

# MOTHER OF THE YEAR

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TORONTO

## CHAPTER ONE

ATTENTION!

ALL MALES IN THE VAUGHN HOUSEHOLD  
THE RULES FOR THE UPCOMING SUMMER  
SEASON ARE AS FOLLOWS:

1. THERE WILL BE NO MORE HOT WHEELS IN  
THE BATHROOM SINK
2. TOOTHPASTE IS NOT TO BE USED AS  
FINGER PAINT
3. SUBMACHINE GUN NOISES ARE NOT  
ALLOWED BEFORE 7:00 A.M.
4. BROTHERS ARE NOT ENEMIES AND  
SHOULD NOT BE TREATED AS SUCH

EVIE VAUGHN CHEWED on the cap of her pen and surveyed the paper in front of her. Had she forgotten anything?

She chewed harder and shook her head. No, the list looked good. Not too many items, but enough for the summer season.

Evie smiled to herself, doubting that other mothers divided their years into seasons – but the process worked for her. Her job as a high school physical education teacher and extracurricular coach made her think in terms of seasons. It was a division she understood, as did her three sons.

Evie stood and anchored the paper to the refrigerator with a magnet. Sounds of a war in the making drifted from the twins' bedroom. She glanced at her watch – 6:55 a.m. Rule number three definitely needed enforcement.

“Mom! He started it.” The shout greeted her as she entered the first bedroom off the hallway. Danny, her youngest son by four minutes, his carrot-colored hair sticking up in numerous cowlicks, made a beeline for her leg. Yanking on her sweat suit, he turned an entreatingly upward gaze. “You don’t like it when we make war, and I told him.” He pointed a semi-grimy finger at his identical twin, Benji, who ignored them both as he blasted all the bad guys into another dimension with his own slightly cleaner finger.

“Boys.” Evie disengaged Danny’s fingers from her leg one by one. “The new list of rules is on the fridge.” Groans replaced the machine-gun sounds as the twins clutched their middles and fell to the ground. “Adam!” she called. “Take your brothers into the kitchen and read them the new rules.”

“I’m not dressed,” her seventeen-year-old shouted from his room.

“Then get dressed. In ten minutes my car leaves for school.”

She looked down at her sons, who were still playing dead on the floor. One still had on his Batman pajama bottoms; the other wore only Ninja Turtle underwear. With one week left before summer vacation, you would think they’d be used to getting dressed in time for school.

She'd heard them arguing over cereal choices before the sun shone. What had they been doing since?

Evie shrugged. She'd been too busy getting ready for work to notice. As long as no one was crying or bleeding, she counted herself lucky.

"Ten minutes, boys," she repeated. "And you'd better wash those hands, too." She turned away, mumbling, "I know I gave them a bath last night. How did they get dirty between then and now?" As she returned to the kitchen, the frantic scrambling sounds that followed assured her all three boys were racing to get ready.

Picking up her coffee cup, Evie leaned against the counter and took a moment to calm down. Every morning was the same – a flurry of activity to get out of the house and to the school on time. Raising three boys alone wasn't easy, but she did her best.

The death of her husband six years ago had made Evie's dream of a teaching degree a necessity. With the help of her parents, and the money from a small insurance policy, she'd earned her degree at a college near her home of Newsome, Iowa.

When she was offered the position of high school physical education teacher in Oak Grove, a few hours east of Newsome, she'd jumped at the chance. Her boys would at last have a stable home in a good community, free of the memories of their father – his life and his death.

With one dream realized, Evie found a new one. She wanted her children to have college diplomas. If she could land a varsity coaching position, she could put

away enough money to send the boys to college. The events of the coming summer would make or break her dream —

The sound of stampeding elephants in the hallway interrupted her thoughts. The elephants materialized into boys as the twins skidded into the kitchen, followed closely by Adam — tall, wiry and as dark haired as Evie herself.

She smiled over her coffee cup as the two youngest stood in front of the refrigerator, their faces scrunching up in concentration as they tried to read her note.

“The,” Benji said.

“All,” Danny added.

Adam ignored them both and read the rules, putting a hand on the shoulder of each brother as they started to argue.

“But Mom, we *have* to put the Hot Wheels in the sink after we play with them in the tub, so they can drool off,” Danny stated, somewhat cleaner hands planted on his hips.

“What does *em-eny* mean?” Benji asked, snatching his backpack from a chair.

“*Enemy*,” Evie corrected automatically. “It means I’m sick of the fighting. You’re seven years old and in the first grade. I think you can try to get along with your brother.”

Adam snorted. “Right, Mom. That’ll never happen. They were born to beat on each other.”

Evie grabbed her duffel bag and handed Danny his backpack as she herded her three sons out the door. “I just don’t understand why you all can’t be nice to one

another. I never had a brother or sister. I would have loved one."

"That's the problem, Mom. You don't understand. They *like* to fight."

Evie sighed. Adam was right. Benji and Danny lived and breathed conflict. But if anyone outside the family so much as glanced at one of them cross-eyed, they defended each other zealously.

"Can I drive?"

