

Chapter One

Destiny Bridges slid her nine-year-old daughter Sophia a glass of milk across the kitchen island where she sat playing with her cereal. “You need to hurry up, sweetie,” she said. “We agreed that if I didn’t make you go back to school we would stick to a proper schedule and make sure we get the work done, so you don’t fall behind. You have to start your computer study program today.” Watching Sophia sort the little circles of her Cheerios into varying shades of brown was making her crazy, she just knew what was coming. First the sighing and the mucking about with her food, it was only a matter of time until the whining started. On cue, Sophia began.

“I don’t want to do any school work today, Mommy, I’m tired,” Sophia said with a yawn. “This is so early and if we don’t actually have to get to school on time, I don’t see what all the rush is about.”

The yawning was a nice touch and a little distraction from the norm. “Oh? Maybe you should have an early night tonight, catch up on your rest.”

“It’s not the not enough sleep kind of tired. How about this? I have a good idea. Today we just chill a little, maybe watch a movie and tomorrow I’ll do double the lessons. Or, I could do it later tonight? You know I’m more of a night owl than a morning person; everything is easier for me in the night time.” Sophia gave her mom her best doe eyed, innocent look.

“Just eat your breakfast, honey,” Destiny said. “You’re just playing with it.”

“I don’t like this kind, Mom.” She dropped the spoon into the bowl, making a loud clang and splashing milk all over the counter. “It tastes kind of drab. There isn’t even any color. It’s all brown; not the good chocolate colored brown but ordinary boring brown.”

“Your cereal tastes drab?” That was a new word to describe food. “And the color isn’t right?”

“Can’t I have a pop tart? I really feel like a pop tart.”

“If I make you a pop tart, Soph, you have to eat that. This is silly. I don’t want to spend the whole morning making different breakfasts, all of which you refuse to eat.”

“I will eat it if it’s a chocolate one. I *love* chocolate pop tarts.”

Destiny opened the pantry and sighed. “There aren’t any chocolate pop tarts left. We have strawberry, you love the strawberry ones,” she said, wishing not for the first time that she had someone to tag team with. Sophia could be a handful and she had been a pain since she opened her eyes that morning.

“It has to be a strawberry kind of day. Today isn’t a strawberry kind of day. Today is a chocolate day.”

Destiny picked up the bowl of cereal and emptied it into the disposal. “That’s it, Soph, you can go back to bed and come down later when you’re more awake *and* in a happier, more congenial mood,” she said.

“Can I have a cookie to take with me?” Sophia asked. “I know you wouldn’t want me to starve to death just because you forgot to buy chocolate pop tarts.”

“No, you didn’t want your breakfast so you’re not having a cookie.” Seriously, did this child really think that would fly?

“You’re mean,” Sophia said.

“I know; I can’t help it.”

“You know what would be fun?” Sophia asked, still sitting on the same stool; she hadn’t moved at all since her mother had told her to go upstairs.

“What would be fun, Soph?” Destiny knew her daughter was being stubborn and manipulative but she loved her so much that she found it hard to be stern with her. There was so much of her father in her. Sophie had her dad’s light brown hair and hazel eyes. When she had this look of innocence on her sweet little face though, she could see herself in her. That face could put a shine on her worst behavior. She wouldn’t be sorry to see the back of this particular phase though. It seemed like she was getting harder to get along with every day. Although Destiny hated to admit it, this might have been the reason for so many, “doesn’t play well with others” comments on her report card.

“A pedicure and brunch,” Sophia said. Now she jumped off the stool and came up to hug her mom. “Please, Mommy, please? One more day of summer and then we can do the learning thing tomorrow. One more day won’t make a difference will it? Think how refreshed we’d feel after we have our nails done.”

Destiny found it really hard to say no to her daughter when she was acting so cute and sweet. She was a sucker for being called mommy and not mom. “Okay, one last day and then that’s

it, we'll need to buckle down and get stuff done. I mean it, Soph, you have to promise me, no more of this, manipulation.”

“What’s manipulation mean?”

“It means you don’t try and talk me into stuff that you shouldn’t be doing. Now, go brush your hair again and we’ll go.” Okay, so she had willingly let herself be manipulated by a nine-year-old. It was a good idea and her nails were sorely in need of attention.

