

Ronnie Morton lives the exciting life of a TV news reporter - until she meets a handsome lawyer named Paul Kearley. As his wife, Ronnie's life begins to present some tough challenges. How will she fulfill family responsibilities and remain true to herself?

Becoming Family

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Becoming Family

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ISBN 978-1-60910-055-1

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Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2009

Chapter 1

Ronnie Morton drove herself to the church on her wedding day. It wasn't as if she didn't have offers of a ride. She needed the time alone to decide whether to get married.

In moments of silence, Ronnie was hearing her own voice asking, "How are you ever going to be a hotshot television news director and Paul Kearley's wife at the same time? What's he going to say the first time you have to beg off on a business dinner to cover a fire? What is most important in life? Being successful or being married?" She had a white wedding gown in the back seat of her car, but at that moment, Ronnie couldn't answer with any confidence the questions roiling inside her head.

Despite the distractions, she made the half-hour drive into Boston and found her way into the underground garage nearest the Old West Church. Ronnie had once lost her trusty Toyota in this cavernous garage, an exasperating memory that now crowded in between her wedding-day doubts. She was careful to take note of where she left the car this time, before beginning the short walk to the church loaded down with the dress bag, makeup kit, shopping bag full of shoes and her purse. Out on Cambridge Street, raindrops were falling and, wearing blue jeans, Ronnie tried to run. Whew. Kindly, silver-haired Pastor Joe Franklin was coming toward her, dressed in civilian clothes, too.

"Here, let me open the door for you on your wedding day, young lady. You look like you could use some help there."

"Yup. Having a bad hair day, Pastor Joe."

"Oh, I'm sure there's some magic in one of those bags that will save the day."

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“This hair may require an act of God.” She felt bad about lying to a pastor, but lying was only practical. How would her doubts sound to the same man she had assured of her commitment during six hours of pre-marital counseling? Flaky, that’s what.

“Will you have help arriving soon, Veronica?” Franklin steered her toward the brides’ parlor.

“Call me Ronnie, Pastor Joe. Mom is the only person who calls me Veronica and only then when she’s ticked off at me,” she said. “But yeah, help should be on the way.”

Closing the parlor door behind her, she was alone. A glance toward the nearest full-length mirror brought a groan. All the curls in her dark blonde hair had wilted in the rain. When she pulled it back from her attractive oval face, all she could see was its imperfection, a small scar left by the surgery to repair the cleft palate that she was born with.

“Damn that thing.”

Still, Ronnie was not one to dwell on what couldn’t be changed. She hadn’t let her scar deter her from a career in television, and she had worked her way from a college newsroom intern’s job to staff reporter at WHDH in Boston. After five years on that job, though, she knew she had a brighter future in management than on air. That became clear the day the station manager announced he was replacing Jack Caldwell, a respected newsman with strong ties to the community, with stunning Marlene Anderson just out of Tufts University. Marlene hadn’t even had the benefit of an internship before she got that job.

For reporters, the next highest rung on the newsroom ladder, the assignment desk, was the crucible that up-and-coming managers had to survive. Ronnie knew that if she could land such a job at the station, she would have to do more than endure the pressure. She would have to shine. Again the

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questions flooded her frontal lobe: “If you give 110 percent at work, what will be left to give this marriage.”

Ronnie felt queasy pondering that one as she switched on a curling iron. In her family, doing less than your best was not an honorable option. Her father had provided an upscale living in West Hartford, Conn., for his family, yet her mother had insisted on earning her own paycheck even in the ‘50s before that was fashionable. Ronnie needed the same independence for herself. She needed somebody to love her, too, an adult love that would be unconditional like the love that she had left behind in her family.

As she wound her hair around the hot tubular iron, the curls began returning to her hair along with a bit of calm. Paul was just the sort of man she needed to love her: He was a lawyer with uncommon dedication to making the law work for people without the powerful connections to make it work for themselves. He invested as much energy in run-of-the-mill cases as he did in those that promised money and glory. At age 35, he had made a full life for himself. During romantic moments in their short courtship, he often told Ronnie, 25, he wanted her to have a full life for herself as well.

She unzipped the dress bag for a look at the satin gown she would wear if she decided to go through with the wedding. With quivering fingers, she removed a straight pin.

“Ouch!” The pin had pierced the fleshy pad of her forefinger and, worse, caused a drop of blood to fall on the gown.

“Damn!” Tears came to her eyes. Is somebody trying to tell me something here?

