



Small Town Sash

Author: Jenna Brandt

Category: Romance

Description: Braden Harding was determined to go down in history as the greatest K9 handler the Air Force had ever seen, and that meant graduating top of his class at the Hero Search and Rescue Academy. What he doesn't expect is to get thrown headfirst into small town politics, and compelled to judge a beauty pageant he couldn't care less about. Even though he tries to keep himself from getting too involved, Braden can't help but feel drawn to the star contestant.

Hadley Wilder was born with a tiara on her head, or at least that's what her mother has told her since she could remember. She was put in every obscure beauty pageant under the sun from Fried Green Tomato Queen to Miss Million Dollar Legs. Only, Hadley wants to be known for more than just her looks. The problem is, no one's willing to see her any differently until she meets a surprising judge, who doesn't focus on what's only skin deep.

Total Pages (Source): 68

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Chapter One

Hadley Wilder fluffed her black hair, the long strands falling perfectly around her face like a raven's glossy wings. Her blue eyes, usually as calm as a summer sky, flickered with a mix of jitters and fatigue. She traced the peach hue of her curvy silhouette in the full-length mirror, adjusting the fit of her formal dress.

"Chin up, Hadley. Posture," her mother called out, fingers expertly skimming over the sequins that adorned Hadley's gown.

"Mom, I'm pretty sure my spine is already at maximum straightness," Hadley quipped, rolling her eyes but obliging with a subtle lift of her chin.

"As if there's such a thing," her mother fussed, circling her like a hawk ready to pounce on any imperfection. "Remember, you were practically born with a tiara on your head."

"Or so the legend says," Hadley murmured under her breath, hating that every opportunity her mother liked to bring up the story she started herself.

"What was that?" her mother questioned with a disapproving arch of her black eyebrow.

"Nothing, just practicing my acceptance speech," she lied smoothly, batting her lashes for effect.

"Good. Enunciate. And remember, Miss Hero Texas isn't just a title. It's your

destiny." Her mother's words were as tight as the curls she imposed on Hadley's hair.

"Of course, Mom. Destiny with a side of hairspray and lip gloss," Hadley responded, her tone laced with sarcasm though her face remained pageant-perfect.

"Exactly. Now, let's review your walk one more time," her mother demanded as she tucked her own black bob behind her ears.

Hadley knew better than to argue with her mother. It was easier to just do what she wanted, and that way, Hadley could get practice over as quickly as possible.

"Graceful, slow...that's it," her mother encouraged as Hadley glided across the living room turned makeshift runway.

"Like I'm floating on a cloud or wading through molasses?" Hadley asked, her steps exaggeratedly slow.

"Both," her mother said, nodding with satisfaction. "If you perform like this at the pageant, you've got it in the bag."

"Sure, as long as the bag is designer and comes with a matching pair of uncomfortable heels," Hadley shot back, her smile hiding the dread of yet another crown she didn't really want or need.

Hadley forced a smile in front of the mirror, one of her latest sashes emblazoned with "Miss Southern Charm" draped over her shoulder. It was one of many that cluttered her closet, each a different color, a different title, a different memory. But none of them were enough for her mother. She insisted she entered one pageant right after the other, claiming it was her destiny to win more titles than any other beauty queen in the world.

"Mom, do I really need to add another?" she asked, eyeing the reflection that seemed more like a mannequin than herself.

"Absolutely," her mother insisted, clapping her hands as if summoning the pageant gods themselves. "You're a natural, darling."

"Natural at smiling through gritted teeth," Hadley grumbled, but her mother either didn't catch the jab or chose to ignore it.

"Look at this wall," her mother gestured to the gallery of crowns and ribbons that lined the shelves of her bedroom. "Miss Prairie Rose. Fried Green Tomato Queen. Miss Million Dollar Legs. You've got every accolade a girl could dream of."

"More like your dreams," Hadley muttered, plucking at the sash with frustration. She wanted to tell her mother that she dreamed of being known for her wit, her brains, and maybe her killer banana bread recipe. Those dreams, however, always seemed to be drowned out by the applause for her perfectly toned calves.

"Speak up, dear," her mother said, fussing with Hadley's hair. "Confidence is key."

"Right," Hadley sighed, plastering on her pageant smile. "Confidence."

"Remember, you're not just competing. You're setting an example. You are an icon in this town, and you were born to win this title."

"An icon in size six heels," Hadley observed dryly. "Maybe I'll get a statue in the town square next. 'Hadley Wilder: Her Stare Pierced Hearts, Her Walk Echoed Through Eternity.'"

"Stop being so dramatic," her mother scolded, but there was a chuckle hidden in her tone. "You should be proud. These titles are your legacy. You barely missed this one

last time around, and now that you're at the right age to enter, you have to win this. You'll be too old in five years when it comes around again."

"Legacy," Hadley echoed, her voice dropping. "I'd rather leave footprints from walking my own path than from standing on a pedestal."

"Darling, there's no better place to be than a pedestal," her mother reassured her, missing the point as she always did. "Now, chin up. We've got an important tiara to win."

Hadley nodded, but her blue eyes lingered on the window, on the world beyond the glass where titles didn't define her, where she could just be Hadley—no sash required.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Focus, Hadley. If you're a good girl and nail this next walk, I'll take you to the Coffee Loft."

"Really? And you'll let me get a coffee?" Hadley asked as she narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

"Of course," her mom said, oblivious to Hadley's skepticism. "I'm not a monster."

"Deal," Hadley stated with an approving nod.

"All right, now that you seem properly motivated, it's time for you to put on your game face."

Hadley let out a sigh, adjusting her tiara one last time before stepping onto the makeshift stage. She plastered on a smile as her mother turned up the lights.

"And here we have the stunning Hadley Wilder," her mother announced as if she were the MC for the pageant.

"Thank you, thank you," Hadley said, waving to the empty room with feigned enthusiasm. She smirked as she mimicked her mom, "Today's forecast: a high chance of winning."

"Enough with the sarcasm," her mother admonished with a frown. "Runway spin, now."

Hadley blew out a breath, turned, and began her return walk down the makeshift

catwalk. One foot in front of the other, hips swaying like a pendulum. She had done this a million times before, and it felt just as dull as ever.

"Excellent," her mother clapped from her seat on the couch. "Now for the final turn and wave."

Hadley turned, gave her pageant wave—elbow, elbow, wrist, wrist—and mouthed 'coffee' toward her mom as though it was her winning word.

Her mother shook her head and sighed. "All right, Hadley, I suppose you've earned your coffee break."

"Finally," Hadley breathed out in relief. Shedding her queenly demeanor like an old coat, she quickly scrambled to her room to get ready for her much-needed freedom.

"Always so quick to leave the limelight," her mother grumbled disapprovingly as she followed after her.

"Yes, because there's a million other things I'd rather do other than parade myself around like a show pony."

"There you go, being dramatic again," her mother scolded as she reached into her closet and pulled out a floral dress. "Wear this one. We want you to look your best for the next few weeks before the pageant starts. We have no idea who the judges are going to be, so you need to make a good impression on everyone."

"Whatever you say, Mom," Hadley mumbled as she took the dress to oblige her.

As they left their home-turned-pageant-stage behind, Hadley couldn't help but glance back at her sparkling tiara and sash resting on the table. A symbol of a legacy she never wanted but couldn't escape.

Several minutes later, Hadley anxiously waited in line at the Coffee Loft. The earthy aroma of roasted coffee beans mingled with the scent of fresh pastries, a siren call to any soul not bound by pageant diets.

"What will you have, Hadley," Michelle asked with a friendly smile.

"A large cup of your French Roast," Hadley ordered with eager anticipation.

"Make sure it's black," her mother reminded the coffee shop owner, peering over the rim of her designer glasses at Michelle behind the counter.

"Of course, Mrs. Wilder," Michelle replied with a practiced smile, handing over the coffee.

"Mom, I could use a little milk in my—" Hadley started.

"Black, Hadley. Calories," her mother cut in, eyes scanning the room as if the walls themselves might disagree.

Hadley suppressed a sigh and nodded. "Black," she affirmed, doing her best to hide her disappointment.

Hadley's fingers curled around the warm porcelain mug, steam curling up like the tendrils of her own black hair. She took a careful sip of the scalding liquid, feeling it burn all the way down. It matched her mood—bitter and too hot to handle.

"Let's sit for a moment," her mother suggested, moving toward a window-side table, leaving Hadley trailing behind.

They settled into a silence that was almost comfortable, punctuated only by the clinks of spoons against porcelain and the soft murmur of patrons. Hadley watched the

world outside—the real world, where people weren't weighed by crowns or sashes.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Suddenly, the door to the Coffee Loft swung open, and Mrs. Matilda Shomacker waddled in, disturbing the peaceful ambiance with her overbearing presence. Her sharp eyes darted around the room, landing on Hadley and her mother.

"Ah, the Wilders at their usual spot. Getting ready for another beauty pageant, are we?" she asked with a broad grin, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Mrs. Wilder forced a polite smile and nodded while Hadley took another sip of her black coffee and stared out the window.

Ignoring Hadley's disinterest, Mrs. Shomacker continued. "Make sure you don't eat any of these pastries, dear. Wouldn't want to ruin that figure. Or maybe I should say eat up so my granddaughter has a better chance of winning the crown in a couple of weeks."

A chuckle erupted from Mrs. Shomacker but was met with frosty silence from Hadley's mother.

"Mrs. Shomacker," a gentle voice chided from behind the counter. Michelle emerged with a tray of fresh muffins. "I thought I warned you about harassing my customers."

"Oh, hush," Mrs. Shomacker said dismissively. "We're all friends here." She turned back to the Wilders again and was about to say something else when Mrs. Wilder abruptly stood.

"We best be going," she said curtly, suggesting they had overstayed their welcome in the land of caffeine and carbs. "Come along, Hadley."

Obediently, Hadley rose, clutching her coffee cup like a lifeline. She spun on her heel, only to collide with a solid form.

"Oof," she exclaimed, coffee splashing perilously close to the brink of disaster.

"Sorry, ma'am," a deep voice apologized. Strong hands steadied her, their warmth bleeding through the fabric of her dress.

"Ma'am?" Hadley echoed, regaining her balance and finally looking up.

"Sorry, force of habit," the man said, a sheepish grin spreading across his tan face. He stood at average height, with black hair cropped close to his head and brown eyes that sparkled with good humor. There was something about him—an air of disciplined strength, the kind you couldn't earn in a gym. That's when she noticed his blue uniform, adorned with medals and a name tag that read, "Harding" and a golden retriever by his side.

"Are you...military?" Hadley guessed, noting the crispness of his posture and the faint outline of muscles beneath his jacket.

"Air Force," he confirmed, releasing her. "I'm just staying here temporarily."

"In Hero?" Hadley's brow rose. Suddenly remembering why most military men and police officers were in town, she added, "You must be here for the search and rescue academy."

"That I am, but it seems like a nice enough place," he replied, the corner of his mouth tilting up even more.

"Depends on the day," Hadley retorted, her blue eyes meeting his gaze squarely as she placed her cup on the nearby counter. She found herself smiling genuinely for the

first time in days, no pretense needed.

"Nice meeting you..." Hadley trailed off, realizing she didn't even know his full name.

"Staff Sergeant Braden Harding," he supplied, with an easy smile that suggested he wasn't used to being forgotten.

"Braden," she repeated, the name fitting him perfectly. It rolled off her tongue far too comfortably for someone she'd just met.

"See you around..." he waited for her to fill in her name.

"Hadley Wilder," she told him with a warm smile.

"Okay, Hadley. See you around," he said for a second time.

"Maybe," she murmured as she pressed her lips together.

"Goodbye, young man," her mother said curtly, not bothering with pleasantries as she all but dragged Hadley away from him.

"Take care," Braden called after them, his voice fading as the distance between them grew.

"Mom, he was just being polite," Hadley protested weakly once they were outside. Over her shoulder, she glanced through the window at the handsome stranger who had turned his attention to ordering. Something fluttered in her chest—a feeling that had nothing to do with pageants or appearances.

"Politeness doesn't win crowns," her mother retorted, her pace quickening as if she could out walk the conversation.

"Neither does rudeness," Hadley countered, her heart sinking with each step that took her further from Braden and the coffee shop.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Keep walking, Hadley. Remember what's at stake," her mother chided, tugging at her arm. "The last thing you need is a guy distracting you right before the biggest pageant of your life."

"Right, the pageant," Hadley muttered under her breath, but her mind stayed fixed on the unexpected encounter with the stranger.

"I just want you to focus, Hadley. Is that too much to ask?" her mother whined with frustration.

"I'll do my best," Hadley affirmed, though her thoughts betrayed her, lingering on a pair of warm brown eyes and a chance encounter cut far too short.

Chapter Two

"Well, that was unexpected, Dash," Braden mused out loud, scratching behind his golden retriever's ears, as he glanced over his shoulder at the door where Hadley Wilder had just exited. His K9 partner wagged his tail, clearly unaware of his partner's attraction to the pretty young woman.

He'd always been a sucker for the combination of black hair and blue eyes, and with the curves she had in all the right places, she was exactly the kind of trouble he used to go for. Not now, though. Not when his promotion with the Air Force was on the line.

"Here's your coffee, sir," the woman behind the counter told him with a friendly smile. Then, glancing at Dash, she asked, "Can I get your canine partner a

puppuccino?"

"I'm not sure what that is, but if it's safe for Dash's diet and will make him happy, sure. "

"Oh, I give them to the other K9 officers all the time. My boyfriend's German shepherd loves them," the woman told him with a laugh, eyes crinkling with genuine amusement. "Trust me, Dash is going to love it."

Braden turned, leaning against the counter as he surveyed the quaint shop, noting the happy faces and cozy nooks filled with conversation and clinking cups.

Against his will, Braden's mind drifted back to Hadley. He frowned, pondering. His mind in overdrive, spooling images of her—the laugh lines by her eyes, the way she nervously flicked her hair behind her ear, how she blushed when he caught her eye.

"Go for it," a voice startled him. A tall, grizzled man with silver hair grinned at him from the adjacent barstool. "The girl with the dreamy eyes? Just my two cents."

Braden chuckled in response, "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to an old timer like me," the man responded, raising his coffee in a half-salute before departing with a knowing smirk.

"Do I look that pathetic?" Braden asked Dash, who wagged his tail in response. Dash's attention was focused on his puppuccino. Braden sighed and glanced at the door again. Hadley had left an impression, even in the short time she was around him.

"Come on, Dash. We need to get back to the academy. Our break is almost over." Braden nudged his partner as he stood up, who lapped up the last of his special treat with gusto.

"Braden Harding, right?" A man with a clipboard came over and blocked his exit, eyes fixed on him with an unsettling intensity.

"Uh, yes," Braden nodded with a tilt of his head.

"Good. I heard you might be here. We need you." Clipboard man seemed to be all business, the kind of local bigwig who made it his business to know everyone in his town.

"Need me for what?" Braden asked with confusion.

"Pageant judge. Our third one bailed, and we need someone neutral."

"Pageant judge?" Braden echoed incredulously.

"Miss Hero Texas. It's tradition. You're perfect—a hero in uniform with no ties to any of the contestants," the man insisted, a conspiratorial wink underscoring his point. "We couldn't ask for a better third judge."

"Really, I don't think?—"

"Great. It's settled, then. Our first meeting is tonight, at seven o'clock sharp. Make sure to wear your Air Force uniform. It will be a real crowd-pleaser." Clipboard man didn't wait for confirmation, already bustling away, shouting orders into a phone pressed to his ear.

"Settled?" Braden rubbed the bridge of his nose, a mild headache forming, looking down at his Air Force blues. He'd only worn them because the dry cleaners had lost his academy uniform. "How did I get roped into this?"

"Who knows? But you'll make an excellent judge," the owner teased from behind the

counter, her chuckle adding to the surreal turn of events.

"Dash, buddy," Braden sighed, looking down at his golden retriever partner, "looks like our evening just got interesting." Then, glancing at his watch, he realized that if they didn't hurry, they would be late. "Come on, we have to go right now."

His boots crunched on the gravel as they made their way into the sprawling complex of the Hero Search and Rescue Academy.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

As they walked through the academy doors, a buzzing swarm of his fellow trainees descended upon them. Braden winked at Dash, always the center of attention with his shining golden fur and infectious enthusiasm.

"Braden, you ready for today's session?" a voice called out from the crowd. It was Sawyer Bennet, a Texas police officer, and his new friend.

"Always ready," Braden replied, grinning. "But listen, as soon as we're dismissed, I'm going to have to go. I can't study with you tonight."

"Oh? Got a date?" Sawyer teased.

"Not exactly..." Braden trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Spill it, Harding. You've piqued my curiosity," Sawyer insisted, a devilish grin spreading across his face.