She watched her daughter run up the stairs happily. It was one hooky day, what difference would one more day make? What difference would it make indeed? It was those very words that had started this whole motherhood journey in the first place.

Sophia’s father had taken Destiny on a date when he was home for the summer from college and she was just about to start her freshman year. They were both broke so it wasn’t anything fancy, just a trip to the drive-in. If you could call sitting *near* the drive-in, going to the drive-in. It was a hill *behind* the drive-in where you could still see the movie from the car. It didn’t matter much anyway about the lack of sound; they hardly even saw the movie. By the second scene they were usually making out anyway...

He pulled a lever and the seat dropped all the way back. Destiny wasted no time shifting her position so she was on top. Her panties had long gone in a tangle of legs and desperate hands that can only come with trying to do the deed in a car, preferably without being seen. Although, that was by no means top of the list of priorities. Most teens occupying the other old cars with fogged up windows were similarly involved and couldn’t care less what she and Justin were doing. Like Justin and her, they were consumed with their own lust. As she straddled him, he clutched her soft cheeks hard, his fingernails digging into her flesh and making her bottom sting. She threw her head back, savoring the delicious feeling as he sunk deep inside her. “Oh Justin, yes.” Then she blinked, suddenly aware of the risk they were taking. “You didn’t use a condom.”

Justin let out a frustrated groan. “I didn’t get a chance; you want to stop?”

She thrust one of her nipples towards his lips to distract him. “No, God no, please don’t stop. Once won’t hurt.”

“Famous last words,” she said out loud.

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Justin Alexander arranged his personal things on his new desk. He *wished* the photo of his nearly eight-year-old daughter Lily-Grace could take pride of place in the very center of his desk where he could easily see it, but she was a student at the school and it wouldn't be fair to the other students or to her. His biggest hope for her was that she would blend in and not become the principal's daughter. For another student to see her photo when they were in his office was unprofessional and wouldn't be doing Lily-Grace any favors. Instead of a place on the desk where everyone else could see it, the photo was carefully placed in his top drawer where only *he* could look at it any time he wanted.

Benson East Elementary, seemed like it was still a nice school. The teachers that he'd met so far were friendly and seemed like a dedicated lot, just the kind of staff he wanted. It was definitely a different experience to end up principal of a school where you were once a student. Not a lot seemed to have changed though, not in the buildings and not really in the children. Those that he had addressed at the morning welcome back assembly seemed, well, excited to see each other and happy. He was certain they'd settle down in the coming days. This was the best part of small town schools; no drama. He opened the large book of policies that was on his desk and started skimming the contents. It was time he reacquainted himself with the way this school ran now. A lot was sure to have changed since his early days there.

"Come in," Justin said in answer to the knock on the door. His secretary was a young woman, looked to be in about her early twenties and she looked absolutely terrified of him. Was he really so scary?

"Mr. Alexander, I've just received a phone call from a parent. I tried to transfer the call but she said there was no need," the young woman said. "She just asked me to pass on a message."

"Katie, call me Justin, please. Was there a problem? What was the message?"

"Yes, sir, I mean Justin. Last year there was kind of an ongoing problem with the woman, Mrs. Bridges' daughter, Sophia. I mean the problem was with the daughter but also with the mother. She was always sticking her nose in; blaming the other kids, telling the teachers how they should teach and what was wrong with the way they disciplined Sophia."

"Oh?"

“Maybe you better read the child’s file,” Katie said. “I tried to tell her that I wasn’t really the person she should be talking to but she hung up on me before I could transfer the call. She just said tell the principal that Sophia won’t be needing a place in the school this year.”

“I see.” He quickly scanned the file that Katie handed him, although he *did* intend to have a better look, especially when he saw who the mother was. He frowned. “The mother is Destiny Bridges?” Well, that was either an enormous coincidence or he knew the person; well. More than well, they had been an item for a few years back when they were in school.

“Yes, and the daughter is Sophia Alexis Bridges.” Katie pointed to the file. “As you can see, there were many incidents in the year that she was at this school and the transcripts from her last school in Florida weren’t a lot better.”

