child support."

"Not if he's entertaining Jessica Tate, he can't. That lady is *expensive*. And you know that if Kyle finds out about Robbie, he'll take him away from me."

Clare took a deep breath. "Would that be so awful for Robbie?" she asked gently.

"Robbie is a gifted child, Clare. He's a brilliant child."

"I know that. That's exactly what I mean. He needs additional advantages that you can't give him. You can't send him to private school, Layne, or to summer camp. And what about college? I know it's a long way off, but surely you want the best for Robbie. What can you give him, compared to what his father can do for him?"

"I can love him," Layne cried. "Love him because he's Robbie, not just because he's an Emerson." She buried her head in her arms on the table. Great choking sobs tore at her throat.

Clare sighed and lit a cigarette. She tapped it on the edge of the crystal ashtray and waited for Layne's sobs to quiet. Then she patted her friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey. You're right, of course. But I hurt so, watching you struggle to provide for Robbie when Kyle could do it so easily. When he *ought* to be doing it." She stroked Layne's hair.

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“What’s the matter, Mom?” Robbie asked at Layne’s elbow.

She raised her head and gave him a watery smile. “Oh, honey, sometimes I just get scared when I think about things.”

“Oh.” He thought that over for a moment and dismissed it. “Are you still coming to the game?”

“Is it time?” Layne glanced at her watch. “Run home and get your uniform on. We’ll have to hurry.”

Robbie ducked out the door. Layne dashed a hand across her eyes, where tears still pooled. “Clare...”

“I know. I’m sorry, and I won’t bring it up again, even though I think...” She stopped and shook her head. “I’ll *try* not to bring it up,” she said ruefully. “All right? Now you’d better hurry, too. And wash the streak of oil off your cheek before you go!”

Layne sat down on the top bleacher, off in a corner by herself. She didn’t feel like being near anyone; the tears had been too recent, and she was afraid that they might start again if anybody so much as asked her what was new.

Down on the field, Robbie’s team was warming up. The blue-and-gold uniforms of Robbie and his fellow Angels stood out against the red and white of the opposing team. She saw Robbie talking to his coach, then the man looked up at the stands and waved at Layne. She waved back, pushed her dark glasses up, and hoped that he wouldn’t come up to say hello just now. She hated to have anyone see her cry, and if Gary Spencer showed an ounce of concern or sympathy, she’d break down all over again.

So she watched the team warm up. Robbie seemed so young to be in organized sports, Layne thought, but he adored baseball, so she had given in. At least he hadn’t chosen a violent sport like football.

She had not been surprised that baseball had been Robbie’s choice, for hadn’t Kyle told her once that it was the sport of gentlemen? Emco’s employees had a team, that summer so long ago. Kyle played shortstop, and he’d taken her to all the games. Layne, at seventeen, had been so blinded by his charm that she wouldn’t

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have cared if he had expected her to be third base, as long as she could be with him.

Yes, she thought, Robbie was definitely his father's son. No wonder he had been so certain the day he'd first seen Kyle on the television screen.

The team's coach was beside her before she was aware he was near. "I'm glad you're here, Layne," Gary said. "Rob really missed you last week. He stole second base, you know, and he wanted you to see him."

"He told me. He was very proud of himself."

"The boy has the makings of a good athlete. If he keeps developing as he has over the past year, I wouldn't be surprised to see him a star on my high-school team. And then who knows?"

"I think eight years old is a little young to be signing him with the Royals, Gary," Layne said tartly.

Her response startled him. "Well, yes. But I can dream, can't I? I don't say anything to him about it."

"I didn't mean to be sharp with you. But I've never been very comfortable about baseball being a profession."

"I see what you mean. Half my team thinks they're going to be stars in pro ball," Gary mused. "Is something wrong, Layne? You look a little unusual."

Layne self-consciously straightened her dark glasses and looked out over the field. "It's just been a hard day."

Gary looked relieved. "I'm glad it isn't anything I did. I'll take you and Robbie out for pizza after the game."

"Shouldn't we see what the score is, first?"

"Why? If Robbie isn't celebrating a victory, he'll need consolation for a loss."