"Promise you won't laugh?" Braden asked, giving Sawyer a skeptical look.

"No promises," his friend replied, chuckling mischievously.

"I somehow got roped into being a judge for the local beauty pageant," Braden admitted, bracing himself for the inevitable laughter.

Sawyer didn't fail to deliver. His laughter filled the room, and soon enough, others joined in. Dash merely wagged his tail, smiling up at Braden as if he just shared the best news in the world.

"A beauty pageant?" Sawyer repeated between fits of laughter. "Well, well, Braden Harding—I never thought I'd see the day you got roped into something like that."

"Neither did I," Braden confessed with a wry smile and a shake of his head.

The rest of the day passed in a whirlwind of lessons and drills. Dash excelled, his nose leading them through every scenario with ease. By the time the sun began its descent, Braden had almost forgotten about his new responsibility. Almost.

"Good boy," Braden told his K9 partner, a grin spreading across his face as Dash wagged his tail, panting happily up at him. "You're going to make one top-notch bomb detector."

Dash barked in agreement, or at least Braden liked to think so.

"Sergeant Harding," shouted Instructor Bowman from the doorway. "Remember, it's not all about the nose. It's teamwork that matters."

"Got it, sir," Braden called back, giving a nod before returning his attention to Dash. "You hear that, buddy? We're a team. The best team they're ever going to see here at the academy."

They strode toward Braden's pickup, the air thick with the scent of cut grass and farm animals. He opened the door for Dash, who jumped in with eagerness.

Braden chuckled. "Easy there, champ. Save some of that energy for tomorrow."

Dash settled in, his golden fur catching the last light of day, making him look like a canine torchbearer. Braden slid into the driver's seat, feeling the familiar leather grip the contours of his average frame. He glanced at Dash, who was already gazing out the window, nose twitching.

"We got to focus if we're going to be top of the class," Braden muttered more to himself than to Dash. "We'll get through this judging thing as quickly as we can so we can get back to our real job."

He started the engine, the rumble, a comforting promise of the journey ahead, filled with obstacles they were determined to overcome. With a final look at the academy's gates in the rearview mirror, Braden eased the truck onto the road.

"Best K9 handler in the Air Force," he whispered, a vow hanging between him and Dash. "That's the target, pal."

Dash let out a soft woof as if sealing the pact.

Braden's grin was a fixed feature as he and Dash made their way through the small town that was nestled close to the academy. The day's success still warmed him, recollections of approving nods from the instructors playing like a highlight reel in his mind.

"Dash," Braden announced as they pulled into the parking lot of the high school, "time to put our judging hats on."

In his formal Air Force uniform, punctuated by Dash's shiny coat, Braden and his partner made an impressive sight as they entered the gymnasium. Not one to shirk responsibilities foisted upon him—even bizarre ones—he listened with a pinched expression as Clipboard man explained judging criteria.

"And remember," Clipboard man continued, "This isn't about just beauty—it's also about personality and talent."

"No kidding," Braden muttered under his breath. With a brief nod to Clipboard man, he took his seat by the other judges. "I'm not sure how much they thought I would

know about this."

"About as much as the rest of us," an older man beside him grumbled as he handed him a cup of black coffee. "I see you got suckered into this against your will just like me. I'm Randy Turner, by the way, owner of the local newspaper."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Braden nodded, the scent of the java a small comfort. "Staff Sergeant Braden Harding. And I'm here to train with my K9 partner, Dash, not judge...is it evening gowns or swimsuits?"

"Both and talent," Randy added, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "They picked me because they said the media is required to be neutral. I tried to explain to them that all reporters have a natural bias, but George Wallace didn't seem to want to hear it."

"Is that Clipboard man?" Braden asked as he gestured with his head toward the man who was checking a list while talking on his cell phone again.

"Clipboard man?" Randy asked with a chuckle. "That's funny. And yes, that's the mayor's assistant and son, I might add," Randy explained.

"Great. It's looking like I have less and less of a chance of getting out of this." He took a long sip, buying himself a moment.

"Not gonna happen. You're stuck, so you might as well get used to it. Maybe you'll even enjoy it," Randy said in a tone that sounded as if he was trying to convince them both.

"Or maybe it's a colossal waste of time." Braden set the coffee down, a decision brewing.

"Or maybe," an older woman pushed a piece of paper with a checklist toward him, "it's just a few nights. A couple of hours. You can spare that, right?"

"They got you, too, Torrey?" Randy asked with a chuckle.

"Unlike you, Randy, I don't mind helping out the town when they ask," the older woman snapped back with a glare.

"That's because it's job security for you," Randy challenged with a roll of his eyes. "Isn't it required as the town manager's assistant?"

"No, but I'm happy to give my time," she stated with a lift of her chin. "And you two should feel the same."

"Everyone needs to be quiet and listen to the rest of my instructions," George raised his voice as he looked at the bickering judges.

"Didn't realize you cared so much about pageants, George," Randy drawled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I don't," George snapped, irritated. "But I do care about keeping the mayor off my back. So can we all play nice?"

"I'm always nice," Torrey said with a sweet smile, patting her notepad against her palm.

"All right then," George sighed, rubbing at his temples. "The girls will come on stage in alphabetical order by their first names. You will mark down your scores in the provided spaces."

"And what are the categories?" Braden glanced at the sheet in front of him, furrowing his brow.

"Swimsuit, evening gown, talent, and final question," George told them.

"Great. Real specific," Braden muttered under his breath.

"Just remember," Torrey leaned over, pointing at a line on the paper. "No score below seven."

"Why not?" Braden looked genuinely confused.

"A seven is basically a zero in the pageant world," she informed him with a knowing look.

"Oh boy," he ran a hand through his black hair. "What have I gotten myself into?"

"More than you know," Randy chuckled from beside him.

"When do we find out who the contestants are?" Braden asked with curiosity.

"Oh, I'm sure it's the regular suspects," Randy jested with a shrug.

"What does that mean?" Braden asked in confusion.

"Just the same pretty girls every time, some new ones here and there, but I bet my eyeteeth that Lily Shomacker and Hadley Wilder will be in the competition," Randy explained with a touch of contempt. "Their stage moms and grandmas are always using their daughters and granddaughters to get attention."

Hadley Wilder. What were the odds that the pretty woman he bumped into at the coffee shop was going to be one of the contestants in the beauty pageant? He wasn't sure if he was ever going to see her again, and now he was going to be around her for dozens of hours because of the pageant. She was a complication he didn't see coming and wasn't sure how he was going to handle.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"And scholarships," Torrey pointed out. "Don't forget a lot of the girls do this for the scholarships."

"Well, I'm all for helping with scholarships," Braden said earnestly, trying to shake Hadley from his mind.

"Sure, if they had any talent worth rewarding," the newspaper owner stated snidely.

"Randy," Torrey scolded. "Don't be so sour."

Braden chuckled. "You're really not a fan of this, huh?"

"I've just been around enough to see the ugly side of beauty," Randy shrugged.

"This is going to be an interesting pageant," Torrey muttered under her breath.

Indeed, Braden thought, with Hadley being in the mix, it was shaping up to be much more than he had bargained for.

Chapter Three

Hadley's heels clicked rhythmically against the polished floors of the dress shop, a staccato echo to her racing heart. The array of pastel silks and chiffons in the room was a blur, but one figure stood out like a beacon. Candace Kealy, measuring tape in hand, was surveying her fashion empire with the confidence of a queen.

"Miss Kealy?" Hadley's voice wavered slightly, betraying her nerves.

Candace turned, her hazel eyes locking onto Hadley's blue ones. A slow smile spread across her face as she took in the beauty queen before her. "Hadley Wilder, right? I've seen you on those pageant stages."

"Thank you," she murmured, tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear. "I came by because I saw your last fashion show and decided I wanted something different for my evening gown this time around."

"Does your mother know about this?" Candace questioned with an arch of her eyebrow.

"You know about my mom?"

"Honey, everyone knows about your mom," the other woman told her with a smirk. "She's the stuff of stage mom legends."

"Don't I know it," Hadley grumbled with a frown. "But she won't care where I get the dress as long as it gets the job done, and I win my next crown."

"Well, I can guarantee that," the dressmaker told her with a firm nod. "I just had one of my latest creations featured in Marie Claire, so that should impress your mom enough to let you wear one of my gowns."

"Really? That's incredible," Hadley gushed with praise. "And for the record, I was going to wear one with or without her approval."

"Uh-huh," Candace muttered, but the tone implied she didn't really believe Hadley.

"No, really. My mom thinks that she's in charge, but I'm the one entering these pageants. I choose to do this."

"Sure, sure, but honey," Candace reached out and placed her hand on Hadley's shoulder, "you should know you're more than just a sash and crown."

Hadley rocked back on her heels, surprised by the statement from the other woman, whose sole job was to drape women in gowns that made everyone look at them. Hadley was her ideal customer, needing a rotation of endless evening gowns and outfits for every new pageant. Why would Candace say something like that to her?

"Ever thought about what goes into these gowns?" Candace gestured around them, her movements bold and encompassing.

"Sometimes. But I'm not sure?—"

"Cut that doubt," Candace interjected, her tone firm yet playful. "You've got an eye, I can tell. How about you learn the ropes? Work with me on designing your outfits for this pageant?"

"Design...my own outfits?" Hadley's mouth fell open in surprise, her usual poised composure slipping.

"Yep. Get your hands dirty. Stitch some sequins. Might find out there's more to you than a perfect smile," Candace winked.

Hadley chuckled, the sound bubbling up from a place of genuine amusement. "That could be...incredible."

"Fantastic." Candace clapped her hands together, causing a few nearby mannequins to shudder. "Let's shake up the pageant world, one stitch at a time."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Hadley's heart raced with the thrill of potential. Candace Kealy's offer dangled before her like a shimmering gown on a runway, full of promise and excitement. As she stood in front of her bedroom mirror, trying to envision herself sewing and stitching rather than sashaying and speech-giving, her reflection seemed to morph into her mother's disapproving stare.

"Mom," Hadley ventured later that evening, "what would you say if I told you I wanted to learn fashion design?"

Her mother was perched at the edge of the sofa, meticulously examining a rhinestone tiara. Without looking up, she replied, "Darling, focus. You have a pageant to win, not a craft show."

Hadley sighed, the weight of expectation pressing down on her curvy frame. "But it's just?—"

"Pageants first," her mother cut in, finally meeting her daughter's gaze with a look that left no room for argument. "Always."

"Right," Hadley mumbled, feeling the seams of her dreams fraying at the edges.

The next day, as Hadley walked to pageant practice, her thoughts stitched back and forth between sequins and self-discovery. She didn't see Braden until they almost collided—literally.

"Whoa," the soldier from the coffee shop steadied her with firm hands on her shoulders for a second time in two days. "Sorry, I should watch where I'm going."

"Me too," Hadley said, cheeks warming. "Hi again."

"Hi." He flashed a grin that could disarm any conflict.

They resumed walking, side by side this time, the rhythm of their steps syncing casually.

"Headed to the pageant practice?" he asked, nodding toward the building in the distance.

"Guilty," she said with a playful roll of her eyes.

"Can't escape destiny, huh?"

"Feels more like a detention sometimes," Hadley confessed, surprising herself with the honesty.

"Detention? Never took you for the rebellious type."

"Maybe I'm not." Hadley bit her lip, thinking of Candace's offer. "But what if I want to be?"

"Ah, the plot thickens," he chuckled, his brown eyes crinkling with amusement.

"Speaking of plots," Hadley began, then hesitated. Her voice dropped to a whisper, "Ever feel trapped in someone else's story?"

"Not really. I like to think I write my own story." His smile faded, a shadow of seriousness flickering across his face. "Which means we get to write our own endings, right?"

"Right," Hadley echoed, boosted by his words.

"Good luck in there," he said as they reached the entrance. "Not that you need it."

"Thanks." Hadley paused, taking in the moment. "And good luck with...whatever you're doing today."

"Thanks. I'll need it," he replied with a wink. "I'm one of the judges for the pageant."

Hadley's eyes widened with shock. "You're what?"

"I'm a judge. Surprise?" Braden's eyes sparkled with mischief.

Her mouth fell open, and then she snapped it shut, managing a shaky laugh. "Well, this just keeps getting weirder."

Braden chuckled. "Tell me about it."

"Okay then, Judge Harding," she said, adding an exaggerated curtsy for effect. "May the odds be ever in my favor."

"I'll be on your side, Hadley." His response was earnest, and she felt her heart give a tiny flutter. "But you can't tell anyone else that, or I'm sure I'll get a huge ration of heat for it."

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Well, I suppose it's some consolation to know that you will be out there secretly rooting for me."

"And Dash will be along sometimes, too," Braden told her.

"Dash?" Hadley raised an eyebrow in question.

"My K9 partner," he replied with a nonchalant shrug as though it was perfectly normal to bring up dogs in such a conversation. "He's at the vet getting his annual check-up right now, but he'll be at the next practice."

Hadley laughed again, this time more freely. "Well, as long as he's not judging the talent portion," she teased.

"You'd win that easy peasy," Braden paid her a genuine compliment.

A blush spread across her cheeks. "You don't even know what my talent is."

"I'm sure it's impressive. Everything about you is."

"Well, thank you," she said with a warm smile, appreciating his apparent fondness for her. "So that means I'm..."

"Contestant number...?" he prompted.

"Seven." A blush crept up her neck. Somehow sharing her contestant number felt more intimate than she'd expected.

"Seven," he repeated. "Lucky number."

"Is it?" She quirked an eyebrow, playing along.

"Absolutely." He nodded solemnly. "Lucky for me, anyhow. Gets me a front-row seat to watch you do your thing."

"Flatterer." She couldn't help the warmth that spread through her at the compliment.

"Truth-teller," he corrected gently. "You've got the whole package, Hadley. It's not just about being pretty."

"Thanks," she murmured her words barely above the rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze. Flattery was part of the pageant game, but from him, it felt different—genuine.

"Anytime." He flashed her a smile that could disarm armies. "And hey, if you need tips on impressing the judges..."

"Are you offering insider info?" She teased, a playful spark in her blue eyes.

"Maybe." His brown eyes danced with mischief. "But only if you promise not to use it against me."

"Deal," she laughed, the sound light and unburdened. For a moment, the weight of expectations lifted. Hadley could feel the pull of his presence like a magnet, but a nagging voice in her head piped up, reminding her of the invisible line drawn between them by his role as a judge.

"Being on the panel...it must be interesting," Hadley said, steering the conversation into safer waters.

"Definitely beats paperwork and early morning drills," he snickered. "But it's not all about judging. It's about recognizing potential."

She nodded, though the irony wasn't lost on her. Here she was, trying to prove she was more than just a pretty face, yet she had to impress people like him to do it.

"Right. Potential," she echoed, her tone light but her insides churning with conflict.

"Hey, don't let it get to you," he said, catching the edge in her voice. "Just be yourself out there."

"Easy for you to say." She gave a rueful smile. "You're not the one being scored."

"True," he conceded, "but I have been under scrutiny before. Trust me, sincerity is your best strategy."

"Thanks, Coach," she nudged him playfully, trying to ignore how natural it felt to banter with him.

"Anytime." He nudged back, then paused, looking at her with an intensity that made her heart skip. "Hadley, I?—"

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Braden—" She cut him off, her voice soft but firm. "We can't."

"Can't what?" The question hung between them, but his eyes were asking a different one.

"Go beyond friendly acquaintances," she clarified, though the words tasted like vinegar.

"Right, of course." His smile didn't quite reach his eyes this time. "Professionalism above all."

"Exactly." She hated how formal her own voice sounded like she was reciting a rule from a handbook.

"Wouldn't want to get too close to a judge, now would we?" His attempt at humor didn't quite mask the disappointment.

"Especially not judge number..." She trailed off, realizing she didn't know his placement.

"Three," he filled in. "Judge number three."

"Especially not judge number three," she finished, the corners of her mouth lifting in a wry smile.

"Then, contestant number seven," he said with a mock bow, "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks, judge number three." She returned the gesture with another curtsy, exaggerated enough to be comical.

They reached the doors of the auditorium, and Hadley stopped, her hand hovering over the handle. She turned to Braden, the air charged with unspoken what-ifs.

"Break a leg out there," he said, and she could tell it wasn't just a saying to him.

"Maybe just a heel," she jested, her laughter contradicting the tightness in her chest.

"Let's hope not," he said, grinning as he gave her a playful salute. "See you inside, Hadley."

"See you, Braden." Hadley watched him go, a laugh escaping her lips despite the knot of uncertainty inside her.

Just then, she noticed her friend, Tina Jones, standing in the doorway, calling out impatiently, "Come on, Hadley. Hurry up. We've got sequins to vanquish."