“It says here that her mother believes she is misunderstood?” Hmm, so she is an overprotective pain in the ass huh? Figures. She always was a little hot tempered herself if she didn’t get her own way. Not a big surprise that her daughter was shaping up the same way. He had to wonder what she looked like now, the mother, that is, not the daughter. Pain in the ass as she’d been, they had dated for years and he’d loved Destiny; she had broken his heart. Justin had never really gotten over her.

“Seems so,” Katie said. “Anyway, I’ll leave you with the file.”

“Just one last thing, Katie? Did she ask for Sophia’s transcripts to be sent to the next school?”

“There isn’t going to be a next school. She is not bringing the child back to school this year. She thinks she can better educate her at home, away from all the negativity and hoo-ha.”

“Thank you, Katie,” Justin said. Damn, he spoke too soon and jinxed himself. This situation had drama written all over it. The mother did anyway. Taking the file at face value, he would have pretty much guaranteed this mother was the one at the bottom of all the drama anyway. Helicopter parenting was alive and well in the small town of Benson East. As a teacher he had seen it all before; as Destiny’s one-time boyfriend, he had seen similar behavior from her, although back then she was still practically a kid herself, not a parent...

“I can’t just come back home, Destiny,” Justin said. “I have to prepare for the new school year and start working a few shifts before class begins. I have books to buy.”

“It’s important Justin. I need to see you,” Destiny said. “I knew it would be like this, out of sight, out of mind.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t want to listen to you, honey, just tell me what all this is about now.”

“I can’t tell you. I just need to see you so I can tell you in person.”

“Then it can’t be that important. Destiny, I love you, honey, but you should be preparing yourself for college. We’ll see each other again in the fall. There might even be a weekend we can get together some time before then but not just now when I’ve only just come back to school.”

“I hate you,” she said and the phone went dead.

And after all that they had been through for a number of years, it was over. The next he’d heard from Destiny she was telling him she’d met someone else. It was probably Sophia’s father, now that he thought about it. Yep, had always had pain in the ass tendencies and it didn’t look like anything had changed or *was going* to change in the near future. Now he had to decide what was he going to do about it. As much as he’d like to take the mother to task and tan some sense into her stubborn and irresponsible backside, the daughter, Sophia had to be his priority. There had to be something he could do to get this child back to school where she belonged, and to help her try to fit in. As a teacher, well, now as a principal, he believed in the whole school experience and he was sure with some support and some set expectations he could get this child back into the system and learning. All he had to do was convince her mother. That could be the hardest job of all.

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Destiny applied the finishing touches to her makeup with Sophia standing next to her doing the same. Some people frowned on the idea of a nine-year-old wearing a little make up but Destiny thought they were being over dramatic. Seriously, if it made the child feel good about herself to have brighter, more defined eyes and shiny lips, what did it hurt anyone else? It was all about self-esteem; being and looking the best that you possibly could. As a mother, she was proud of her little girl; she was a beautiful child inside and out, even if she did sometimes keep the inside bit well hidden. “Time to go, honey bunch,” she said.

“I just need to get my phone,” Sophia said.

“Oh, I wonder who that could be,” Destiny said with frustration, snapping her make-up purse shut and going to answer the door. As soon as you are about to leave the house, someone

knocks. She pulled open the front door and just about swallowed her tongue when she gasped, coughed and spluttered all at the same time. “Justin, oh my Lord,” she answered breathily. It was all she could do to get out a few words let alone get them out into a sentence that made a modicum of sense. She wanted to slam the door in his face and run and hide, at the very least tell Sophia to run and hide. This was bad, really bad but he was standing in front of her, in her doorway; she would have to say something. He beat her to the punch but he wasn’t any more articulate than she was.

“Hi,” he said. “I, ah um, came to talk to you.”

No shit Sherlock, she thought. Obviously he must have a reason to be there. Ask him you ninny, she thought. “What do you want?” He blinked and she wondered if she’d offended him, well who cares if she did? She wanted him out of there as fast as possible, before he ran into the one person she didn’t want him to meet.

“Like I said, I came to talk to you.”

His eyes roamed all over her and she wished she could make out what it was he was seeing. She didn’t care anyway, what he thought, really she didn’t but it would be nice to know if he thought she’d improved with time. She *was* only twenty-eight but she had had a child since she had seen him last. “Look, I’m a bit busy to catch up right now,” she said, trying to close the door. It was too late; Sophia was beside her.