"Huh?" Evie gaped at Adam. He smiled, and her heart skipped a half beat. When he turned on the charm, Adam was the spitting image of his father, a fact that caused her no small alarm. While alive, Ray Vaughn had made countless lives miserable, her own and her sons' at the top of the list. He had used his good looks and charm to get his way, regardless of the consequences.

"Mom?" Adam asked. "Are you all right?"

His eyes, warm, brown, concerned, peered into hers, and Evie relaxed. Adam resembled his father only superficially. Ray had died before he could totally ruin his sons, and Evie had spent the past six years fixing the damage he had managed to accomplish.

"Sure," she said, and tossed Adam the keys. Because of the size of Oak Grove, driver's education was just offered once a year. Therefore Adam, despite being seventeen, had gotten his driver's license only a week earlier. Evie still wasn't used to the change. Her throat tightened as she watched him shepherd the twins into the back seat, then climb behind the wheel. Somewhere along the way he'd become a young man – and she'd been too busy keeping the family afloat to notice.

Blinking back the unaccustomed wetness from her eyes, Evie got into the battered Ford station wagon. The twins were already arguing about who had fastened his seat belt first. Evie tuned them out and concentrated on the road.

The high school stood on a flat stretch of land just a few miles from their house, with the grade school and the middle school on either side. Adam dropped the twins off at the front door of Oak Grove Elementary, and the two raced inside without a backward glance. Then he made the short trip to the high school teachers' parking lot and pulled into Evie's assigned space. He handed her the keys with a grin.

She smiled back and was about to compliment him on his driving, when a flash of red at the corner of her vision made her turn her head. A car skidded into the lot. Before she could warn Adam, he opened his door to get out, and the vehicle – an expensive, foreign sports car – scooted into the parking space next to them, slamming into the door.

Evie instinctively grabbed for her son, but he shook off her protective hand and stepped from the car. She jumped out her side and hurried around to survey the damage.

"Oh, no," she breathed as she took in the mangled driver's door, which tilted crazily, held only by one bent hinge. She winced when she considered the price of a replacement compared with her insurance deductible.

Then the door to the offending sports car opened with a *whoosh* of expertly oiled hinges, and Evie's head

snapped in that direction. “I’ll handle this,” she said to Adam, shushing him when he would have argued.

She stomped around the back of the red car and stood there, foot tapping in impatience, while she waited for the owner to make an appearance.

Tennis shoes the size of small boats hit the ground. Evie stared at them in amazement as the rest of the body followed. Her gaze traveled up, up, up along the black jeans and body-hugging black T-shirt, until she met the eyes of the giant in front of her – ice blue framed by bronzed skin, short, silver-blond hair belying the youth of the face.

Evie couldn’t stop staring. She’d never seen such a large man in her life – or one so striking. Even though she was petite and used to looking up to most people, this man made her neck ache.

He stalked to the front of his car. Evie followed and watched as he bent over and squinted at the damage, which appeared minor from her point of view, then slowly straightened and returned to stand in front of her.

“What are you kids doing in this lot?”

Evie frowned. “Excuse me?”

The man sighed irritably and slammed his car door. Evie jumped at the sound. “*This* lot.” He pointed at the sign directly in front of her car. “The *teachers’* and *visitors’* lot. Shouldn’t you kids park somewhere else?”

Evie stifled a laugh, certain this giant would not be likewise amused. This wasn’t the first time she’d been mistaken for a student. When she wore her sunglasses, as she did now, the telltale lines around her eyes were hidden, creating a more youthful appearance.

"I think you've made a mistake –" she began.

"No, you have, honey. And your boyfriend, too."

He glared at Adam, who stared back without flinching.

"Did you just get your driver's license, kid?"

Evie's amusement died at the man's condescending tone – and she had never taken well to being called "honey" by a stranger. She silenced Adam with a wave of her hand and stepped in front of the mountainous man.

"Listen, mister, you're the one who came tearing in here about fifteen miles over the speed limit. This is a school zone. And *you* hit *our* car. So if anyone should be asking about a driver's license, it's us."

The man looked down at her, and Evie could have sworn she saw a flash of amusement in his cool blue eyes before he frowned and stepped past her to assess the damage. The sight of their demolished door deflated his anger, and his shoulders moved on a silent sigh.

"Hell," he muttered, and reached for his wallet. Turning back to them, he ignored Evie as though she didn't exist and pulled out several bills, which he handed to Adam. "I'm sorry about the car, son. She's right. I should have been more careful. But let me give you some advice. You've got to stand up for yourself in this world. Don't ever let a woman do it for you. Once you lose control in a relationship, it's tough to get it back." After a wink at Evie, who stood speechless, he walked into the school.

"Of all the nerve," Evie sputtered. "Who does he think he is?"

Adam laughed. "I don't know. But he thought you were my girlfriend."

Her son's continued laughter drew Evie's attention away from the school. "Hey, it's not *that* funny. I'm only thirty-five."

Adam eyed the money in his hand, and the laughter stopped. "Mom? Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" He held out the bills.