"Looks like duty calls," Hadley grumbled, trying to shake off her interaction with Braden.

Tina rolled her eyes when Hadley caught up with her. "Did I just catch you flirting with one of the judges?"

Hadley blushed even more and let out an exasperated sigh as she stepped into the flurry of pageant preparations. "No, we just met the other day at the coffee shop, and he was saying 'hi.'" Her attempt at a nonchalant shrug was as transparent as Tina's white t-shirt dress.

"For your sake, I hope the other contestants didn't see," Tina mused, her hazel eyes

sparkling with mischief. "You wouldn't want to get a reputation that you're that girl."

Hadley groaned, "Oh, don't even say that. It was a harmless conversation."

Tina smirked and gave her friend a playful nudge. "You say that now, but wait till the pageant starts. I bet he gives you really high marks."

"Stop it," Hadley retorted, dreading the thought of such a potential scandal.

Just then, George appeared with his clipboard in hand, glaring at them. "Have you two been standing here gossiping instead of helping?" he scolded them lightly.

Tina shrugged unrepentantly while Hadley hurriedly assured the pageant director they were just coming in.

"Good," George clapped his hands together briskly, "Now let's get to work. We've got a pageant to prepare for."

As Hadley tried to concentrate on the opening dance moves, she couldn't help but think about Braden's smile and the twinkle in his eyes when he looked at her. The pageant no longer seemed like her biggest challenge. Keeping her attraction to Braden under control was shaping up to be the real competition.

Chapter Four

Braden shuffled the stack of contestant bios, his gaze inadvertently drawn to the stage where Hadley Wilder glided through her paces. Her midnight black hair cascaded in a glossy waterfall, and every time she turned, her blue eyes sparkled like twin sapphires. She was rehearsing her speech, lips moving with mechanical precision, but her voice was drowned out by the hum of activity around him.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Contestant number eleven," whispered Randy to the other judges, scribbling something on a notepad. "Pageant robot," the newspaper owner muttered under his breath.

Braden watched Hadley's curvy frame pivot at the end of the runway. She was all poise and grace, yet something about her felt off. The words didn't seem to match the person he glimpsed during those unguarded moments between poses or his previous private interactions with her.

"Braden?" Randy nudged him. "You're zoning out, man."

"Sorry," he said quickly, snapping back to reality. He couldn't afford distractions; after all, he was here to be impartial. As he watched Hadley, a nagging curiosity began to itch at the back of his mind.

"Hey, you think there's more to Miss Wilder than the tiara twirl?" Braden asked, half-jokingly, hoping for an ally in his growing suspicion.

"More than meets the eye? It's a beauty pageant, Harding, not a mystery novel," Randy chuckled, shaking his head.

Braden wasn't convinced. As Hadley took her place center stage and began delivering her speech to the empty auditorium, he leaned forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the real person behind the pageantry. Her voice rose and fell with well-rehearsed inflections, yet each word seemed to hang heavy in the air like they were borrowed or staged.

"Doesn't it get tiring?" Braden said aloud, although more to himself than anyone else.

"What's that?" Torrey questioned beside him with a raised eyebrow.

"Never mind," Braden replied, pushing away from the table. He watched as Hadley's peach-colored skin flushed slightly with the effort of her recitation, her practiced smile unwavering.

"Beautiful, sure. But I bet she's got more grit than glitter underneath," he murmured, imagining her tackling challenges with the same determination someone like him would admire. Someone who valued the guts and glory of search and rescue over the gloss of superficial accolades.

"Maybe," the skeptical Randy conceded, following his gaze. "Or maybe she's just really good at winning crowns, and that's her only skill set."

Or maybe we've never really heard her, just the echoes of what's expected, Braden countered in his head, his brown eyes fixed on Hadley as she finished her speech. The judges clapped politely.

"Then again," he added with a smirk, "what do I know? I'm just a guy who searches for bombs with a dog."

"Right," Randy laughed. "Let's stick to judging, Sergeant Harding. Leave the psychoanalysis to the professionals."

"Fair enough," Braden conceded with a grin, though his attention remained locked on Hadley Wilder—the beauty queen who might just have the heart of a warrior if anyone would give her a chance to prove it.

A little while later, Braden leaned against the auditorium wall, his arms crossed, as he

watched the contestants disperse from the stage after the final hour of the grueling practice session. His gaze followed Hadley, noting the way her shoulders sagged ever so slightly the moment she thought no one was watching. The façade of perfection slipped, and for a fleeting second, he saw a glimmer of the real Hadley Wilder.

"Hey, Hadley," Braden called out, pushing off the wall.

She turned, her blue eyes wide with surprise. "Oh, hi, Braden. You're still hanging around here?"

"Seems like it," he replied, taking a few steps closer. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure," she said cautiously, smoothing down her blue dress.

"Back there, on stage..." He paused, searching for the right words. "Why did you say what you said?"

Hadley blinked, her practiced smile faltering. "What do you mean?"

"Your speech," he pressed gently. "It's polished, perfect. Exactly what most judges would want to hear, but do they come from you? Your own thoughts, dreams?"

"Uh..." She looked taken aback, her black hair falling over her shoulder as she tilted her head. "No, not...not exactly. My mother plans them out for me."

"Ah." He nodded, though he felt a twinge of disappointment. "Doesn't it ever feel like you want to share your own story?"

Hadley's eyes darted away, a flicker of vulnerability crossing her features before she composed herself. "It's just how these things go, you know? Winning is what matters in the end."

"Is it?" Braden asked softly. He wanted to nudge her, to see that spark of authentic passion he suspected was buried deep within.

Braden leaned against the backstage wall, arms still folded, a half-grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "But wouldn't it be better if it was, I don't know, natural? Something that came from your heart?"

Hadley's gaze flitted across the room before settling back on him. Her hands fidgeted with the hem of her sash, the white fabric contrasting sharply against her blue dress. "Natural doesn't win pageants," she said with a rehearsed precision. "The speeches my mom writes...they work. That's all that matters."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Really?" Braden quirked an eyebrow, the grin now in full bloom. "So, you're telling me that a crown on your head is more satisfying than speaking your own truth?"

Her blue eyes met his brown ones, and for a moment, there was a crack in the beauty queen's façade. "It's complicated," she admitted, then straightened up, smoothing down her dress as if realigning her armor.

"Doesn't have to be," he shot back playfully. "Ever thought about going rogue? Saying what Hadley Wilder really thinks?"

"Braden..." She hesitated, her lips parting as if she might actually spill a secret or two. "That would be unthinkable."

"Do you really think so?" he prodded, leaning in closer. "You'd rather settle for a scripted life than an authentic one?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, biting her lip. Silence hung between them, heavy and expectant.

Hadley's eyes darted away, a storm brewing in their depths. "I—I have to go," she stammered, her voice a whisper of its former poise.

"Wait, Hadley—" Braden reached out but grasped only air as she spun around, the click of her heels punctuating each step like a metronome set to double time. He watched her hurry off, feeling both intrigued and frustrated. There was more to her. He was sure of it. He just had to find a way to help her see it, too.

She didn't look back, not even once, as she wove through the sea of stage props and clusters of contestants. Her figure became smaller until it vanished beyond the heavy velvet curtains.

"Great job, Braden," he muttered to himself, sarcasm dripping from every word. His hand ran through his hair, a gesture of frustration that seemed to say, "What were you thinking?"

"Really smooth," he added, his words echoing off the empty walls. He could almost hear Dash, his faithful golden retriever, giving him a disappointed woof in his head. "Scaring her off with your big, bad questions." He grimaced, picturing her troubled expression, the way her curvy frame had tensed before her hasty retreat. "Maybe I should stick to searching for actual bombs rather than setting off verbal ones," he sighed, half-expecting his instructors to pop up with a wisecrack about his less-than-stellar social skills.

"Sure, let's just throw a wrench in the one decent conversation we've had," he continued his self-deprecation, hoping humor might mask the prick of regret. "Because who needs meaningful connections when you've got awkward silences and runaway beauty queens?" He gave a hollow chuckle as he shook his head, his thoughts already plotting an apology or at least a peace offering. "Maybe a coffee and a muffin from Michelle's shop will help her forgive me," he mumbled to himself. Considering she probably wouldn't want the calories from the muffin, that wasn't the best idea.

"Or maybe just keep your mouth shut next time, Harding," he chastised himself, the weight of the evening pressing downlike a lead cloak. "Definitely need to work on those people skills," he concluded.

As he made his way to the veterinarian clinic, he imagined Dash's wagging tail and nonjudgmental eyes. At least someone was always happy to see him, and for now,

that would have to do.

Just as he was about to descend into full-blown pity, his phone buzzed against the pocket of his jeans. He pulled it out, squinting at the screen. A text message from Instructor Bowman.

"Lay off the guilt trip already," it read, "We heard what happened. Remember, we are K9 handlers, not therapists. It's better if you just stay in your lane."

Braden huffed a laugh. Trust Danny to bring him down to earth. He typed back a quick response: "Thanks for the reminder."

His phone buzzed again immediately, "And for goodness' sake, get her that muffin."

"From the Coffee Loft?" Braden texted back, picturing Hadley's clear blue eyes lighting up at the sight of a warm blueberry muffin.

"No," came the response quicker than he thought possible, "From some bakery in New York. Of course, from the Coffee Loft."

Braden chuckled as he reshuffled his priorities. Dash could wait another half an hour at the vet.

As he turned his steps toward the Coffee Loft, his heart seemed lighter than before. It was funny how one small action could change his perspective completely. Suddenly, buying a muffin didn't seem like just an empty apology anymore.

"Let's hope I won't mess this one up, too," he murmured to himself. A slight smile tugged at his lips for the first time since Hadley rushed off in a huff.

Arriving at the Coffee Loft, he paused before entering. The smell of fresh coffee and

baked goods wafted through the door, coaxing him in. The owner, Michelle Kenney, stood behind the counter, her blonde hair pulled back and her hazel eyes sparkling. She was always a welcoming sight, her upbeat energy infectious.

"Braden, long time no see." She greeted with a hint of sarcasm in her warm voice. "The usual?"

He nodded but added, "And one of your blueberry muffins."

Michelle's eyebrows shot up. "You don't seem like the blueberry muffin type."

Braden grinned sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck as he looked anywhere but at Michelle's knowing smirk. "It's not for me," he admitted.

"No worries," she chuckled, bagging up a muffin. "Everyone knows the fastest way to Hadley Wilder's heart is via food. Mostly because her mother monitors every single bite that girl puts in her mouth."

He didn't like the sound of that. The more he found out about Hadley's mom, the more he began to realize she must be the root of Hadley's problems. It must be exhausting having to live up to someone else's unrealistic expectations all the time.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Thanks, Michelle," he said, eager to escape the conversation before it could venture into even more uncomfortable territory.

"Don't mention it. And Braden?" she called out as he turned to leave. "You can do this. I happen to know she works out at the local gym every night at seven."

"Thanks for the heads-up," he told the coffee shop owner.

"You're welcome. Just do right by her, okay? She's a great girl, and you'd be lucky if she agreed to go out with you."

He left the shop with a small wave and an embarrassed smile, cringing internally. He noticed during several visits to the CoffeeLoft that Michelle was always able to read people like open books, and right now, he was an all too predictable chapter.

Back at the veterinarian clinic, Dash's tail thumped eagerly against the floor at the sight of his human companion. Braden reached down to ruffle his golden coat. He could tell he was ready to go to the park and run some energy off, but Braden had a pressing priority to handle first.

"Soon," he murmured to Dash, "first, we gotta make things right with Hadley."

After a brief run-down of his checkup—during which Dash behaved impeccably—they headed out. Braden held the muffin in one hand while the other held Dash's leash absentmindedly.

Nearing the gym's door, he felt a pang of anxiety. What if she didn't accept his

apology? What if she had already made up her mind about him? He shook off these thoughts, reminding himself that worrying wouldn't help anyone.

With a deep breath, he pushed through the door. The gym was a hotbed of activity. The hum of treadmills, the clank of weights, grunts from weightlifters, and popping hip-hop music filled the air. There in the corner, punching the stuffing out of a boxing bag, was Hadley, dressed in a black tank top and matching leggings. The outfit enhanced the curves of her body, and Braden couldn't take his eyes off of her. Though, he was surprised that of all the activities in the gym, that was where he found her. Then he remembered everything he'd heard about her mother, and he figured it might be the only way she could safely let out her frustration.

Braden steeled himself and approached her, Dash by his side. "Hey, Hadley," he started, voice slightly shaky against the thumping bass around them.

She stopped her punches and turned to look at him. Sweat was dripping down her face. Her black hair slicked back in a tight ponytail. "Braden?"

"Yeah..." He rubbed the back of his neck, flustered. "And Dash."

At that, the golden retriever got excited and ran toward Hadley wagging his tail.

Hadley smiled down at Dash before looking back up at Braden. "What brings you both here?"

"I...uh...I wanted to apologize," he said with a sincere smile.

"For what?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"Well...for sticking my foot in my mouth earlier, and..." Braden hesitated. He hadn't really thought this far ahead. He looked down at the muffin he brought for her.

Maybe food would do the talking for him. "With this." He held out the muffin toward her, hoping she'd get what he meant. She glanced at it and then back up to him.

"Is that a peace offering?" she asked with a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

He shrugged and gave a half-smile. "Something like that."

For a moment, she just stared at him before bursting into laughter. She took the bag and looked inside. "I've never gotten a muffin apology before."

"Then I'm glad to be the first," Braden said, relief spreading over his face. He could see Hadley's eyes soften, her laughter filling the air between them with a sense of camaraderie.

Dash had, by now, lost interest in the two humans and found himself a stray tennis ball. The dog raced around, chasing the ball all over the room.

Watching Dash's antics, Hadley chuckled, "Your partner is quite an athlete."

Braden nodded, smiling with admiration. "Yeah, he's always like that. A real bundle of energy, which is why I need to be going soon to take him to the park. You want to come with us?"

Her eyebrows shot up as she took a swig of water from her bottle. "I guess I could cut my workout short and go with you."

"Good, because we need to get out of her right now. We're getting a lot of irritated looks because of Dash's behavior," Braden confessed.

Hadley broke into a wide grin as she took a bite of her blueberry baked good. "So, do I get muffin apologies every time I see you now?"

He shrugged, "I guess that depends on whether I mess up again or not."

"You're assuming you won't mess up?"

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Braden gave her a sheepish smile, "I'm hoping."

Hadley laughed at that, the sweet sound echoing throughout the room. It was a sound Braden found he liked very much. "I'll take that as a yes," she said, finishing her muffin.

Just then, Dash came careening back, ball in mouth, and tail wagging furiously.

"Looks like someone is eager to get going." Braden glanced at his watch. "Are you ready?"

Hadley tossed her empty water bottle into the recycling bin and draped her towel around her neck. "Let's go."

As they left the gym, Braden noticed a few of the patrons watching them. He just grinned and nodded in their direction before following Hadley out the door, Dash bounding along behind him.

"Hey, Braden?" Hadley called over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Can we stop at the Coffee Loft? Michelle makes a killer iced mocha that I'm suddenly craving after that muffin."

"Lead the way," he responded, the grin on his face growing wider with every passing moment.

It was a quick walk back to the Coffee Loft, and Michelle was still behind the counter, a friendly smile plastered on her face. "Hadley, Braden," she greeted them enthusiastically, an apron tied around her waist. "I wasn't expecting you back tonight. You both want the usual?"

Hadley leaned against the counter, a twinkle in her eyes as she shook her head. "I'm feeling a little rebellious tonight. I want to splurge and get your amazing iced mocha."

"Make that two," Braden added, patting Dash, who sat beside him obediently. His eyes met Hadley's, and he shrugged sheepishly. "Can't let you have all the good stuff."

Michelle chuckled, punching their orders into the register. "Anything for my favorite customers. I'll make a puppuchino for Dash, too."

A couple of minutes later, they were back outside with two cold drinks in their hands and smiles on their faces. Dash was still licking his mouth from his own treat.

"Dash is gonna love the park," Braden said as they started walking again. "He's got way too much energy left to burn."

"And maybe you do, too?" Hadley suggested with a playful smile.

"Perhaps," he replied with a grin. "Though it's been a pretty long day already, and I need to study when I get back to the B&B."

The wind blew through their hair as they walked toward the park, their laughter filling the air around them as they talked about their lives.

"Speaking of studying," Hadley nudged him with her elbow, "How's the academy

training going?"

Braden took a moment to respond, sipping his iced mocha thoughtfully before answering. "It's not a walk in the park, but Dash is picking up things pretty quickly, and I'm holding my own."

Hadley glanced down at the golden retriever wagging his tail excitedly. "He seems like a pretty smart dog."