Layne smiled reluctantly. Gary was good for her, she admitted; sometimes he almost forced her into doing things, but she always ended up enjoying herself. "You're right. And Robbie can always eat pizza."

Gary glanced down at the field. "I'd better get down to my boys. I'm shirking my duties."

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The game started, and Layne watched the action with only half her mind. She was remembering other days, and other games.

It seemed to her that fully half of Kyle's brief courtship had taken place at the ballpark. Either he was on the field and Layne was watching from the bleachers, or they were in the stands at the professional games, eating hot dogs and cheering Kyle's favorites. Layne hadn't cared who won or lost, but she minded very much when he was unhappy.

Baseball had never been her passion. She was certain, however, that Kyle had never suspected her lack of interest in the sport. She had bought books, learned to read base scores, studied all the players, in an effort to be what he wanted her to be.

It wouldn't have mattered what he wanted to do. If Kyle had wanted to hunt elephants in darkest Africa, she thought, she would have been waiting at his elbow to hold his gun. Layne had been so thrilled at seventeen to be noticed by the older, handsome and frankly sexy Kyle that she would have done anything to please him.

How very much she had grown up over the last eight years, she thought a little sadly. She couldn't help wondering just a bit what Kyle would think of her now. Had he missed the little wife who would have breathed for him if it had only been possible? After all, the honeymoon had scarcely been over. Or had he been relieved when she disappeared from his life?

Had her clinging love smothered him? *That's funny*, Layne thought. *The idea never occurred to me before.*

Robbie hit safely into right field and easily beat the throw to first base, hitching up his uniform with a flair as the ball arrived ten seconds after him.

"He's a bit of a showoff," Layne muttered as he looked towards the dugout for approval. Gary must have supplied it, for Robbie pulled his cap down tight over his ears with a swagger, turned his attention to the pitcher, and paced off a two-yard lead towards second base. Layne watched him, but her thoughts were in the past.

She had adored Kyle so blindly that it never occurred to her to wonder just what it was about her that he found attractive. He'd actually treated her like a little sister much of the time, dragging her along on his outings with the guys. He had said that being alone with her was too much temptation. Had he been telling the truth?

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Why, she wondered now, had she not questioned his reasons when he asked her to marry him? But she had been so eager to be his wife that nothing could have stopped her.

A world of illusion it was that she had lived in, she knew now. Jessica Tate had left her illusions in shreds that dreadful day in the library at Wheatlands.

A cheer went up from the crowd, and Layne's attention snapped back to the field. Robbie had stolen second base; he was dusting the dirt collected by his slide off his uniform. He retrieved his cap and took a graceful bow towards the stands.

"What a little actor!" Layne told herself. And no wonder that his uniform was so hard to keep clean. It was one gigantic streak of dirt up the left side. Thank heaven whoever was in charge of uniforms hadn't chosen white ones.

The inning ended with Robbie stranded at third, and the Angels took the field. The game dragged on, and Layne yawned in the stands. The sun beat down mercilessly, and she wished that she had remembered to pick up her sunscreen lotion. She brushed a hand experimentally across the back of her neck; the skin felt hot and tight.

Kyle used to tease her about how easily she sunburned. It was amazing, he used to say, that he was actually the fair-skinned one, but he tanned and she burned. But that was because of all the hours he'd spent in the sun in the days when he was just a construction worker instead of the owner of the business...

Why was she wasting so much time thinking about Kyle today? Layne asked herself, and decided that it was only because Robbie had brought the subject up.

It was Robbie's turn at bat again, and this time he scarcely beat the throw to first base. But the umpire signaled that he was safe, and Robbie pulled his cap down tight and took his lead off the base.

"The little brat is going to try it again," Layne thought, and watched half-admiringly as Robbie inched himself into a position to steal. The pitcher eyed him suspiciously before going into his wind-up. The instant the ball was released, Robbie was off in a blur of blue-and-gold uniform and dust from the path, sliding the last six feet into second base—and the second baseman. The crowd went wild. Even the opposing team's fans realized that here was something unusual and cheered the accomplishment.

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It was close, so close that the umpire hadn't yet ruled when Robbie popped back to his feet. Then, it seemed to Layne, two things happened simultaneously. The umpire swept his arms out to signal that Robbie had made it in time, and the child dropped to the ground in a heap like a rag doll tossed aside by a child at play.