Suppose she and Paul grew apart as they pursued two demanding careers. Ronnie suspected that had happened to her parents. Steve Morton was a planner in the Connecticut Department of Transportation with visions of being the

transportation secretary one day, Donna Morton was an office manager in the Hartford schools' finance department and, some days, all the time they had for each other was given to bickering about the bills, the house and the three kids.

Behind her, she heard her mom's voice. "Hi." When she wheeled around, Donna Morton couldn't miss the pools of tears in her daughter's brown eyes. She grasped Ronnie in the hug she badly needed. "What's the matter, honey?"

"This spot, Mom." She lied again. This time, it was a diversionary tactic, to occupy her mom with a task that needed her attention. Given a mission, she wouldn't ask probing questions.

"I'm going to go call Michael and see if Lisa's plane landed on time," Ronnie said, hoping to focus her mom on the missing maid of honor.

Just then, though, it was Michael Ballenger she needed most. Her friend from college days, and now her colleague at the TV station, had a reporter's analytical mind. Michael could listen to the facts of this situation and help her see the truth. Out in the hallway, she saw a door open and there he was.

"Lisa! Am I glad to see you." The two women hugged.

"You're a little shaky, Ronnie. Didn't you think I'd show up?"

"Of course, I knew I could count on you, the one who never forgets my birthday. It's this guy I need a word with. You can relax and freshen up in there. Mom knows where everything is."

Ronnie took Michael's hand, led him into a room full of choir robes and closed the door.

"What the?"

"Michael, I'm not sure I can do this."

He fetched a wedding invitation out of his coat pocket. "This says you're going to do it at 5 o'clock. It's 4 now."

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“I’m having second, third and fourth thoughts about getting married. How can I chase news stories and be a wife to Paul? You’re a guy. Is that fair to him?”

“He must think so, Ronnie. Haven’t you talked with him about your job?”

“Not really. I’ve been late for enough dates that I thought he’d know what he’s getting into. After meeting his parents Thursday night when they flew in from Kansas City, I’m not so sure anymore, Michael. They’re adorable but...”

“But what? They seem normal to me.”

“They’re traditional. Paul’s dad, Will, sells insurance, and his mom stays home and caters to his dad. Always has. Emma’s job was to raise Paul and his brother while Will traveled all week long. When he came home, Paul says, everything changed. They did what Dad wanted. Paul left home when he was 18 and hasn’t been around them much since, but he warned me Wednesday that they were, what did he call them? Simple people, that’s it. She still spends her days cooking, cleaning, taking care of his clothes, and that sparkling rock on her left hand must be her proudest possession. They rarely venture far from home. What a life.”

“What’s wrong with that if she’s OK with it?”

“Not a thing. It’s fine for them. But when I got hung up at the station Thursday, on that hostage thing, you remember, and showed up for dinner an hour late, they both looked at me like I was from Mars. I have nothing in common with them, Michael. And whose side do you think they’ll take if Paul ever gets fed up with the life of a TV widower? What if I have to choose sides? I don’t know whether I could compromise my work or not. Am I promising to do that if I say, ‘I do’?”

The same woman who could stand in front of a TV camera and talk about a police line or the city budget, that same cool customer now was fidgeting with the laces on her sneakers.

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Michael took her hands into his. “Look, Paul’s getting a great catch, and he knows it. You’re smart. You’re good-looking. You’re independent. The question is: Can you have your independence with love and marriage on the side? Is it worth it to you to try to have them all?”

“Why shouldn’t I have them all?” she asked, all attitude and indignation.

“No fair answering a question with a question,” he said.

“No fair saying, ‘No fair.’ This is serious, Michael,” she said.

“I know, Morton. Everything’s serious, and I’m worthless. I’ve never been married, not even close,” he said.

“You’ve met Paul’s brother and his sister-in-law. His mom seems to think they have the perfect marriage. If that’s what a perfect marriage is about, standing next to them may be as close to one as I ever want to get.” Ronnie had never known two people with one life before she met Josh and Marianne Kearley. They live in a small Missouri town, Columbia, a two-hour drive from his parents. He’s an archivist with the state historical library, she’s a kindergarten teacher and they have two young children, a boy and a girl. “Didn’t you see them at the rehearsal dinner last night? They stayed glued to their seats all evening and fidgeted about the kids staying with a babysitter they didn’t know. Will and Emma were about the only people they talked to. I bet it wasn’t even 8 o’clock when they left. Hey, it’s a celebration, people.”

“Don’t be too hard on them. They don’t know people here, probably can’t even understand what people are saying when they’re saying it in Boston brogue,” he said.

Ronnie stared down at her unadorned ring finger.