"Smartest dog I've ever met," Braden agreed proudly, reaching down to give Dash a pat on the head.

As they entered the dog park, Dash immediately took off after he was released from his leash, barking and wagging his tail with joy as he ran around.

"He sure loves his freedom," Hadley commented, careful not to let her drink spill as Dash ran past them, kicking up grass.

"That he does," Braden said with a chuckle as he watched Dash make another lap around the fenced-in area.

They spent some time talking and laughing as Dash played in the park. Hadley told him about her childhood beauty pageants she was forced into by her mother, and Braden shared funny stories from his time in the Air Force.

"Hey, Braden?" Hadley asked after a moment of silence.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Dash likes being a bomb detection dog?"

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Braden looked down at his partner, who was now lying on the grass, panting heavily, looking up at him adoringly. "I think he loves it. I mean, he gets to protect people all the time."

"Sounds like a good deal to me," Hadley replied with a smile. "I bet that's why you love it, too."

He nodded. "I couldn't imagine doing anything else."

An alert went off on Hadley's smartwatch, and she glanced down at it. "I have to go. My mom's going to be back at the gym in a few minutes to pick me up."

"You know, you should have the freedom to do what you want, not just what your mom wants for you," Braden pointed out.

"That's a nice idea, but it doesn't work in my world," Hadley stated with a sigh. "But it was really great spending time with you. Hopefully, we can do it again sometime."

"Here's hoping," he called out after her retreating figure.

Suddenly, life felt a whole lot more interesting—and certainly more unpredictable—than it had been before he met Hadley Wilder. He was beginning to see that was exactly how he liked it.

Chapter Five

Candace waved Hadley over to a corner booth in the bustling bistro, where two

women sat sipping what appeared to be artisanal lemonade. "Hadley, meet Jenesa and Avery," she said with an enthusiastic flutter of her hands that almost knocked over a glass.

"Hi," Hadley managed, taking in Jenesa's pearl encrusted suit and Avery's floral blouse splattered with what looked suspiciously like what must be the B&B's soup special for the day.

"Charmed," Jenesa said, extending a hand, her grip firm and confident.

"Super excited to meet you," Avery chirped, nearly tipping from the booth as she leaned too far forward in her eagerness.

"I know your mom thinks you're here for sponsorship...which is not entirely untrue," Candace said with a wink that made Hadley's heart do a nervous jig.

"Ah, the pageant life. All glitter but no real gold," Jenesa quipped, swirling the ice in her drink.

"More than a pretty face, right?" Avery added, dodging a rogue crouton that decided to escape her plate.

"Exactly." Hadley felt her cheeks warm up. "I want to be known for more than just a tiara on my head."

"Good, because a tiara won't keep you warm at night unless it's knitted," Avery noted, deadpan.

"Or pay the bills," Jenesa added, raising an eyebrow.

"Unless it's stuffed with cash," Avery said, trying to stifle a giggle.

"Or wisdom." Jenesa gave Hadley a meaningful look. "Pursue what sets your soul on fire, not just what sparkles under stage lights."

"Though a little sparkle never hurt anyone," Candace added.

"This is true," Avery chimed in, grinning as she nearly knocked over her lemonade in a fit of enthusiasm.

"Points well taken," Hadley laughed, feeling lighter than she had all week.

"Okay, Hadley, spill it. What's your secret talent?" Avery leaned in, eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Uh..." Hadley hesitated, fidgeting with her napkin. "Secret talent? I mean, I sing at the pageants."

"No, not that. Come on," Jenesa prodded, "something that isn't 'pageant approved.'"

"Is eating a whole pizza in one sitting a talent?" Hadley offered weakly, earning a burst of laughter from the table.

"Absolutely," Avery declared. "But what about you? The real you, under all that hairspray and sash."

"Nobody wants to see that on stage," Hadley mumbled, but Jenesa shook her head firmly.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Wrong. That's exactly who we want to see. The Hadley who devours pizza like a champ." Jenesa's gaze was steady and sincere.

"Be you. Whoever that is," Candace said, reaching over and giving Hadley's hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Even if 'me' doesn't fit the crown?" Hadley's voice was small, but hopeful.

"Especially then," Jenesa's affirmation rang clear.

"Because 'you' is unique. And that's your real power." Avery nodded, nearly toppling her chair in her enthusiasm.

"Thanks, guys," Hadley felt a warmth spreading through her chest, a stark contrast to the coolness of her mother's calculated plans. "For believing I can be more than just a crown and sash."

"That's what friends are for, and that's what we want to be," Candace added her smile, along with the others that were as encouraging as a standing ovation.

"Best. Pageant prep. Ever," Hadley beamed, feeling for the first time that maybe she could wear the crown on her own terms.

As the night continued, plates of half-eaten food lay forgotten as Candace, Jenesa, and Avery swapped tales that had nothing to do with beauty pageants or tiaras.

"Okay, okay," Hadley gasped between chuckles, "your turn, Candace. Worst date?"

"Easy," Candace said, eyes glinting with mischief. "Guy took me to a taxidermy exhibit. Said it was 'educational.'"

"Yikes," Jenesa grimaced.

"Wait, it gets better," Candace continued. "He whispered sweet nothings to me by quoting death rates of the animals."

"Romantic," Avery deadpanned, and they all burst into fresh peals of laughter.

"Enough about bad romance," Jenesa declared, pushing her chair back. "It's time to dance."

"Here?" Hadley blinked, scanning the bustling restaurant.

"No, silly," Avery winked. "At the Coffee Loft. They have line dancing tonight."

"Line dancing?" Hadley's heart leaped in trepidation and excitement.

"Trust us," Candace said, standing up and tossing a few bills on the table. "It's a hoot."

They navigated through the crowded eatery and out into the balmy evening air that hinted at the promise of fun. The neon sign of the Coffee Loft buzzed in welcome, and with each step, Hadley felt an unfamiliar lightness.

Out back in the garden, the rhythmic thumping of boots against a makeshift wooden dance floor filled the space. The instructor, a lady with enthusiasm oozing from every pore, called out steps over the twangy music. They joined the group, falling into the pattern of grapevines and heel taps.

"Step, turn, step together, step," the instructor shouted.

"Whoops," Hadley stumbled slightly, but Candace caught her elbow.

"Laugh it off. I'm the worst at this," Avery shouted over the music, spinning past them with a grin as she, too, tripped and nearly toppled to the ground.

"Got it," Hadley found the beat, her body moving almost without thought once she found her own rhythm. She was clumsy, sure, but she was doing it. And it was...fun. It was so different from the dancing she did for pageants, where every part of it was perfectly choreographed for the viewers.

"Look at you go," Candace cheered, clapping hands with Hadley as they passed in the weave of dancers.

"Never thought I'd be here doing this," Hadley said, breathless with joy.

"Where? On your feet?" Jenesa teased.

"Having fun, feeling...free." Hadley's blue eyes sparkled, reflecting the colorful lights crisscrossing the dance floor.

"Get used to it," Candace whooped, swinging her hips to the beat. "This is just the beginning."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Feels like more than that," Hadley admitted, her voice barely above the music. "Feels like I've got real friends."

"Yes, you do," Avery called from across the formation.

Their laughter mingled with the music, a melody sweeter than any crowning ceremony's fanfare. In that moment, the tiara, the sash, the expectations—all faded into the background. Here, surrounded by her new allies, Hadley Wilder was simply a girl having the time of her life.

Hadley's heels tapped along, keeping time with the beat as she spun under Candace's outstretched arm. Her laughter was lost in the music.

"Y'all are naturals," Michelle called out, sidestepping a rogue dancer as she waved to all of them.

"Speak for yourself," Avery chuckled, attempting to mirror Jenesa's fancy footwork. She seemed to be the best of them all.

"Hey, Wilder. Fancy seeing you in these parts," the familiar voice cut through the ruckus.

Spinning around, Hadley's eyes widened. Braden Harding, his black hair tousled and those brown eyes alight with mischief, stood at the edge of the dance floor. He was with a group of men whose faces were new to her but wore the same camaraderie as Braden. His dog, Dash, wasn't in sight, presumably resting after a day's training.

"Braden?" She blinked, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"Blowing off steam," he grinned, gesturing to the men behind him. "Meet my fellow trainees."

"Mind if we join you?" one of the trainees asked, his smile easy.

"More the merrier," Avery whooped, already pulling two of the newcomers into their line.

"Looks like we've got ourselves some new recruits," Candace said, clapping her hands to the rhythm.

"Welcome to the chaos," Hadley laughed, finding herself paired with Braden as the music shifted to a faster tune.

"Hope you can keep up," he teased, twirling her effortlessly.

"Watch me," she shot back, the challenge sparking her competitive streak.

This was when Tina appeared, her entrance as subtle as a bull in a china shop. Her glare zeroed in on Hadley, a sneer twisting her lips.

"Cozying up to one of the judges again, Hadley?" Tina accused, arms folded, her voice dripping with venom.

"Excuse me?" Hadley faltered, the accusation jolting her. She stopped dancing and stiffened under the accusation.

"Please, Tina," Braden interjected. "We're all just here to dance."

"Right," Tina drawled, eyeing them skeptically. "And I'm here for the pastries."

"Back off, Tina," Candace stepped forward, protectively. "No one's cozying up to anyone."

"Let's not ruin a good night," Jenesa added, her gaze stern.

"Yeah, if you're not here to have fun, you should just go," Avery chimed in.

"Whatever," Tina huffed, flipping her hair dismissively as she turned around to leave. "Just watch your step, Hadley," she added over her shoulder as she stomped off.

"Thanks, guys," Hadley murmured, grateful for the shield her friends formed against Tina's barbs.

"Hey, don't mention it," Candace said, bumping shoulders. "Now, let's show these academy boys how it's done."

"Lead the way," Braden smiled, and they plunged back into the fray of dancers. The incident with Tina quickly dissolved into the laughter and high spirits of newfound friendships.

Hadley's laughter faded as she caught the time on her phone. The screen glowed 9:03 p.m., a silent reminder of the real world waiting outside the Coffee Loft's twangy bubble.

"Guys, I think I should head out," Hadley said, her voice barely cutting through the music.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Already?" Jenesa pouted theatrically.

"Mom's rules," Hadley replied with a sigh. "During pageant time, I need to be in bed by 10."

"You are a grown woman, right?" Jenesa asked in confusion. "Aren't you in charge of your own curfew and bedtime?"

"You would think so," Hadley stated with a shrug, "but you can't fight the iron fist of pageant prep."

"Escape while you can," Avery teased, mock-serious.

"I'll see you tomorrow at practice, then?" Braden asked, concern lacing his casual tone.

"Sure will," Hadley promised, a grateful smile on her lips.

She navigated through the sea of dancers, the weight of Tina's words and her mother's expectations pressing down on her. Stepping outside, the cool night air wrapped around her like a reality check. She made her way home, each step a reluctant march toward the gilded cage she lived in.

The house was dark except for the kitchen light spilling into the foyer. Her mother stood silhouetted against the soft glow. Her stance was rigid, brow furrowed.

"Where have you been?" her mother demanded.

"Out with potential sponsors," Hadley replied, hoping it was enough to appease her mother.

"Sponsors, really? I heard you were out with a group of riffraff, including one of the judges," her mother's voice was sharp, accusatory.

"Mom, it's not what you think—" Hadley started, but her mother cut her off.

"I heard about your little spectacle at the Coffee Loft. Dancing with that trainee, the one that's a judge. You know that could cost you your spot in the pageant."

"No, Mom. Braden's just?—"

"Doesn't matter," her mother snapped. "Appearances, Hadley. It's all about appearances."

"Mom, I?—"

"Listen to me. You're so close to that crown. Don't throw it away over some boy you just met."

Hadley's protest died in her throat. She wanted to argue, to defend her innocence and her need for something real, but the set line of her mother's mouth told her it would be futile.

"Fine," Hadley muttered. "I'm going to bed."

"Think about what you've worked so hard for, Hadley," her mother called after her. "And what you're willing to risk for it."

Hadley climbed the stairs, the echo of her mother's words chasing her up to her room.

Hadley's hand paused on the banister, her heart sinking. The soft carpet under her feet muffled her steps as she retreated to the sanctuary of her room. She closed the door with a quiet click, leaning back against it.

"Risk," she whispered to the silence. The word felt foreign, a luxury she couldn't afford. Her eyes flickered to the rows of tiaras perched mockingly on a shelf above her vanity—shiny shackles meant to keep her the way her mother wanted her.

"Right," she scoffed, peeling off her clothes and slipping into an oversized T-shirt. "Because sparkly headgear equals life fulfillment."

The mirror caught her reflection, a tired girl with hollow victories. She poked at her curvy frame and frowned at the black hair tumbling over her shoulders. "More than pretty," she murmured. "More than this."

Her bed beckoned, a cocoon of blankets promising oblivion. She crawled in, pulling the covers high. Sleep, however, was a coy lover, evading her grasp. The ceiling stared back at her, unblinking.

"Mom could've been a general," Hadley mused. "Charge."

She imagined saying what churned inside her. 'Let me be happy.' But the words clung to her tongue, heavy with consequences. Dreams of tiaras clashed with dreams of freedom, a mountain of 'shoulds' and 'musts' dominating everything in her life.

"Braden would get it," she thought. A smile crept onto her lips, only to fade. Even he was tangled in this mess now—all because of a muffin and a dance.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Great," she muttered. "I'm one more incident away from being a walking scandal."

The night pressed in, thick with her sighs. Her phone buzzed—a message from Candace: "Keep your chin up, Queen."

"Queen of the lonely hearts club," Hadley typed back, then erased. She settled for a simple heart emoji instead.

"Enough drama to fill a rom-com," she told her stuffed bear, the confidant of her youth. It stared back, judgment-free and plush.

"Cut to the heroine, wallowing in bed," she said aloud, scripting her own misery. "Fade to black."

The moonlight streamed through the window, bathing the room in a cold glow. Hadley turned away, curling into herself. If only wishes were crowns, she'd rule a happier kingdom.

"Tomorrow," she promised the darkness. "I'll be braver tomorrow."

But tonight, she was just Hadley—discouraged, alone, and without a way to make herself feel any better about her situation.

Chapter Six

Braden's sneakers rubbed the carpet as he paced the narrow confines of his room. Dash, with a quizzical tilt to his head, trailed a few paces behind, his leash dragging

like an abandoned lifeline. Braden grimaced, snatching up the leash and planting a hand on his hip.

"Sorry, pal," he muttered to the golden retriever, who responded with a forgiving nuzzle against his palm. "Just got a lot on my plate."

Dash woofed softly as if to say he understood, but his brown eyes seemed to demand more attention than Braden could afford at the moment. Between the rigorous training sessions, his partner's need for consistency, and the unexpected duty of judging a beauty pageant—which frankly felt like navigating a minefield in clown shoes—Braden was stretched thinner than the last slice of Sunday roast at a family dinner.

Hadley...her image flickered in his mind. Black hair spilled over her peach-colored shoulders, and those piercing blue eyes that could stop a man—or at least him—in his tracks. He shook his head, attempting to dislodge her from his thoughts as effectively as Dash shedding water after a bath.

"Need to clear my head," he announced, more to himself than to Dash, who wagged his tail in agreement. "Maybe going to church will help."

A half-hour later, the church loomed ahead, its white steeple piercing the clear blue sky like an arrow. Braden always found something soothing about an old building like this one, with its stained-glass windows and the way the wooden pews creaked with history. Maybe a dose of the divine would untangle the knot of obligations tightening in his chest.

"Here goes nothing," he whispered, pushing open the heavy door where murmurs and the scent of polished wood greeted him. He slid into a back pew, the wood cool against his hands, and exhaled slowly. The preacher's voice rolled over the congregation, waves of calm that Braden desperately needed to ride.

"Lord," he prayed silently, "help me find the balance."

Dash sat obediently by his feet, embodying the patience Braden wished he could muster. As his gaze wandered over the bowed heads and clasped hands, it snagged on a familiar form—Hadley, her silhouette unmistakable even at a distance.

"Focus," he chided himself, rubbing his temples. He knew it was a lost cause to ask himself to sit in church and not think about Hadley. It was like asking Dash to ignore a squirrel scampering across their path—futile.

"Maybe after this, we'll go for a long run, eh?" he suggested to Dash, who perked up at the prospect, blissfully unaware of the inner turmoil of his human companion. "Keep it together, Harding," Braden muttered under his breath, hoping for a miracle or at least a signpost to guide him through the chaos of his life.

Braden leaned forward, elbows on his knees, as the preacher's voice swelled. "And it is in balancing our duties with our passions that we find harmony," boomed the reverend, his sermon slicing through Braden's haze of worry like a lighthouse beam through fog.