Layne broke the Little League record for fastest time in the downhill bleachers and reached the field only an instant behind Gary. She peered over the coach's shoulder at her son's face. He'd lost his cap somewhere on the run, and his dark hair was ruffled. The freckles that dusted his nose stood out like puddles against paper-white skin, and his eyes were dark with pain.

"Mom?" he questioned with a catch in his voice.

"I'm right here, Robbie." Layne took his hand, and Robbie sighed and closed his eyes against the pain.

"It's his ankle, Layne," Gary said. His eyes met hers; they were full of concern.

"A sprain?"

"Probably. But I think we should have it X-rayed. Where's your car?"

"It's right by the gate."

"I'll bring Robbie." He cradled the child in his arms and carried him to The Tank, carefully strapping him into the back seat. "I'd come with you, but..."

"That's all right. The rest of the boys need you."

"I'll stop by the house after the game to see how he is."

"Thanks, Gary." Layne was shaking a little as she started the car. This was exactly what she didn't need right now, she thought. Emergency room, X-rays – and no insurance to cover the cost. Why had Robbie tried that darn fool stunt? she thought, and then scolded herself for letting it cross her mind. Robbie hadn't done it on purpose.

He looked a little better; the color was starting to come back to his face. "How are you feeling, Rob?" she asked.

"It hurts, Mom. When I tried to get up, my foot just wouldn't hold me." He winced. "Was I safe?"

"You were safe."

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Robbie cheered up. "That's okay then. Gary can put in a pinch runner. He'll probably pick Tom because he's the fastest runner on the team. After me, that is."

"I'm sure Gary will figure something out."

An orderly saw them coming and met them with a wheelchair. Robbie was already in the radiology department by the time Layne had the forms filled out, and she sat in the waiting room, her hands clenched, till the X-rays were completed.

Robbie chattered as the orderly wheeled him back down the hall. "I broke my record," he bragged. "The most I ever stole before was one base in a game. Today I got two." His leg was propped up on the chair's footrest. "Isn't this neat, Mom? They took pictures of my ankle."

Layne didn't trust herself to answer.

A few minutes later a young man in a lab coat came down the hall. "Mrs. Emerson?" he said, and Layne thought he looked slightly surprised when she answered. Let him wonder, she thought. She *was* young to be the mother of an eight-year-old, and the shorts and low-necked top she wore didn't make her look any older. She followed him into an office where an X-ray hung on a light box.

"All Robbie cares about is that he broke his record," she said, a little nervously.

He glanced at her and flipped the switch. "Yes. Well, he also broke his ankle." He took a pen from his pocket and pointed out a faint shadow on the X-ray. "Right here. He did a good job of it, too. He'll need to be in a cast for four to six weeks."

Layne sat down abruptly in the nearest chair. "That will kill him. Isn't there any alternative?"

"None. I imagine he'll adjust quickly. Most kids do. By the second day there isn't anyplace they won't go on their crutches. If it's any consolation, it would be more painful if he'd just sprained it, and ligaments are slower to heal than bone is. As it is, a month or so and he'll be good as new." He turned the light box off. "Do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

"You may have the pleasure." No baseball, no swimming, no running about the neighborhood... It was going to be a very long month.

"I'll refer you to an orthopedic surgeon."

"Surgeon?" Layne's voice was sharp with alarm.

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“That doesn’t mean Robbie needs surgery, Mrs. Emerson, but you should have the fracture X-rayed again in a week or so to be sure it’s healing properly. The doctor can do that right in his office, through the cast. Then he’ll give you a better idea of when the cast can be removed. We specialize in putting plaster on around here, not taking it off.” He gave Layne a crooked smile and a slip of paper.

She looked at it. “Are his fees expensive?”

The young doctor looked surprised. “Yes, I suppose they are. You could take him to your own family doctor, of course, and perhaps it would be a little cheaper. But if it were my kid, I’d go for the best. He’s only eight years old. You want somebody taking care of that fracture who can make sure he won’t have lasting damage.”

Layne nodded and tucked the slip of paper in the pocket of her shorts. *Oh, Robbie,* she thought, *what in heaven are we going to do?*