

Chapter 1

Tanner Brice liked the room he'd set up for himself. It was actually a spare room in his mom and stepdad's apartment. The family had once used it for storage.

The space was tiny. But it was his. That was important to Tanner. It was better than having to share a bedroom with his half-brother. Damon was an annoying kid. The fourteen-year-old was just like Tanner's stepdad, Floyd. The two even looked alike. They were both short and muscular. Just the opposite of Tanner and his father. The truth was Tanner had never liked Damon or Floyd.

Mom had married Floyd Richards just

nine months after Dad died. He'd been killed in a hit-and-run accident when he was only four. When he got a little older, Tanner had begun to wonder why his mom would remarry so soon. It had seemed a little suspicious.

What was it about Floyd that appealed so much to mom? Or had Floyd worked his way into Mom's life for a reason other than love? Tanner didn't trust the man.

Floyd was nothing like Tanner's father. Tanner remembered his dad as being a kind man and a good father. His dad was also good-looking. Tall and well-built. His eyes were dark brown. And he had a great smile. Tanner kept a photo of his father on his dresser.

Dad had worked hard for a living. Floyd was a scammer. He'd said his job was in sales. But the products he sold weren't from stores. They were ordered online. There were things like diet pills and cleaning supplies. Tanner wondered if they might even be fake.

He'd looked at some of the labels once. The expiration dates had passed.

It was embarrassing the way Floyd would try to get the neighbors involved. He'd ask them to be part of his business schemes. They'd have to hold parties and sell the products to people they knew. There was little in it for them. Floyd kept most of the money.

Tanner had never felt part of his new family. And he couldn't wait to be out on his own. First he had to finish school. He'd nearly completed a two-year auto repair program at the community college. His grades had been good. And his instructors were impressed with his skills. He could make good money as a mechanic.

After he got his certificate, he could get his own apartment. He'd already saved some money from his part-time job at a place that did oil changes.



Tanner was on his way out the door. That's

when he heard his mom and stepdad talking in the bedroom.

“You look so beautiful this morning,” Floyd was saying.

The sound of his voice made Tanner sick. What did his mother see in that man? Tanner had always been a little angry at her for marrying him. How could she have settled for such a loser? Especially after being married to a good man like his dad.

“Come on, Floyd,” Mom said. “I have to get dressed for work.”

She was a checker at a grocery store. The job didn’t pay well. But she still brought home more money than Floyd, even with all his businesses.

“But I don’t want to let you go,” Floyd said. “Can’t you stay here with me today?”

The way he said it sounded so sleazy. But his stepdad was right about one thing. Mom *was* beautiful. And she looked much younger than her age. People seeing

them out together often thought she was Tanner's older sister. It made him feel proud.

Mom was flirting back with Floyd. "Oh, come on," she said. "We've been together for eighteen years. You're telling me that I'm still that attractive to you?"

The words *eighteen years* had caught Tanner's attention. They couldn't have been together that long. His father had died sixteen years ago. Mom had always said she'd met Floyd *after* Dad died. Unless that had been a lie.

The story Tanner had been told was that Floyd sold life insurance back then. Before his death, Tanner's dad had bought some insurance. Then Dad died. And Mom had to meet with Floyd to get the money. That's what brought them together. They started dating soon after.

Now it seemed there was a whole different story. Mom may have known Floyd while

Dad was still living. What was that about? The thought was making Tanner mad. It only added to his suspicions.

“Damon,” Mom called. “We need to get going. Finish your breakfast and get ready for school. You don’t want to be late again, do you?”

“Yeah,” Floyd said. “Didn’t you get locked out of a class the last time you were late?”

“Getting locked out of history is always a good thing,” Damon said. He grabbed his backpack and went outside.

Damon and Floyd had now both left the house. Tanner and his mom were alone in the kitchen.

“Mom,” Tanner said. “How long did you and Floyd know each other before you got married?”

She set her coffee cup on the counter. “You know the answer to that, Tanner. We’ve talked about it. I met Floyd after your father died. He was the one who handled

your dad's insurance. What does it matter after all these years?"

"I just heard you say that you and Floyd have known each other for eighteen years. But Dad was still alive then," Tanner said. "Did you know Floyd before Dad was killed?"

"Oh, Tanner," Mom said with a sigh. "I just misspoke. I'm not sure where this is coming from. But you're worrying for nothing."

Tanner wasn't convinced. His mother was putting up a good front. But he could swear that she was hiding something. Maybe she'd been hiding it for eighteen years.