"Talk about timing," Braden mumbled, a wry smile tugging at his lips. Dash's ears twitched at the sound of his voice, but the dog remained statue-still, a testament to his training.

A ripple of 'amens' washed through the congregation, and Braden found himself nodding along, the knot in his chest loosening just a hair. He was grateful for the unexpected guidance, like a life preserver tossed out into choppy seas.

"Needed that," he said to Dash, who offered a quiet sniff in response as if agreeing or perhaps just acknowledging the shift in Braden's demeanor.

As the final notes of a hymn filled the air, Braden stood, stretching legs that felt lighter than when he'd arrived. His eyes scanned the dispersing crowd, landing once again on Hadley. She was placing her hymnal back in its place, her black hair cascading down her back, the blue of her dress making her eyes pop even from this distance.

"Should probably say hi," Braden thought, feet carrying him closer before his brain fully agreed. "Hey there," he called out softly, not wanting to startle her in the serene space.

Hadley turned, her face brightening. "Braden, hi. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Could say the same," he replied, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Sermon hit home for you too?"

"Absolutely," she laughed, the sound mingling with the lingering chatter of other churchgoers. "I swear, it's like he's got my mom on speed dial, feeding him my life story."

"I guess you could take it that way," Braden said with a shrug. "I'd like to think that the point is that we should not focus too much on either one, but find a way to make them both matter."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"That's an interesting take on it," Hadley murmured, the corner of her mouth turning up in a small smile. "Divineintervention with a side of canine companionship, right?" Hadley gestured at Dash, who sat obediently by Braden's side.

"Dash is my furry guardian angel," Braden grinned, scratching behind the dog's ears. "Keeps me on the straight and narrow."

"Sounds like a tough job," she teased, stepping closer to offer Dash a gentle pat.

"Hardest one in the Air Force," Braden agreed, his laughter mingling with hers, a brief respite from the juggling act of his life.

"Have you grabbed lunch yet?" Hadley's question hung in the air like an unexpected summer breeze.

"Actually—" Braden hesitated, a mental image of them line dancing the night before swirled with thoughts of impartiality. "I've got to study. Duty calls, you know?"

"Right, of course." Her smile didn't reach her eyes, and he felt a twinge of something akin to regret.

"Rain check?" He offered up a hopeful grin.

"Definitely." Hadley's smile returned, genuine this time.

Braden watched her walk away. Dash was panting at his side. He exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of responsibility settling back onto his shoulders.

When he returned to the Bumblebee Bed and Breakfast, it was bustling with the sounds of lunchtime chatter as Braden pushed open the front door. Jenesa and Avery were hosting his instructors, laughter spilling from the dining room.

"Hey, Braden," Avery called out, waving a spatula. "Join us for lunch?"

"Can't," he replied, holding up his books. "Study time."

"Suit yourself," Avery chirped before turning back to her culinary creations.

Braden made his way through the maze of dogs lounging in the foyer. He reached the stairs when a chorus of barks erupted behind him.

"Dash, no." Braden spun around just in time to see his golden retriever bolt toward the dining room, followed by an enthusiastic parade of canine chaos.

"Rambler's on the loose," Avery yelped as a German shepherd brushed past her, sending a bowl of salad soaring through the air.

"Touchdown," Hunter hooted, catching the bowl but not its contents.

"Guess it's a floor picnic today," Jenesa jested, dodging a slobbering border collie.

"Dash, stop right now," Braden's voice finally pierced the pandemonium, the dogs skidding to a halt, tongues lolling. "Sorry about that," he apologized, cheeks burning as he corralled the dogs.

"Never a dull moment around here," Jenesa laughed, handing him a towel.

"Seems not," Braden mumbled, mopping up salad dressing and dog drool.

"Hey, at least the dogs are entertained," Avery added, a silver lining in her tone as she slipped on a rogue tomato slice but miraculously stayed upright.

"Entertained and fed, apparently," Braden smiled, watching the German shepherd gobble up the last of the salad.

"Next time, maybe put a leash on your partner," Hunter teased, the group erupting into chuckles.

"Or on me," Avery countered, grinning at her own mishap.

"Could say the same for myself," Braden muttered under his breath, thinking of Hadley and how he'd barely restrained himself from accepting her lunch invitation.

As the laughter subsided, Braden excused himself, dog in tow, heading upstairs. He needed to focus on studying, but the image of Hadley lingered, as persistent as Dash's tail wags.

The clink of metal echoed as Braden clipped Dash's leash onto his harness. He glanced around the training yard, taking in the orderly chaos of canines and handlers weaving through obstacle courses. That's when he spotted Charlie leaning against the fence, a wry smile playing on his lips.

"Morning, Harding," Charlie called out, pushing off the fence to approach. "Heard you're moonlighting as a pageant judge?"

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Guilty," Braden replied with a shrug, feeling the weight of everyone knowing his business.

"Small town, big drama," Charlie chuckled, clapping him on the back. "You'll need some guidance navigating those waters. It takes some getting used to."

"Feels more like whitewater rafting than navigating," Braden confessed, watching Dash sit attentively by his side.

"Come on," Charlie said, motioning for them to walk. "I've got something that might help."

They crossed the academy grounds, passing trainees who offered respectful nods, then made their way into the center of town. The library was a small brick building nestled between towering oaks, its windows filled with the soft glow of morning sunlight. Inside, Charlie's girlfriend, a librarian with an easy smile, waved them over.

"Braden, meet Taylor," Charlie introduced. "Sweetie, he could use some insider knowledge."

"Pageant politics?" she asked knowingly, her icy blue eyes gleaming with a wealth of hidden information.

"Among other things," Braden admitted. "Some dog handling books would also be helpful."

"Say no more," Taylor said, turning to scan the shelves. She returned with an armful

of books, ranging from dog training manuals to a surprisingly thick volume titled "Small-Town Pageants: A Survival Guide."

"Study these," she instructed, her tone half-serious, half-amused. "Especially Chapter Seven: 'Sashes and Scandals.'"

"Scandals?" Braden raised an eyebrow, accepting the stack. "I think I pretty much know how to stay clear of those."

"Preparation is key," Taylor added with a grin. "And hey, if you need to practice evening gown commentary, I'm sure Hadley Wilder is more than willing to help."

"Thanks, but I'm more worried about the talent portion," Braden chuckled, balancing the books under one arm.

"Good luck," Taylor said, waving them off. "And remember, it's all about the smile and wave."

"Smile and wave," Braden repeated, mock saluting as they left the library.

"See? You're a natural already," Charlie laughed, slapping Braden's shoulder. "Now, let's get back to training that dog of yours."

"Right behind you," Braden said, his mind already flipping through pageant strategies and dog commands, wondering how on earth he'd juggle both.

Several hours later, Braden's fingers traced the spine of "Small-Town Pageants: A Survival Guide" as he sat on his bed at the B&B. His eyes darted between lines about poise and posture, but his mind was doing somersaults around Hadley—her laugh, her tenacity, the way her blue eyes sparkled under stage lights. He let out a sigh, books piling up like a fortress around him.

"Focus, Braden," he muttered to himself. The clock ticked away mockingly. He peeked at his watch; an hour had vanished with little progress. He decided it was time to switch to a dog training manual. His legs bounced with pent-up energy for another hour, still unable to concentrate properly. A workout—that's what he needed. Maybe he'd bump into Hadley, clear his head, and get back to studying with renewed vigor.

"Dash," he called out to his K9 partner, who looked up from his chew toy with a tilt of his head. "Gym time. Let's hope the treadmill is kinder to me than these pageant rules."

After putting Dash in his kennel, Braden made his way over to the gym. Braden spotted Hadley immediately, black hair tied in a high ponytail, earbuds in, punching away at a boxing bag with fierce jabs. Her peach-colored skin glistened with sweat, a testament to her resolve.

"Hey, heavyweight," he joked, approaching her with a smile.

Hadley paused, pulling out an earbud. "Braden, I didn't know you're one for sparring."

"Trying to diversify my talents," he teased, rolling his shoulders. "Mind if I join you?"

"Only if you can keep up," she teased, resuming her routine.

They fell into a rhythm, side by side; her punches were precise and powerful, his more measured, each learning the dance of the other's training. Between sets, they exchanged playful banter, their laughter echoing off the gym walls.

"Didn't peg you as the boxing type," Braden said, genuinely impressed by her stamina.

"Pageantry isn't all tiaras and sashes," Hadley shot back, wiping her brow. "Gotta be strong too, you know?"

"Strong and stunning," he replied, earning a roll of her eyes but also a smile that made his heart skip.

"Keep it up, and I might just let you go up against me," she chuckled, landing a solid right hook on the bag.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Deal," Braden grinned, feeling lighter than he had all day. "But only if you promise not to laugh when I trip over my own feet."

"Never," Hadley promised, her eyes shining with mirth. "I'll just critique your form like a true pageant judge."

"Harsh, Wilder." He feigned a wounded expression before adding, "All right, show me how it's done, champ."

As they continued their workout, Braden realized this was exactly where he needed to be. With every jab, every shared joke, the weight of his responsibilities seemed to lift, replaced by something far more exhilarating—the simple joy of being with Hadley.

"Your form's not half bad, Sergeant Harding," Hadley kidded, her breath coming in short bursts as they moved onto the treadmills.

"That's because I learned from the best," Braden replied, increasing the incline on his machine to keep pace with her.

"Is that flattery part of your judge training?" she asked, a playful glint in her eye.

"Maybe," he winked. "But no bias here, Wilder. Pure admiration for a worthy contestant."

They ran in a comfortable silence, the rhythm of their strides syncing up. Braden glanced her way, taking in her determination, the way her black hair clung to the nape of her neck, and he felt the urge to spend the rest of the evening with her. A late

dinner, a walk, anything—just to be around her more.

"Hey, Hadley, want to grab a—" He was cut off as her phone rang. She slowed her treadmill to a walk, fishing the device out of her pocket.

"Mom?" Her voice shifted, a note of resignation threading through it. "Yeah, I'm almost done here."

Braden's shoulders slumped slightly, the question dying on his lips. He turned down his treadmill, trying to mask his disappointment with a casual shrug.

"Everything okay?" he asked as she ended the call.

"Mom needs me for some pageant prep stuff." She hopped off the treadmill, still breathing heavily. "Duty calls, you know?"

"Sure, duty," he echoed, nodding. "Rain check on our sparring session, then?"

"Definitely," Hadley said, flashing him a quick smile as she gathered her things. "Thanks for the workout. It was fun."

"Anytime," Braden managed, watching her go. "See you, Hadley."

"Bye, Braden," she called over her shoulder, already halfway out the door.

He stood there a moment longer, the gym suddenly too quiet. The temptation to chase after her, to say something—anything—was strong, but he shook his head. Not today.

"Next time," he muttered to himself, the words barely audible over the whir of machines. "Next time."

Chapter Seven

Hadley balanced a tower of canned goods in her arms, her black hair falling like a curtain around her concentrated expression. She navigated through the church's bustling hall, where volunteers were organizing a food drive.

"Whoa, careful there, beauty queen," one of the volunteers joked as she narrowly avoided a collision with a stack of cardboard boxes.

"Thanks, but I've got it," Hadley retorted with a smile, proud of her agility that wasn't limited to the stage. She placed the cans onto the table with a satisfying clink. "And for today, just Hadley will do."

"Right, Hadley without the tiara. Got it," the older man winked, returning to his task.

Just then, a disheveled woman came rushing in, clumsily knocking over a stack of cups.

"Oh dear," she muttered, her cheeks turning the color of the tomato cans Hadley just set down.

Without missing a beat, Hadley moved to help. "Been there," she said, bending down and collecting the scattered cups.

The woman laughed, embarrassment melting into relief. "Thank you," she said. "I'm Kerry."

"Hadley," she responded with a bright smile.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Former Miss Peachville, right?" Kerry asked, recognition flickering in her eyes.

Hadley nodded and braced herself for the expected beauty queen commentary.

Instead, Kerry leaned in and cheerfully whispered, "Same. And let me tell you, these food drives are harder than any pageant I've ever competed in."

Both women erupted into laughter and instantly bonded over their shared experiences.

Quick as a flash, Hadley piled the cups back onto the table. "If you think this is hard, try teaching the Sunday school kids to make pasta salad," she said, grinning at the memory. "The mayonnaise disaster of 2022 will go down in history."

Kerry chuckled warmly. "I can imagine. But you know, it's all worth it." She gestured around at the organized chaos of the food drive.

Hadley nodded in agreement. She wasn't just Miss Peachville or Hadley 'the beauty queen' here. She was simply Hadley, lending a helping hand wherever she could.

Just then, Pastor Bowman shuffled past, huffing under an overstuffed sack of potatoes. In typical comedic fashion, a stray spud wriggled from his hold.

"Catch that tot," he bellowed as it rolled away.

Hadley made a sprint for it, sliding on her knees across the polished floor and catching it just before it bumped into a precarious tower of canned beans. With a

triumphant grin, she held up the potato. Everyone in the hall cheered.

"Marvelous save," Kerry exclaimed.

Pastor Bowman chuckled heartily. "Hadley Wilder, our very own Potato Superhero."

And for the rest of the day, Hadley wasn't known as Miss Peachville or even just Hadley. She had become Hadley 'the Potato Superhero,' and she figured there were worse things to be.

Later, at Candace's dress shop, Hadley stood amidst fabrics and sketches, her blue eyes sparkling with every new pattern and texture she touched.

"Think of the dress as a canvas," Candace instructed, her petite frame moving energetically around the room. "You're the artist, and this," she said, handing Hadley a pencil, "is your brush."

"Is it always this thrilling?" Hadley asked, her hand unconsciously gliding over a swath of silk, imagining the possibilities.

"Only when you love it," Candace replied, her hazel eyes reflecting a shared excitement.

"Maybe I do," Hadley murmured, the pencil in her hand feeling like she found a new piece of herself. "Maybe I really do."

Then again, Hadley's life always had an interesting twist when Braden Harding was involved. She'd been trying to avoid him, but there he was, outside the shop window.

Candace noticed her gaze. "Better not let that one slip away."

"He's not slipping," Hadley replied, biting her lip. "He seems to turn up a lot lately."

"You're Miss Sweet Corn Queen," Candace reminded her, grinning. "You can handle one little ol' Sergeant Harding."

Suddenly, Braden looked straight at them through the window as if he sensed them talking about him. His gaze met Hadley's, and he cracked a small smile.

"Fine," Hadley said, preparing herself for the encounter. She pushed open the door to the shop and walked outside.

Braden leaned against his red Ford F-150. "Hadley," he greeted her with a smirk. "Need a ride home?"

She shook her head. "I have work to do still."

"You want to grab dinner after?"

"Sorry, I can't. My mom has me on a tight schedule with the pageant coming up. I barely got away for a couple of hours."

"You know, you should really start making decisions for yourself, Hadley. You're a grown woman, and it isn't right you're so beholden to your mother."

"Easy for you to say. You have no idea how hard all of this is on me," Hadley snapped. Instantly regretting her reaction, her tone softened, "Sorry, Braden. It's just...complicated."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

He nodded, his brown eyes understanding. "I get that, Hadley, but I just want you to do what makes you happy for once. You focus so much on everyone else; you don't do anything for you."

"Believe me, I'm trying," she assured him. "It's just not something that cannot happen overnight."

Suddenly, Dash jumped from the back of the truck, barking happily at her.

"Dash," Braden scolded, but the dog ignored him and licked Hadley's hand.

She laughed despite herself, ruffling Dash's fur. "Hey, boy. It's good to see you, too."

Braden looked at them both and shook his head, smiling. "Hopeless. Both of you."

Dash wagged his tail in agreement, and Braden rolled his eyes before leaning back against his truck.

"Just let me know if you change your mind about dinner," he said as Hadley turned to go back inside the shop. "It's a standing invitation."

Pushing open the door, she glanced back once more at Braden and Dash playing by his truck. The sight warmed her heart a little, and she found herself hoping that she could change her mind about dinner sometime in the future. She gave a short wave before turning her attention back to dressmaking.

Back in the shop, Candace raised an eyebrow at her, smirking knowingly. "Dinner

with Braden? That sounds like a date."

Hadley sighed and rolled her eyes. "It's not a date, Candace. Just...dinner, and it's not even happening anyway."

"Uh-huh, sure," Candace replied, her hazel eyes twinkling with mischief. "I think that's precisely why it's not happening. I think you're afraid to give into it and see where things can go with Braden."

Hadley ignored her friend's observation and turned back to the dresses, not wanting to admit that she was right.

Hadley's phone buzzed in her pocket, interrupting her conversation with Candace. She pulled it out and saw a message from her mother.

"Where are you? You've been gone for hours," the text read.