“Aren’t we going out, Mom?” she asked, glaring at the unwelcome visitor who was holding up their day.

“Yes, we are, honey,” Destiny said, smiling at her daughter with a flicker of guilt. This was a life changing moment for two people and neither of them had any idea it was even happening. “As you can see, we were about to go out.”

“We’re having brunch and getting our nails done,” Sophia said helpfully.

“Are you indeed?” Justin asked. “I’m still going to need to have a word Destiny, Mrs. Bridges, in private if that’s okay.”

“It’s not okay, we were just leaving,” Sophia said with a pout.

Mrs. Bridges? That sounded like her mother. “I’m still Destiny,” she said. “Do you have to be so formal?” His matter of fact tone hurt her feelings more than she would like to admit, even to herself.

“This is not exactly a social call, Destiny,” he said. “I need to talk to you now and it’s business, at least from my end.” His eyes shifted back and forth from Destiny to Sophia.

Destiny sighed. “Sophia, wait upstairs please,” she said.

“No, it’s not fair, you said we were going, you promised!” Sophia stomped her foot.

“I just need a minute to talk to my daughter,” Destiny said, hustling her little girl into the house.

“Sophia,” Destiny said. “If you do as I ask and wait upstairs until I call you, then after we get our nails done, I’ll take you shopping and you can choose something nice, okay?” Not her best parenting moment, but she didn’t want to have a knock down drag out war with the child in front of Justin. Her head was spinning; he was still as gorgeous as he always had been, better even and he was here, standing at her door while she demonstrated how out of control she was as a parent. “Sophia, upstairs please, now.”

“Okay, I’m going but you better not change your mind or say it has to be a book or something.”

Destiny closed her eyes. She really had to do something with that child. She plastered a fake smile on her face and walked back to the door. “Now, what is it you need to tell me?”

“Maybe I could come in?” he said. “I mean, this isn’t easy to talk about on the doorstep.”

“Sure,” Destiny said, hoping she had left the house tidy enough. She opened the door wider and allowed him to pass. “I’m sure you remember the way,” she said.

“I sure do. Your Mom and Dad aren’t here?” he asked.

“My parents passed away,” she answered, “within six months of each other, actually. That’s why we’ve come back to live here in the old house.”

“I’m so sorry, Destiny, I didn’t know. I’ve only just come back to Benson myself. My daughter and I moved back the last couple of weeks before the end of summer.”

“Oh, you have a daughter?” She felt like she’d been stabbed in the heart. She knew he’d moved on, but she didn’t know he had a child. That hurt.

“Yes, Lily-Grace, she’s almost eight.”

“Her mother didn’t come with you? To Benson, I mean.” Was she pumping him to see if he was still with his wife? Who knew, she sure didn’t.

“No, Lily-Grace’s mother passed away when she was two.” He smiled thinly. “Lily-Grace and I manage by ourselves mostly. I came back to be closer to my mom and for a job actually, and that’s partly why I’m here; I’m the new school principal.”

Well, there is an *oh shit* moment, Destiny thought. Now she knew why he was here and she felt a bit of a heel for pumping. “I’m sorry about your wife.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry that Sophia had such a hard time last year that you felt you had to pull her out of school.”

Destiny could feel him watching her, waiting for her answer. Oh well, he was a captive audience, she may as well tell him how she really felt about the school. “She had a really hard time fitting in. The kids were mean to her and the teachers picked on her. It was like everything that happened was her fault,” Destiny said. “I’ve decided that I can better educate my daughter at home.”

“That’s what I’ve been told. Destiny, I really value the whole school experience. It isn’t just about the learning. I would like to try and help Sophia to better fit in at school. I know what it’s like to struggle with being in a new place.”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m happy with my decision. Sophia and I will be just fine.”

“I was hoping we could deal with this nicely and do what’s best for Sophia,” he tried.

“I *am* doing what’s best for Sophia,” she said, trying hard to keep the frustration out of her voice. God, she thought that even more now. She couldn’t have Sophia in that school now that Justin was there as the principal. There was no way. “She’s staying at home with me.”

Justin pressed his lips together in annoyance. “Perhaps Sophia’s father would like to be in on this conversation,” he said.