“Maybe it comes down to taking a risk. Who knows what’s going to make you happy 10 years from now? Maybe talk of the

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state health plan and day care will interest me at that point in my life. Who knows? Maybe it's all a big gamble, Michael."

"Let's look at the odds. Do you want Paul around when you get home from work at night? Do you want to see his face when you wake up in the morning?"

"Yes, yes, yes. I can't be happy without Paul. Until he came into my life, I wasn't. To me, the question is: Can he be happy with me the way I am? I'm not like the girl who married dear old Dad, that's for sure."

"Well, if he changes his mind, I'll take ya." He surrounded her in his arms. "Today, Paul probably won't give a rip if you aren't anything like his mother."

"Maybe not, but how long will it take?"

"No guarantees, are there?"

"Guess not."

"I always figured you for a risk taker, Morton. Remember back at Northeastern. Lifeguarding wasn't scary enough for you. You had to go for med tech training."

"Good point, Ballenger. You'd make a pretty good lawyer, as Paul would say." She felt herself smiling for the first time that day. They got up and left the room together, laughing, into the hallway.

Not more than 10 yards away, standing there talking with Pastor Joe, already in his black robe and collar, were Will and Emma Kearley. He wore a dark blue suit and crimson red tie, she wore sky blue chiffon. As the robing room door opened, the three of them turned. Seeing fit and trim Michael with their son's bride in blue jeans, they said nothing but they stared at Ronnie.

"Well hello, Will. Hello, Emma. Ready for the main event?" she asked.

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Will continued staring, letting Emma do the talking. “Honey, I’d have been in my dress by now. You need some help?”

“Naw, TV people know tricks for going on-air in a matter of minutes.”

“There were show people in my family, too, honey,” Emma said.

“Mom’s cousin, twice removed, was Bob Cummings, you know, the famous actor,” Will said. “Everybody in Joplin is related to Bob Cummings somehow or the other.”

Emma cut off his chortling. “We’re probably holding up the works with this small talk, Wilbur. Come with me. I could use a smoke.”

Michael stepped in to show the couple the way. Once out of Ronnie’s range, Emma asked Michael, “Is she OK? The ceremony is supposed to start in 20 minutes. On my wedding day, I wore my dress for hours before it was time.”

“You were beautiful, Mom,” Will said.

“I just knew it would be the only wedding dress I’d ever get to wear,” Emma said.

“Our generation has to over-think everything,” Michael said. “When you’re ready, one of the ushers can show you your pew. Don’t worry, folks. She’ll pull it together. She always does.”

Ronnie had gone in the opposite direction back to the bridal parlor. Those inside – her mom, Lisa, three bridesmaids from college and her old neighborhood – took over. They dressed her, finished restoring the curl to her hair, they checked for something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.

“You’ve got everything, sweetheart. I need to go find your father,” Donna Morton said, kissing her only daughter on the cheek. “You are a beautiful bride.”

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Ronnie was on auto-pilot, doing what she was told. “Thanks, Mom.” The photographer shot a picture of her pulling a perfectly useless garter up a pantyhose-encased leg. “It’s show time,” Lisa said. The four of them gathered up bouquets, smiled for the camera and started filing out the door, leaving the bride for last.

Ronnie heard her cellphone ring, pausing out of instinct. No, though she tried to picture who might be calling, she was not going to answer the phone on her wedding day. Did that mean her choice was made? She stood at the back of the church waiting to hear “The Wedding March,” while others were grinning and chattering around her. Some may have been talking to her. Ronnie was listening to an interior dialogue. Lisa and the others began slow-walking down the aisle. This was it, she knew. Then the familiar strains: Dum dum dee dum dum dum. Walking down the aisle, her face felt frozen in a small smile that masked her muddle.

There, on the right, were her brothers, Doug and Kevin, with their wives. There were the Wilsons, neighbors from Connecticut who were old family friends. They all had come a fair distance to see this marriage take place. On the left was the Channel 7 newsroom crowd. They’d think a bride backing out at the altar was a great story. In the two front rows were the Kearleys, the elders smiling obligatory smiles, Josh and Marianne occupied with straightening dress clothes on their toddlers. They wouldn’t know what to think if she turned around now. Then she saw Paul, gorgeous in a simple black tuxedo. As a lawyer, he would understand. He’s seen people change their pleas before.

Then Pastor Joe was standing before them. Surely, though, he would rather see an incomplete wedding than a divorce later. He was speaking words that didn’t fully register with her until he said, “Do you Veronica take this man...” Ronnie looked at

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Paul's face and saw tears welling in his eyes as he smiled a wide smile.

“I do,” she said.

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