"I'm out running errands. Be home soon," Hadley quickly replied, not wanting to delve into details and create an argument with her mother.

"What's going on?" Candace asked, noticing her tense expression as she put her phone away.

"It's my mom. She just wants to know where I am," Hadley answered with a sigh.

"Maybe you should tell her about our meetings," Candace suggested, concern evident in her voice.

"I will, eventually," Hadley said, although she knew she had been putting it off because she knew her mother wouldn't understand and would want her to quit.

Candace gave her a sympathetic look before they both went back to work on the dresses. But Hadley's mind was elsewhere, worrying about what her mother would say when she found out about their secret meetings.

As soon as she finished up at the shop, Hadley rushed home to face the inevitable confrontation with her mother. She walked into their house and found Mrs. Thompson, her mother's best friend, waiting for her in the living room, arms crossed over her chest and a stern expression on her face, standing right next to her mother with the same look on her face.

"Hadley, where have you been?" her mother demanded with a huff.

"As I told you, I was running some errands around town," Hadley answered, trying to keep calm despite feeling like a child being scolded by their parent.

"For hours?" Mrs. Thompson raised an eyebrow skeptically.

"I wasn't aware I needed to report in," Hadley stated defensively.

"You can quit lying to me, Hadley. One of her mutual friends saw you at the dress shop." Hadley's mother arched an eyebrow, her tone laced with a cocktail of disapproval and frustration. "Between your volunteer time at the church and pageant practice, don't you think that's already overdoing it? You should avoid adding one more thing to your list, especially something so trivial as a glorified hobby."

Hadley stood firm, her curvy frame refusing to wilt under the weight of her mother's scrutiny. "It's not just about the dresses," she insisted. "I'm learning, Mom. Designing could be...more than a hobby."

"More than a hobby..." Her mother echoed the words as if tasting something sour. "And less time on pageant prep, I suppose?"

"Maybe," Hadley said, a bold streak of defiance coloring her voice for the first time in her life. Before her mother could launch into another lecture, the doorbell chimed, signaling an escape.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Got to go. That's Jenesa and Avery," Hadley called out, grabbing her purse and slipping through the door before another word could tether her down.

"Fake," the word hung in the air like a bad perfume as Hadley entered the bustling coffee shop where her new friends congregated. She turned toward the source, the narrowed eyes of a fellow contestant boring into her.

"Excuse me?" Hadley's voice was a mix of shock and indignation.

"Come on, Hadley. Volunteering? Spending all your time at the dress shop?" Lily tossed her blonde hair, a smirk playing on her lips. "What are you playing at? What angle does this give you?"

"Nothing." Hadley's cheeks flushed several shades darker than her peach-colored skin. "I actually enjoy it."

"Sure you do," another voice chimed in, dripping with sarcasm. She noticed it was Tina, and she was surprised that her once friend was joining in on the attack. "Just in time for the judges to see how 'well-rounded' you are."

"Ugh, clearly, there's no point in explaining anything to either one of you." Hadley rolled her eyes and marched past them to the corner table where her true friends waited, laughter and warmth radiating from the group.

"Those girls..." Hadley began, slumping into the chair beside Jenesa, who looked up from her laptop, her lawyerly instincts kicking in at the sight of distress.

"Let me guess, more pageant politics?" Jenesa asked, her hazel eyes sharp but sympathetic.

"Yep," Hadley sighed, resting her head in her hands. "They think I'm faking this whole...being a real person thing."

"Because clearly, volunteering and having interests outside of pageants is sooo unnatural," Avery deadpanned, stirring her coffee in exaggerated circles.

"Unnatural," Hadley snorted, the absurdity of it all teasing a reluctant smile onto her lips. "Apparently, I'm either a robot or a mastermind manipulator."

"Ooh, I like mastermind manipulator, Hadley," Michelle quipped with mirth as she handed the women their drinks. "Sounds like a comic book villain."

"Wrong genre, Michelle," Avery laughed, playfully nudging her with her elbow. "We're in a rom-com, remember?"

"Right, my bad," Michelle grinned, leaning back against the counter. "So, what's next for our leading lady?"

"Surviving," Hadley muttered, though the frustration was slowly ebbing away, diffused by the camaraderie around her. "And maybe...proving them wrong."

"Come on, Hadley," Jenesa urged, snapping her laptop shut with a decisive click. "You can't let them get to you."

"Easy for you to say," Hadley retorted, but the fight had gone out of her voice. "You have a Harvard degree backing you up."

"Exactly, and it was just as hard proving myself there as it is for you right now,"

Jenesa explained.

"We've all been through the wringer. It's like some sort of twisted rite of passage around here," Avery chimed in, her green eyes glinting with amusement. "It's why we need each other."

"Twisted is right," Hadley muttered.

"Look," Candace said, her voice steady and reassuring as she leaned forward, resting her arms on the table. "What you're doing—finding yourself, it matters. More than any sash or crown."

"Plus, who says you can't redefine what a pageant queen can be?" Jenesa added, her tone softening the edges of her words.

"Redefine..." Hadley mused, the word rolling around her mind like a loose marble. "I like that."

"Then stick with it," Michelle said firmly. "Do what makes Hadley Wilder happy."

"Speaking of happy..." Avery stood up, brushing crumbs from her floral blouse. "Let's go out. You need some fun."

"Fun sounds...like it might get me into trouble with my mom," Hadley murmured, though the idea tugged at a smile she tried to suppress.

"Life's full of trouble," Michelle chuckled. "But having fun is worth the risk."

"Come on," Jenesa said, standing and twirling her car keys around her finger. "My treat tonight."

"Where to?" Hadley asked, curiosity piquing despite the worry gnawing at her insides.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Somewhere that doesn't know your name or your face," Jenesa promised.

"Or your supposed pageant strategies," Avery added with a wink.

"Fine," Hadley relented, standing up and smoothing down her skirt, feeling lighter already. "Let's do this."

They spilled out into the evening air as Michelle waved them off, the setting sun casting long shadows on the ground. The laughter and light-hearted banter sustained Hadley's spirits as they walked toward Jenesa's white Mercedes parked under a streetlight.

As Hadley climbed into the backseat of the car, the scent of leather and pine air freshener greeted her—a stark contrast to the perfume-laden backstage areas she was so accustomed to.

"Okay, Hadley?" Jenesa checked the rearview mirror, meeting her blue eyes.

"Yeah," she said, though her heart twinged with guilt. Mom's disapproving gaze flickered at the edge of her thoughts, but she pushed it away. "Just thinking about...stuff."

"Stuff has no place on a fun night out," Avery declared from the passenger seat, turning to offer Hadley an encouraging smile.

"Right," Hadley agreed, nodding more to herself than anyone else. "No stuff. Just fun."

"Exactly," Jenesa said, revving the engine as they pulled away from the curb.

"Tonight's about forgetting the nonsense," Candace encouraged from beside her in the backseat.

"Here's to forgetting," Hadley raised an imaginary glass, and they all echoed the toast with chuckles and nods.

The car sped down the street, carrying them away from expectations and toward a night crafted solely for camaraderie and laughter. While the shadow of her mother's disappointment lingered, for the first time in a long while, Hadley felt free enough to chase the joy instead of the crown.

The neon sign of Lenny's Arcade buzzed, casting a kaleidoscope of colors over Hadley and her friends as they spilled out of the vehicle. Pinball machines jingled, and laughter from inside promised an escape from her troubles. She straightened her jacket, a determined glint in her blue eyes.

"First round's on me," Jenesa announced, leading the charge toward the entrance with the others in tow.

"Prepare to lose miserably at air hockey," Avery teased, elbowing Hadley playfully.

"Bring it on," Hadley shot back, her lips curving into a smile that didn't quite reach her worried eyes.

As they reached the doorway, a familiar bark cut through the chatter. Dash, Braden's golden retriever and ever-faithful partner, greeted them with a wagging tail.

"Braden," Hadley's heart did an anxious little flip. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, Wilder," Braden called, his brown eyes locking onto hers as he approached with his friends.

"Never thought I'd find a beauty queen in a place like this," one of Braden's friends joked with a cackle.

"I'm full of surprises," Hadley retorted. "And you shouldn't judge a book by its cover."

"You should listen to the lady," Braden grumbled as he folded his arms over his chest.

"Touchy, touchy," the young man said with a smirk. "Though I shouldn't be surprised that you're defending your girlfriend right now."

"Shut it, Sawyer," Braden muttered, cheeks coloring slightly under the arcade's dazzling lights.

"Oooh, Harding's got a girlfriend," another friend teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Guys, come on," Braden said, glancing apologetically at Hadley, who was trying hard not to laugh at his expense. "It's not like that." Then, turning his attention back to Hadley, he added with a sheepish grin, "Sorry, they have no filter."

"Clearly," Hadley replied, her own smile now genuine as she felt a little of her tension ease. "So, are you here to challenge me at skee-ball or what?"

"Challenge given. But when I win, you owe me a dance," he countered smoothly, despite the redness still lingering on his cheeks.

"Deal," Hadley agreed, feeling lighter already. The prospect of letting go, even

briefly, seemed to glow brighter than the arcade's flashing lights.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

They winked at each other, quick smiles passing between them before they both turned to the skee-ball lane. Braden took his first shot and, like a professional, landing the ball into a fifty-point pocket.

"Beginner's luck," Hadley called out, her teasing grin evident.

"Sure," Braden shot back with an unconvinced look on his face. Then, leaning in close to her ear, he whispered. "You're going to lose."

With an exaggerated roll of her eyes, Hadley prepared for her turn. She inhaled deeply and then threw the ball down the lane. It bounced a few times before landing straight into a hundred-point pocket.

"And that's how it's done," Hadley cried victoriously, punching the air as she turned to a stunned Braden. The spectators erupted into laughter and applause as Braden stood there, dumbfounded.

Hadley's triumphant cheer echoed around the arcade, bouncing off the walls and slot machines. The nervous tension from earlier is now completely forgotten.

"I demand a rematch," Braden declared after recovering from his initial surprise.

"Only if you're ready to lose again," Hadley retorted with a smirk, placing another token into the skee-ball machine.

As their friendly rivalry continued through the night, both of them forgot about everything else. Their laughter rang out in harmony amidst the arcade's chaotic

noise—blaring music and chimes of other games—creating lasting memories they would cherish forever.

Their fun time was interrupted, however, by a buzzing of Hadley's phone. She reached into her pocket and pulled it out, squinting at the bright screen as she tried to make out the name on the caller ID. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw it was from her mom.

"Hello?" Hadley answered apprehensively.

"Hadley, there's been an emergency," her mom's voice came through, laced with urgency.

"What? What happened?" Hadley asked, her mind racing with all sorts of worst-case scenarios.

"I accidentally spilled red wine on my dress, and I don't have time to change it before my church meeting. I need you to come home and help me clean it up," her mom explained in a frantic tone.

Hadley let out a breath of relief, feeling slightly annoyed for her night out being interrupted for such a trivial matter. She knew better than to argue with her mom when she was in this state.

"Okay, I'll be there soon," Hadley replied drearily before hanging up and making her excuses to leave.

When she arrived, her mom greeted her at the door. "I'm sorry to disturb your night out, dear. But you know how important this meeting is for me."

"It's fine," Hadley replied through gritted teeth as she followed her mom inside. This

wasn't the first time something like this had happened—where Hadley needed to fix some minor issue for her mother that could easily be resolved without involving her. It always seemed like an excuse for her mom to control and manipulate Hadley's life.

She shook off those thoughts as she helped clean up the stain on her mom's dress, trying to push down the anger bubbling in the pit of her stomach.

"Thank you, dear," Her mom said sincerely once the stain was gone. "You're always so helpful and reliable."

Hadley gritted her teeth. "Thanks, Mom, but I'm pretty exhausted. I think I'm going to go lie down."

"Are you sure? You can come with me to the meeting if you like," her mother offered.

The last thing Hadley wanted to do was go to one of her mother's Overeaters Anonymous meetings. Despite what her mother thought, Hadley didn't have a problem with food like her mother did. "I really just want to go rest. I have a big day tomorrow. It's one of the last practices before the pageant begins."

"All right, darling. Good of you to put the pageant first. If you need anything, you can text me while I'm gone."

"Thanks, but I'll be fine. Have a good meeting, Mom."

In the quiet of the house, Hadley let out a long sigh. She was finally alone, but instead of the relief she expected to feel, all she felt was an exhausting emptiness.

She made her way into her bedroom. Plush cushions and velvety comforters beckoned her, but there was no relief for her.

Collapsing onto the bed, she rolled onto her side. Her eyes fell on her Miss Teen Angel sash hanging neatly from the vanity mirror. The blue satin glimmered under the lights.

A fleeting smile crossed her lips as she traced the embroidered letters with her eyes. It wasn't all bad, she thought. At least there was something in this world that she was genuinely good at. Maybe her mom was right, and she should just focus on that rather than try to be something else.

Her phone buzzed, and her heart leaped as Braden's name flashed onscreen. "Hey," his message read, "just wanted to check in. How's my favorite skee-ball champion doing?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Hadley chuckled as she typed back, "Surviving."

As expected, Braden came back with some humor of his own. "Just surviving? Should I send Dash over with a care package?"

The thought of Dash bounding up to her door with a basket tied around his neck made Hadley laugh out loud.

"Tell Dash that won't be necessary," she replied.

"Will do," Braden texted back. "Hang in there, Hadley."

As she put down the phone, a strange sense of calm washed over her. Yes, things were overwhelming sometimes—more often than not—but at least she had friends like Braden, who never failed to make her feel better. Even though it would be easier to give up, she knew that the new path she was on made her feel better about herself. She wasn't willing to give that up for anyone, not even her mom.

Chapter Eight

"Okay, Dash," Braden commanded with a smirk, "find the queen."

Dash's ears perked up, and he scampered through the bustling pageant rehearsal hall, weaving between a parade of sequined gowns and towering heels. At his side, Hadley chuckled, her black hair bouncing as she dodged a rogue makeup artist.

"Is this part of the official training?" Hadley asked, her blue eyes gleaming with

amusement as she followed Braden through the chaos.

"Absolutely," Braden shot back, "search and rescue...of beauty queens. It's chapter seven in the manual."

"Very funny, Sergeant Harding." Hadley's peach-colored cheeks flared with a smile. "And what would your commanding officer say?"

"He'd say, 'Wilder, you're distracting my best man,'" Braden jested, but his playful tone dipped into something softer, more genuine. "But honestly, this is the most fun I've had all week."

"Even more than heroic feats like sniffing out bombs?"

"Definitely beats the lectures," he teased. "Don't tell anyone, but Instructor Bowman has a monotone voice. It's all I can do to stay awake."

"Is that why you get so many cups of coffee at the Coffee Loft?"

Braden nodded. "I need the walk and the caffeine."

Hadley's laughter mingled with the pre-pageant pandemonium, a sweet sound that made Braden's heart forget its marching orders for just a moment. As they reached the stage, reality tapped them both on the shoulder, reminding them of where they stood and what was at stake.

"Braden," Hadley said, her voice suddenly serious, "we need to talk about?—"

"Expectations, right? Yours, mine, the whole shebang?" Braden interjected, reading the hesitancy in her gaze.

"Exactly." Hadley glanced around the room, filled with prying eyes and whispering lips. "My mom, the judges...it's like everyone has a script for me, and I'm just trying to remember my lines."

"Tell me about it," Braden sighed, raking a hand through his black hair. "The academy, my unit...I have to be the guy who's great with a K9 partner. Lives depend on it."

"More like great with Dash, and that's easy because he's a great dog," Hadley corrected him, a playful edge returning to her voice.

"Thanks, Wilder," Braden smiled, but the weight of their shared struggle pressed down on the moment. "So, how do we play this scene, then? The one where the soldier and the beauty queen rise above?"

"Carefully and quietly," Hadley answered, biting her lip.

"Sounds like a plan," Braden agreed, though the uncertainty of their next steps was as clear as the sparkle on the pageant tiara.

Dash returned then, a triumphant bark announcing his arrival as he sat at Hadley's feet, his own version of a salute to the queen before him.

"Looks like Dash has cast his vote," Braden whispered, the corners of his mouth lifting in spite of the tension.

"Smart dog," Hadley replied, bending down to scratch behind the golden retriever's ears. "Maybe we should put him in charge."

"Wouldn't be the worst idea," Braden mused, watching Hadley with an admiration that went deeper than any title or rank.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"All right," Hadley stood up straight, her curvy frame poised with a newfound determination. "It's time for us to show them what we're really made of."

"Lead the way, Your Highness," Braden teased as he watched her glide toward the stage.

A few minutes later, Braden leaned back in his chair, watching Hadley practice her elegant stage walk. The subtle sway of her hips and the assuredness in her step captivated him until a hushed but harsh voice sliced through his focus.