“I just bet he would like to be in on this conversation, but it just isn’t possible. He’s out of the country with work. He uh, works overseas, in mining. Sophia and I visit him when we can.” She couldn’t even pass that off as a fib. She had just told Justin a bold faced lie, she had good reason though, so she didn’t feel guilty at all.

“I noticed on Sophia’s file that you have the same name as you always did and so does Sophia.”

“Yeah.” She fake giggled, really badly. When was this person going to leave? She didn’t remember Justin being so over the top bossy and inquisitive. “It was really quite the coincidence to meet a guy who shared the same last name as me.”

“I bet,” he said. “Are you sure we couldn’t do some kind of video conference or something. It doesn’t seem right to me that you would make such a life altering decision without the approval of your child’s father.”

“No, I mean, he would like nothing better than to be included in all of Sophia’s life decisions, but I don’t believe there’s a stable Internet connection where he is most of the time.”

“It must be hard for you to stay in touch.”

“It sure is,” she said. Pretty hard to stay in touch with a man who didn’t exist. Some would say it was downright impossible.

“Now, back to business. Have you filled out all the relevant forms to homeschool Sophia? What are the subjects she’s going to be learning?”

“Oh, well I have all the details upstairs in my office,” she said. No need to tell him that her office mostly consisted of a laptop and her bedside table. It had a drawer full of incidental stuff that could be considered office things. She was pretty sure she saw a paper clip in there once. Destiny had definitely opened a file and typed up some notes on what she thought they should cover for the term and she had even purchased an online math and English program. There you go, that might appease him some. “I purchased an online program,” Destiny said proudly.

“Oh, which one did you choose?”

“Which program did I purchase?” she asked. “It has math and some English I think.”

“I meant the name of the program.”

“The name of the program?” See she was very well qualified to teach her daughter. This man had her so rattled that she couldn’t remember anything at all. “Does it matter what the name of the program is? I have all the stuff somewhere.”

“Have you given the district superintendent notice to homeschool? That should have been done by August fifteenth.”

She was so confused, but nodded anyway, she was entwined in so many lies now, what were a few more?

“So when you gave notice, you sent the subject forms and all the other relevant information along with that affidavit?”

“I’m not an idiot,” she spat indignantly. And yet she was doing a pretty decent impression of an idiot, it seemed. She had no clue what affidavit he was talking about.

“I’m curious,” he said.

“You sure are,” she said. *Did I say that out loud?* “I don’t see what the big deal is. People home school their children all the time.”

“If you truly understand what homeschooling is about and you’re committed, why are you and Sophia about to spend the day out having fun? You do realize that your daughter is supposed to be keeping the same school hours as she would if she were attending a public school? If you want to take Sophia to get her nails done and God knows what else, it should be done on the weekend.”

Destiny felt like her head was about to explode, she hadn’t known any of that stuff about all the regulations. Why should she answer to other people about the way she raised her own child? “You listen to me, mister high and mighty principal, Sophia and I do just fine. I don’t need you or anyone else coming into my home and telling me what I can and can’t do with my kid. Now get the hell out of my house!”

“You have just confirmed what I was already thinking,” Justin said. “I know you, Destiny. You might be all grown up now and a mom, but you *still* fire up into a frenzy when you’re lying and backed into a corner. Let me tell you this, I see you and what you’re doing. I won’t let this drop. I am going back to my office and I’m going to check that Sophia is properly registered to be homeschooled.”

“You can’t go prying into my business just because you know me personally,” she said. “It isn’t fair.” Now she sounded like Sophia, great.

Justin leaned in so close that his breath sent tingles right through her. “You are the same spoiled child you were when we were dating. Maybe I should have turned you over my knee and spanked some manners into you way back then. It’s obvious your husband has lost control of his home.” He turned and walked away; the door closed softly behind him.

Tears filled Destiny’s eyes. She had dreamt of Justin coming back into their lives for years. Now, when it had finally happened, he was only there long enough to make sure he made trouble for her. *Could* he really make trouble? Surely there wasn’t a law that could stop her doing what she wanted with her own child.

“Mom,” Sophia called from the bottom of the stairs. “Why did you tell that man lies about my dad?”

Fabulous, now she had to try to explain some of this to Soph, or fob her off if that were possible.