Evie took them and gasped. Five crisp, new, one-hundred dollar bills lay in her palm.

She looked from her son's wide eyes, to the fire engine-red car, to the front door of the school. Then she crumpled the bills. "Who is that guy?"

JOSEPH SCALOTTA, known as "Joe" among his friends, "Iceman Scalotta" to football fans across the United States and "Wild Man" in too many newspaper stories, entered the central office of Oak Grove High.

The school secretary glanced up from her computer. Her smile froze when she saw the size of the man on the other side of the counter. "M-may I help you?"

"I hope so. I'd like to register my daughter for school in the fall. We've just moved here from Chicago."

The woman nodded and began to gather the appropriate papers. She came to the counter and tossed them toward Joe from a distance of three feet. He slammed his palm down on them before they could skid off and scatter over his tennis shoes. The secretary gave a startled little shriek at the thump his hand produced when it connected with the Formica countertop, and scurried behind her desk.

Joe stifled his irritation. Why did people in Oak Grove treat him as if he were a monster? Didn't they grow big, strapping farm boys in Iowa anymore? Obviously not, from the way everyone gaped at Joe's height and breadth.

The only person not intimidated by him had been that teenybopper in the parking lot. *She'd* stood up to him. She'd even stepped close and tried to argue. Funny, now that he thought about it, she hadn't smelled like a teenager – teenage girls wore too much perfume – or looked like the ones he was used to seeing – they used too much makeup.

No, she'd smelled like summer air and Ivory soap, and her face had been attractive in a fresh-scrubbed way. Maybe he should find out her name so he could introduce her to his daughter. Heaven knows, Antonia could use a friend with some spunk. Toni was far too quiet and eager to please. Even though he, too, had been at fault, Joe blamed a lot of Toni's problems on his late ex-wife. The woman had been a pain in the

"Sir?"

Joe snapped out of his reverie to see the secretary hovering nearby. He tried smiling at her, but stopped when she inched back. He should have known better. He'd used that smile often on the opposition – with the same effect. He wasn't called "Iceman" for nothing.

"When you're through with those papers, you can go down to Mrs. Vaughn's office. Room 123. She'll be your daughter's adviser for next year."

Joe picked up the forms. With a nod to the secretary he left.

This domestic stuff confused him, but with his ex-wife's death he now had custody of their sixteen year-old daughter. His status as a pro player with a degree in physical education had brought numerous offers for coaching jobs all over America, and now that he was done with football he wanted to use the degree he'd worked so hard to obtain.

His mom had always said he was a born teacher, just like his father, who had been a high school principal. When people needed a hand, Joe was the one who helped – be it in baseball, football or algebra. He was the one who showed everyone else how to do things, and he had a lot of patience. He liked kids, and he loved coaching. He planned to make the most of this opportunity.

He'd picked the job at Oak Grove Community College because he wished to raise his daughter in a town reminiscent of the one he'd spent his youth in. The money wasn't too good coaching at this level, but then, money wasn't one of Joe's problems. He'd made scads in pro ball, and he had invested it well. What he wanted right now was to give his daughter the stable home she had never known. The kind he'd grown up in. The kind he himself craved again.

Room 123. Joe paused in front of the door and read the name plate: Mrs. Evelyn Vaughn. Physical Education.

He reached for the doorknob, only to have it spring away from his hand. Before he could move, a tiny Fury of a female barreled straight into his chest.

“Oh!” she gasped, and stumbled backward. Her arms flew out as she struggled to keep herself upright; papers and books scattered in every direction.

Joe caught her by the elbows, hauling her upward until her toes dangled above the floor.

“Hey! Put me down!” She windmilled her feet, catching him in the knee.

“Ow!” Joe set her on the floor with a *thump*. Leaning over, he rubbed his kneecap, then bent farther to collect the books and papers she’d dropped. “I was just trying to keep you from falling on your can,” he said. “The least you could do is say thank-you.” Joe glanced up, then straightened. The Fury was none other than the girl he’d met in the parking lot.

“You.” Her mouth twisted into a grimace, as though she’d just stepped ankle deep in a swamp. She snatched her books and papers from his hands and rearranged them in her arms as she continued to frown at him.

“We meet again.” He nodded at the door. “Is she your adviser?”

“Who?”

“Mrs. Vaughn. I suppose she’s one of those iron- maiden teachers – as wide as she is tall, with steel-gray hair and thighs like thunder.” He paused, remembering teachers from his past. “She’s probably a widow – nagged her husband to death before they’d been married five years – and teaches kids since she doesn’t have any of her own. I want Toni to like it here.” He squinted at the girl. “Don’t you ever take those glasses off?”

“Not when I’m on my way outside. Who’s Toni?”

“My daughter. She’s going to start school at Oak Grove in the fall. I think you might be about her age.”

“Think again.”

“You’ve got to be close if you’re at this school. She could use a friend. What’s your name?”

The “girl” yanked off her sunglasses to reveal annoyed hazel eyes. “I’m Evie Vaughn.” Her frown deepened the faint lines of life surrounding those eyes. “The iron-maiden widow.”