"Did you hear about the latest?" Mrs. Matilda Shomacker's voice carried lobbing scandal over the heads of the gathered locals. She stood, a gaudy floral dress clinging to her ample frame, just outside the circle of pageant mothers and their hopeful daughters.

"Can't say I have, Matilda," Mrs. Balster, the pharmacy clerk and beacon of church gossip, replied, leaning in with an eagerness that belied her usually pious demeanor.

"Word is," Mrs. Shomacker said, eyes glinting with mischievous triumph, "that young Hadley's got herself tangled up well and good with that Air Force man. What's his name? Braden Harding?"

A collective gasp rippled through the crowd like a wave crashing against the shore. Heads turned, eyes searched, and whispers bloomed like unwanted weeds in a garden.

"Surely not," Mrs. Balster clucked, though her tone suggested more interest than disbelief.

"More than friends, they say," Mrs. Shomacker continued, relishing in the rapt attention, "and here I thought she was a serious contender, but goodness knows, she should be disqualified for carrying on with a judge."

"Scandalous," someone muttered.

"Unseemly," added another.

"It'll cost her the crown," a third chimed in, the words heavy with faux concern.

Braden straightened, his jaw setting firm. Dash, at his side, let out a low growl as if sensing the unease in his partner.

"Hey," Braden called out, his voice steady but strong enough to cut through the murmurs. Heads swiveled toward him, and he could feel the weight of the community's scrutiny pressing down. "That's not true. You all need to get your facts straight."

"Braden," Hadley's alarmed voice rose from the stage. Her eyes, wide and blue as the summer sky, met his. He gave her a small nod, a silent promise he was in her corner.

"Isn't it, though?" Mrs. Shomacker challenged—all bluster and bloated confidence. "Why else would a soldier be lurking around Hadley all day and night?"

"Because he's a decent guy, maybe?" Hadley descended the steps, her black hair swishing defiance with every step.

"Or perhaps," Braden interjected, "because he's here to train with his search and rescue dog." He gestured to Dash, whose tail now wagged as if he understood his role in debunking the rumors, "and got roped into judging a pageant against his will."

"Search and rescue," Mrs. Shomacker scoffed. "More like hanky panky."

"Matilda, must you really," Mrs. Balster chided gently, though her eyes danced with unspoken delight at the drama unfolding.

"Listen," Hadley said, crossing the space to stand by Braden. "We're friends, all right? Just friends."

"Friends who seem awfully cozy," Mrs. Shomacker shot back.

"Cozy?" Braden echoed with a laugh that lacked its usual warmth. "You ever seen two people less cozy? I mean, we can't even agree on what to eat."

"True," Hadley conceded, playing along. "He wants barbecue; I want sushi. It's a no-win situation."

"Barbecue is the best," Braden confirmed, rolling his eyes. "But she's all about that raw fish life."

The crowd tittered, the tension breaking like a popped balloon.

"Ah, young love," Mrs. Shomacker muttered with a sneer. "You prove my point for me."

"Don't you have anything better to do than gossip?" Braden retorted, quick as a flash. "Meddling isn't a good look for anyone."

Mrs. Shomacker glowered at them, her cheeks reddening as her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. "Fine. Have it your way."

"And stay out of my business," Hadley added for good measure. She shot Braden a

triumphant look, her blue eyes sparkling with glee.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Braden returned the look, his own eyes softening. "Well, we showed her," he said under his breath.

Hadley laughed softly. "Yeah," she agreed. "We did."

They stood side by side as Mrs. Shomacker made a hasty retreat amidst a chorus of chuckles and whispers. Braden watched Hadley wring her hands, the aftermath of Mrs. Shomacker's latest rumor mill churning visibly through her. The stage was empty now, a stark contrast to the earlier hustle of the final practice, and the quietness seemed to amplify her stress.

"Sushi?" Braden queried after several beats of silence.

"Hmm?"

"Dinner? Us? Sushi? My treat. You can demolish some raw fish, and I'll suffer through it with a smile."

Hadley's eyes flicked up, the blue in them stormy. "Braden, you know we can't."

"Can't eat?" He cocked his head, feigning innocence.

"Can't be seen out together," she corrected, a sad smile touching her lips. "Not now. It would just...feed the fire."

"Ah, right." Braden stuffed his hands into his pockets, feeling the weight of disappointment settle in his chest. "The optics."

"Exactly." She sighed. "Optics."

"Did I tell you that I despise optics," he muttered. Then, more seriously, "Look, Hadley, I just want to make things easier for you."

"By taking me out?" She raised an eyebrow. "In this small town? That's like trying to douse a bonfire with gasoline."

"Point taken." Braden kicked at a loose floorboard on the stage, sending a hollow thump echoing through the empty auditorium. "You're under enough pressure as it is, huh?"

"Pressure," she scoffed gently. "That's one word for it."

"Then forget I asked." His voice softened. "Just remember, I'm here for you. Whatever you need."

"Thank you, Braden." Her smile reached her eyes this time, a touch of the old sparkle returning. "But what I need is to not complicate my life any further."

"Complicated, simple..." He shrugged. "I'm good either way. Just say the word."

"Word is 'thanks,'" she replied, a playful note creeping back into her tone. "But I'll keep that in mind."

"Good." He nodded, satisfied for the moment. "Now go home and get some rest. Beauty queens need their beauty sleep, right?"

"Right." Hadley chuckled, but there was fatigue behind the sound. "See you tomorrow, Braden."

"Tomorrow," he echoed, watching her go. He knew better than to push it. Hadley had a crown to win, and he wouldn't be the reason she lost her shot.

Two hours later, the thud of darts and the clink of glasses filled the dimly lit Rusty Hinge. Braden's hand hovered, unsteady, as he aimed for the well-worn dartboard.

"Come on, man," Sawyer chuckled, slapping him on the back. "You've got this."

Braden released the dart with a flick of his wrist. It sailed through the air and barely hit the outside ring.

"Looks like your aim's off tonight, buddy," Mike, another friend wisecracked, raising his bottle in a mock toast.

"Maybe it's not the aim," Braden muttered, retrieving the wayward dart. "Maybe it's the target."

The group erupted into laughter, but it didn't reach Braden's eyes. He forced a smile, though it felt as hollow as the laughter that surrounded him.

"All right, enough fun for one night," he said, setting down the dart. "I'm heading back to the B&B."

"Already?" Sawyer called out. "It's early."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Got things to do," Braden lied, escaping the noise and the forced camaraderie.

"Like spending time with Dash?" someone called out after him, causing everyone to break out in a fit of laughter.

"Dash would be more company than you louts," he muttered under his breath, pulling his jacket tighter against the cool night air.

The laughter echoed behind him, following Braden as he made his way down the still streets toward the restored Victorian. The B&B was quiet, a stark contrast to the bar's rowdy crowd. As he stepped in, the familiar creak of the floorboards greeted him like an old friend.

"Didn't expect you back so soon," Danny's voice came from the lounge area. He and Hunter sat with mugs of coffee, a chessboard between them.

"Bar's not really my scene tonight," Braden admitted, sinking into an armchair opposite them.

Hunter raised an eyebrow. "Other things on your mind?"

"That obvious, huh?"

"Like a sore thumb," Danny added, taking a sip from his mug.

"Can't stop thinking about Hadley Wilder, can you?" Hunter guessed, moving his knight.

"Is it that transparent?" Braden sighed, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

"Only like a glass house," Danny joked, but his eyes were sympathetic.

"Small town problems," Braden said, running a hand through his hair. "Feels like every move we make is under a microscope."

"Comes with the territory," Hunter said, capturing Danny's bishop. "We're just used to it because we grew up here. But hey, you like this girl, right? So what's the real issue?"

"Optics," Braden replied, frustration seeping into his voice. "She's worried about how it looks, us being together. And I get it, I do, but..."

"Sometimes, what others think isn't as important as going after what you want," Danny interjected, studying the chessboard.

"Easier said than done around here, though," Hunter added.

"Exactly." Braden exhaled deeply. "And now, she's pulling away because of it."

"Sounds like you're stuck between a rock and a hard place," Danny observed, leaning back in his chair.

"Yep," Braden confirmed, a rueful half-smile on his face. "And all I want is to help her feel better."

"Look," Hunter began, locking eyes with Braden. "You can't control what people say or think. But you can control how you handle it. Be there for her, even if it's from a distance."

Braden nodded slowly, absorbing the words. "Guess I'll just have to be patient."

"Patience," Hunter chuckled, shaking his head. "Never was my strong suit."

"Nor mine," Braden agreed, feeling a hint of camaraderie in their shared shortcomings. "But for Hadley, I think I can try."

"Chess isn't like life, you know," Danny said, setting the king down with finality. "When you lose, you can set up the pieces and start again."

"Life's got more moving parts," Hunter's gaze flickered to Braden. "More consequences."

"Sounds grim when you put it that way," Braden replied, attempting a light tone. He traced the grain of the wood on the chessboard with his finger.

"Could be worse," Hunter teased. "You could be playing blindfolded."

"Feels like I am," Braden admitted, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms.

"Advice?" Danny asked, arching an eyebrow as he gathered the scattered chess pieces.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Sure," Braden said, shrugging. "Hit me."

"Be honest with her," Danny suggested. "And with yourself. If this thing with Hadley is real, it'll weather the storm."

"Easy to say, tough to do," Braden muttered.

"Most things worth doing are," Hunter pointed out. "Besides, if this pageant queen can't handle a little rain, maybe she's not your queen."

"Harsh," Braden chuckled, despite the weight in his chest.

"Truth often is," Danny said, offering a half-smile.

"Thanks, guys," Braden said, pushing himself up from his seat. "I think I need some shut-eye."

"Remember," Danny called after him as he started toward the stairs. "Honesty, patience, and a smidge of courage. It's the perfect recipe."

"Got it," Braden replied without turning around. "The perfect recipe," he repeated quietly to himself.

He trudged up the stairs, the chatter of his instructors fading behind him. In the quiet of his room, he let Dash out of his kennel, then flopped onto his bed, shoes still on. The ceiling stared back, blank and unhelpful. Hadley's face floated into his mind's eye—those piercing blue eyes, the curve of her smile. A pang of longing hit him,

sharp and sudden.

"Why does this have to be so complicated?" he whispered to the empty room.

There was no answer, just the soft whisper of the night wind against the windowpane. With a heavy sigh, Braden kicked off his shoes and rolled onto his side, closing his eyes against the images of what could be. He drifted off to sleep with Hadley's laughter echoing in his dreams, a bittersweet symphony of 'what ifs.'

Chapter Nine

The towering stage lights threw Hadley's shadow long across the backstage floor, mirroring the stretch of her patience. Braden stood across the room, but every time she glanced at him out of the corner of her eyes, his concern was tangible. She tried to focus on her final talent practice while Hadley's mother flitted around her like an anxious hummingbird, dabbing at imaginary makeup smears.

"Stand up straight, Hadley," her mother clucked, poking at her posture. "And don't slouch your shoulders."

Hadley complied with a sigh, her blue eyes flickering to meet Braden's brown ones. He offered her a sympathetic half-smile.

"Maybe ease up?" Braden ventured, but her mother shot him a look that could curdle milk.

"Judge Harding, this is important," she said, her tone frosty. "And you should get back to where the rest of the judges are to go over your own tasks."

"It's not like it's life or death," Hadley muttered under her breath with frustration.

"Isn't it, though?" Mrs. Shomacker's voice boomed from behind them, thick with sarcasm. "A beauty pageant is serious business, after all."

"Shouldn't you be terrorizing someone else's daughter?" Hadley shot back, feeling her cheeks flush with a mix of anger and embarrassment.

"Ooh, I see Hadley's claws are out," Lily chimed in, flanked by a small posse of pageant girls. Their laughter was as sharp as their manicured nails.

"Focus on your catwalk, not your catfight," Tina sneered, flipping her hair with practiced disdain.

"Hey," Braden stepped forward, protective instinct written all over him. "Back off."

"Easy, hero. We're just having a little fun," Lily cooed mockingly, but her eyes were cold. "But if I back off your favorite, will you give me a better score?"

"Fun? Favorite?" Hadley echoed, her confidence wavering like a candle flame in a draft. "You clearly don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Hadley," her mother urged, either oblivious to the tension or doing her best to ignore it. "You need to practice your routine."

"Right, my routine," Hadley repeated, trying to ignore the snickers and sidelong glances. She needed to focus, to prove she was more than just a pretty face, but singing in front of everyone right now was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Remember what we talked about," Braden whispered as she walked away. "You've got this."

"Thanks," Hadley whispered back, though her heart thudded doubtfully.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Wilders never quit," her mother called after her, and Hadley forced a smile. As she stepped onto the stage, she felt the weight of eyes on her, judgmental and expectant. Her newfound sense of self-worth seemed to slip through her fingers like sand.

"Spotlight's on you, Hadley," the stage director announced, oblivious to the internal battle raging within her.

"Let's give them a show," she replied, forcing the words out. And with a deep breath, she started her walk to the center stage, each step a silent challenge to the whispers and the doubts, a declaration that she wouldn't be brought down so easily. Not today.

"Is that music I hear?" Braden asked, squinting at the stage. Dash, the golden retriever, pricked up his ears.

On stage, Hadley opened her mouth to sing, and all eyes were on her. What her mother didn't know was that she chose a different song and submitted it secretly for this competition. As the words of the new song came out, all eyes were on her. The song spoke of independence and finding oneself; each word was a whispered plea from her soul for everyone to see her differently. It was different from what most pageant contestants chose to sing, and that's exactly why she picked it.

"Wow, incredible," she heard Braden say from the judges' panel.

"She's more than just a pretty face," someone else added, encouraging her to continue and finish with her grand finale of vocal flurries.

Backstage, one of the girls muttered jealously, "I didn't know she could sing like

that."

"Neither did I," admitted another.

On stage, Hadley took a bow as the scattered audience began to clap. Hadley couldn't help but grin at them all. Her heart pounded in her chest. Even though it was only a handful of people, it felt like she just performed at the Grand Ole Opry.

Lily huffed in disbelief. "Who knew she had that in her."

"Just because she can sing doesn't mean she can win," Mrs. Shomacker challenged, but even she couldn't hide a hint of envy over Hadley's performance.

Backstage, Hadley allowed herself a moment of victory. She'd done it. Contrary to her mother's plans and Mrs. Shomacker's doubts, she'd shown them all that there was more to her than just being a beauty queen.

"Great job, Hadley," one of the few friendly contestants shouted, offering an awkward thumbs-up.

"Thanks," Hadley replied, managing a small smile. A real one this time.

Mrs. Balster, who had been watching from the shadows nearby, clapped her hands together. "My word," she said, real pride in her voice. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"Neither did I." Hadley winked back at her.

Mrs. Shomacker continued to complain and muttered something about 'the nerve of some people.' Hadley tried to ignore it, but the other woman continued to go on to anyone who would listen and said that Hadley was using her connection to Braden to

win the pageant.

Hadley stepped out of the auditorium, her head still spinning from the intense practice. She couldn't wait to get away from all the pageant drama and visit her friends at the B&B. They always knew how to lift her spirits and make her forget about all the pressure she was under.

A few minutes later, Hadley's heels clicked on the hardwood floor of the B&B's quaint parlor as she paced, a frown etched between her perfectly arched brows.

"Trouble in the pageant world?" Avery asked, looking up from her spot on the couch next to Hunter. She was sprawled out with Hunter's K9 partner, with Duchess's head resting on her lap. Cleo, her cat, was snuggled in on the other side.

Hadley's frown deepened as she watched her friend stroke the border collie's fur. "Just Mrs. Shomacker being her usual self," Hadley shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant.

Hunter snorted. "What's she done this time? Poisoned someone's coffee?"

"No," Hadley laughed, "Just spreading rumors about me and...Braden."

"Ah," Avery paused, her hand stalling in Duchess's fur. "What do the rumors say?" she asked, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"They say I'm using my relationship with Braden to win the pageant," Hadley admitted, cheeks flushing.

Hunter threw back his head and laughed. "Well, then it must be true," he teased.

Hadley playfully swatted his arm. "It's not funny, Hunter. I could get disqualified if

the mayor hears about this."

"And would that be that bad?" he questioned with a shrug.

"It sure would. I've put a lot of time into this, and my mom would be heartbroken."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Well, we can't have that." Braden leaned against the doorframe, his arms folded, a determined look darkening his brown eyes. Dash sat obediently at his side, wagging his tail. "We can't just let Mrs. Shomacker get away with this."

Everyone's attention focused on him, and Hadley's face burned even redder. She had no idea he was going to be there and overhear her venting. Hadley stopped mid-pace and turned to him, her hands on her hips. "I know, but?—"

"Spreading rumors is bad enough," he continued, "but she's messing with your life and your family."

"Braden, I appreciate it, really," Hadley sighed, her blue eyes meeting his. "But the pageant is in a few days, and I need all my energy for that."

"Exactly. So why not let me help you clean this mess up?" Braden pushed away from the doorframe, stepping closer.

"Because it's not just about cleaning things up." Hadley shook her head, her black hair swaying. "It's about not stirring the pot even more."

"Stirring the pot?" Braden chuckled, though there was no humor in his voice. "She's practically boiling it over."

"Maybe so," Hadley conceded, biting her lip. "But I've got to pick my battles. This one is..." She gestured vaguely, her voice trailing off.

"Is worth fighting," Braden finished for her. "Trust me."

"Braden, I have a sash to win and a point to prove," Hadley countered; her resolve hardening. "Not a neighbor to take down."

"Fine," he relented after a beat, though his stance remained rigid. "But if she crosses the line again..."

"Then we'll consider it. But right now," Hadley stepped forward, placing a gentle hand on his arm, "let's focus on positive things. Like...how I'm going to walk in my swimsuit without face-planting."

"Okay, but for the record," Braden grinned, "you'd still win points for most graceful fall."

"Ha-ha," Hadley rolled her eyes, but a reluctant smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Always," Braden winked.

The next day at practice, Hadley couldn't seem to get anything right. Hadley's heels clicked against the polished floor, echoing too loudly in her ears. She twirled, but her arms felt like lead, and her smile was plastic.

"Footwork, Hadley," her mother's voice pierced through the music.

"Right, sorry," she mumbled, attempting another turn and stumbling slightly.

"Take five, everyone," the choreographer called out with a sigh.

As the other contestants dispersed, chatting and laughing, Hadley sank into a chair, her forehead creasing with frustration. Braden approached, his brown eyes showing concern beneath the furrow of his brows.

"Rough go?" he ventured.

"Understatement of the year," Hadley snapped, instantly regretting her tone. "Sorry, it's not you."

"Hey, no sweat." He sat beside her, a comforting presence. "You know, sometimes knocking the bullies down a peg can really take the edge off?—"

"Braden, I said no." Hadley cut him off, her voice sharp. "I'm not adding fuel to this dumpster fire."

"Dumpster fire, huh?" He grinned, but his smile quickly faded. "Hadley, these bullies?—"

"Will be there whether I fight them or not," she interjected, standing up abruptly. "And right now, I need to focus on not tripping over my own feet."

"Okay, okay," Braden relented, hands raised in surrender. "Just remember, if they push too hard?—"

"Thanks, but I've got it." Hadley forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"All right then." Braden stood, giving her a nod before moving away. "You've got this."

"Thanks," she murmured to his retreating back.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Returning to practice, Hadley's movements were mechanical, her mind elsewhere. Every slip, every missed beat whispered Braden's name. Her connection to him had become a liability, a lightning rod for rumors and ridicule, but she still couldn't shake the need to check where he was every so often.

She watched as Braden laughed with one of the stagehands, his easygoing nature a stark contrast to the storm brewing within her. A decision formed, clear as crystal, yet heavy as stone.

"Keep your distance from him," she whispered to herself as if the words could shield her from the gossip. "It's the best way to let the rumors die."

With a deep breath, Hadley focused on her dance moves, determined to perfect her portion of the routine and stand out in all the right ways for once.

Her eyes focused on the back wall, her black hair bouncing along with each turn, twist, and step. She tried to stay focused and determined, but it was hard with so many thoughts swirling around in her head.

"Looking good, Hadley," came a voice from behind her. It was Candace, clad in a beige blouse and black pants. "I have your new dress and wanted to get it over to you and make sure you had it for your session."

"Thanks, Candace," Hadley managed to say between breaths as she came over. "I was about to call you to see if it was ready."

"I think you're going to love it. Your design was amazing and so original," Candace

praised as she handed over the garment bag.

Hadley stopped and turned to face her friend. "I wish I could talk longer, but if I don't practice harder and get this just right..."

"No." Candace cut her off. "You're already doing great, Hadley. Believe it or not, you need rest, too."

Hadley sighed and nodded. "Yeah, I guess so."

Candace gave her an encouraging pat on the shoulder. "No matter what happens, you're going to kill it out there."

Hadley watched as her friend left, then gleefully opened up the garment bag to reveal her creation.

The dress inside was an ethereal dream, the fabric was soft cream chiffon that seemed to glow in the stage lights. It had a fitted bodice and a flared-out skirt that would twirl beautifully with each spin she made. The tiniest silver sequins adorned the waistline and trailed down the hem, adding a touch of magic.

Hadley's eyes welled up with tears at the sight. For once, it wasn't about being the prettiest or the most eye-catching. This was something she created, something she was proud of.

"Did I hear right? You made that!" Tina's voice echoed from behind. "Why would you do such a thing? You're not a designer." She chuckled. "I guess the good news is, if you wear that, you're going to help me win."

Hadley turned to face Tina with a defiant smile. "We'll just have to see about that." She carefully zipped up the garment bag, clutching it close. "You may underestimate

me, Tina, but I'm more than just a pretty face."

Stifled laughter echoed from behind as Mrs. Matilda Shomacker ambled into the scene. "Oh ho ho," she chuckled, her large belly jiggling with mirth. "This is going to be a beauty pageant I won't forget. I can't wait to see everyone's reaction when you wear that ridiculous dress."

Unable to take their ridicule any longer, Hadley rushed from the backstage. She was just leaving the auditorium when Braden stopped her. "Are you okay?" he asked with concern.

"I'm fine," she brushed off his question. "Just another day in pageant hell." She didn't wait for his response, instead rushing away.

It seemed no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't manage to change what people thought of her. Even designing her own dress was an epic fail. She threw the garment bag into the back of her car with a huff. Maybe she should just give up and do what her mother told her. It had worked in the past. Maybe it was time to accept reality and stop trying to change her life. She was just a simple beauty queen, and she was never going to be more than that, no matter how hard she tried.

Chapter Ten

Braden paced the length of the B&B's quaint parlor, his fingers drumming a staccato rhythm against his thigh. Dash watched from the couch, tilting his head at the unusual restlessness of his partner.

"This isn't easy, boy," Braden muttered. "I know Hadley told me not to get involved, but I can't just sit back and watch other people tear her reputation to shreds. It isn't right."

Dash barked in agreement. Or maybe it was disagreement. Communicating with dogs was a tricky business.

Braden stopped pacing. "You're right, Dash," he sighed, sinking into a plush armchair. "Maybe I'm just overthinking this."

He moved to the window, and to his surprise, he saw Mrs. Shomacker outside talking to her granddaughter on their patio. His gaze was pinned to the view of the two of them, conspiring in hushed tones with Tina Jones and her mother. "Something's not right."

"Talking to the dog now?" Jenesa teased, appearing at the doorway, her curvy frame leaning nonchalantly against the frame.

"Ever feel like you're in a game of Clue?" Braden questioned without turning.

"Mrs. Shomacker in the conservatory with the candlestick?"

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"More like with the rumor mill." His eyes narrowed as he watched the group disperse, each woman heading in a different direction with all the subtlety of a military operation.

"Let it go, Braden," Jenesa sighed.

"Can't," he said simply, turning to face her. The resolve in his brown eyes met the weariness in her green ones.

"Since when did you turn detective?"

"Since I saw that look in Hadley's eyes every time they pull their stunts. What do you think they are up to?"

"Who knows? Maybe they're forming a book club," she stated with a shrug.

"Right," Braden scoffed. "And I'm the next Mr. Universe."

"Wouldn't put it past you," she shot back with a smirk.

"Watch this," Braden announced, moving toward the door.

Jenesa grabbed his arm, her grip surprisingly strong. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Undercover."

"Undercover? You're wearing camo shorts and flip-flops."

"Subterfuge," he deadpanned, pulling away gently. "They'll never expect it."

Jenesa rolled her eyes but didn't stop him. Braden strode outside with the confidence of a man on a mission, Dash at his heels. He made a beeline for Mrs. Wallace, who was conveniently watering her roses next door.

"Morning, Mrs. Wallace," Braden greeted cheerfully, the old woman peering over her spectacles with an assessing gaze.

"Morning, Sergeant Harding. To what do I owe the pleasure?" She had a voice like a gravel road—rough but steady.

"Seen anything interesting lately?" he asked casually, leaning on the fence.

"Depends on what you call interesting," she hedged, a twinkle in her eye suggesting she knew more than she let on.

"Like a particular neighbor and her granddaughter chatting with another mom and her daughter," Braden prodded.

"Ah," Mrs. Wallace nodded sagely. "You mean the daily 'Tea and Treachery' meeting?"

"Tea and...wait, really?"

"Figure of speech, dear." Mrs. Wallace chuckled. "But yes, those four have been thick as thieves lately. Odd, considering how that Tina girl used to be such a friend to your Hadley."

"Figures," Braden murmured, a grim smile touching his lips. "Thanks, Mrs. Wallace."

"Anytime, dear. Keep an eye on Hadley. Those women are up to no good."

"Will do."

He returned to the B&B, his mind racing. Then, as if fate had a sense of comedic timing, the parlor door flew open with a bang. In strode Hadley, cheeks flushed, eyes blazing like a summer storm.

"Sergeant Braden Harding," she seethed, planting her hands on her hips.

He blinked at her. "Hey, Hadley. You look...fiery. Just the way I like you."

"Do not flirt with me right now," she snapped.

Was he flirting? News to him. He was just pointing out the obvious. "Fine," Braden raised his hands in surrender, "What's up?"

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Hadley groaned. "I can't believe you."

"Not helpful," Braden retorted with an eye roll. He still had no idea what he'd done wrong.

"Why did you go behind my back and interfere like that?" she accused, jabbing a finger at him.

Ah, now things started to make sense. "I didn't confront them," he corrected her. "I simply found out the truth so I could bring that information to you."

Hadley looked ready to explode or implode, depending on which was messier. Most probably both simultaneously.

"And who asked you to do that?" she demanded.

"No one. But sometimes people have to intervene when they see a train wreck coming," Braden replied calmly.

Hadley huffed. Dash whimpered.

"I asked you to stay out of it," she murmured, her voice deflating as she sank into the couch next to Dash and began patting his head.

"Don't you want to know what I found out?" he questioned with a wag of his eyebrows.

"Turns out Mrs. Shomacker and her mini-me are in cahoots with Tina Jones and her mom," Braden announced with a frown. "They're working together to undermine you and try to get you kicked out of the pageant by spreading their false rumors."

"Seriously?" Hadley bolted straight up, her expression darkening.

"Seriously. Which means we need a plan to counteract their plan."

"Tina? I can't believe she would do this to me. We've shared secrets, hair spray...mascara."

"Looks like they were sharing more than beauty tips," Braden said, shaking his head with frustration.

"Maybe I should just drop out of the pageant," Hadley replied in a defeated tone.

"That's what they want, so maybe I should just give it to them."

"No, that is not an option. You don't let bullies get their way, or they never stop. And after you, they will just move on to someone else."

"I get your point, but I'm scared of what they might do to me if I stand up to them. Everyone's got an angle, huh?" her voice broke slightly.

"Hey, not everyone." Braden reached out, but Hadley sidestepped, hugging herself tightly.

Her blue eyes searched his face. "Can I even trust you? We haven't known each other for that long. Maybe you're in on this with them, and they sent you here to trick me."

"Come on, Hadley. You know me better than that." Braden said, his voice firm. He tried to hide the hurt her accusation caused, knowing she was only saying it because

she was upset.

"Knowing people doesn't seem to be my strong suit right now," she muttered, swiping a stray hair out of her face.

"Look, all this—me being here—it's because I care about you." Braden's voice was earnest, but he could see her walls going up brick by brick.

"Maybe you care too much. People talk, Braden." She sighed, a weary smile failing to hide her frustration. "If we're seen together, it'll just fuel Mrs. Shomacker's fire."

"Let them talk. It's just noise."

"Noise that can cost me the crown." She met his gaze squarely. "I need to win this. For my mom. She's sacrificed everything for me, and I owe her."

"All right, if space is what you need..." His words trailed off, and he stood up from the chair, feeling like he'd just been handed marching orders.

"Thank you," she whispered with a small smile. "Maybe when all of this is over, things will be different."

Braden's hands balled into fists at his sides; the skin stretched taut over his knuckles. He looked at Hadley, her eyes soft but resolute. "Okay, then," he managed to say, though each word felt like it was being dragged from him.

"Braden, I'm sorry..."

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Hey, no, I get it. You've got a tiara to win, and I'm only getting in the way."

"Stop." There was a plea in her voice, a crack that made his chest tighten. "Don't make this harder by being so nice."

"Making things easy isn't exactly my specialty." The corners of his mouth quirked up despite the situation.

Hadley chuckled dryly. "Clearly."

"Look, I'll back off. But if you need me—" His offer hung in the air, half hopeful, half defeated.

"I know," she said quickly and then softer, "I do trust you, Braden. It's just...complicated."

"Complicated is my middle name." He tried for lightness but faltered. "Well, actually, it's Michael, but?—"

"Braden," she interrupted, a smile breaking through. "Go be a hero somewhere else for a bit."

"Will do." He turned to leave, then paused. "And Hadley?"

"Yeah?"

"I expect you to win the whole thing, okay?"

"Plan on it, Sergeant." Her words followed him out the door, lingering like a promise.

Braden's footsteps echoed in the hallway as he walked away with Dash following behind, pulling with him the last string of their entanglement. The heavy front door of the B&B creaked open and then closed with a dull thud behind him.

Braden glanced back one last time. Even from the sidewalk, he could still see Hadley's silhouette framed in the window. Her missing presence ached like a phantom limb. He patted Dash's head, the dog's tail wagging gently.

Braden found himself wandering down Main Street with no clear plan of where to go. When he saw the glowing light of the Coffee Loft, he went inside like he was on autopilot.

Michelle was inside, hunched over the counter, inspecting something. She straightened up at his entrance. "Well, if it isn't Mr. Hero with his furry sidekick." Her tone conveyed the familiarity of their new friendship. "You want your usual?"

"I'm thinking something a little stronger might be in order. How about a triple shot espresso?"

She squinted at him, her eyes sharp as they appraised him. "You're looking a bit off today, Braden. Is everything okay?"

"I'm fine," he said defensively, though he knew she would see right through him.

"Oh, no, you don't. You can't fool me." She pointed to a stool by the counter. "Take a seat."

Heaving a sigh, Braden sank onto the stool while Dash flopped down next to him.

"Now spill," Michelle demanded, her expression both stern and caring.

Braden took a deep breath, feeling the weight of his troubles settling on his shoulders once again. "It's just...Hadley. Things are complicated between us."

"Complicated how?" Michelle prodded.

"We've become friends, and I thought it might be turning into something more. But she just told me that she wants to cool things off between us, and it's taking everything in me to stay away from her."

"I see," Michelle said knowingly. "Here's my advice; give her space," she began pouring the triple espresso. "But don't disappear completely. Show her what she's missing." She slid the cup toward him, her face filled with sympathy.

He nodded, taking a sip of the hot drink. It was bitter and scalding, much like his feelings at the moment. "You're right," he conceded. "I have to give her the room she needs."

Just then, Mrs. Balster bustled in, her purse clutched tightly to her chest. "Oh dear," she fretted, looking between Braden and Michelle. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

Michelle's brows shot up, amusement sparkling in her hazel eyes. "Not at all, Mrs. Balster," she assured the woman. "What can I get you?"

A devious glint appeared in Mrs. Balster's eyes that made Braden uneasy. "Did I hear right? Trouble in paradise?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"It's nothing," he downplayed hastily. Dash whined at his feet, sensing his discomfort.

"I guess it's for the best. You're a judge, after all," she said, patting Braden's hand with a sly smile. "Besides, there's plenty of other fish in the sea—that aren't in the pageant, mind you."

Braden choked on his espresso while Michelle's eyes widened with embarrassment. Although his heart was heavy, he couldn't help but chuckle at the sheer absurdity of it all. "I'll keep that in mind, Mrs. Balster."

As Braden sipped on his triple shot espresso, he couldn't help but think about what Michelle said. How did he balance giving Hadley space while still maintaining a presence in her life? For the type of guy that rose to a challenge, it seemed impossible.

He finished his drink and thanked Michelle before heading out of the coffee shop with Dash trotting by his side.

He wandered aimlessly around town with no clear destination in mind until he found himself at the park. The greenery and calmness soothed him as he sat down on a bench and watched people walking by as Dash played in the dog area.

As he sat there, lost in his thoughts, Mrs. Shomacker huffed and puffed her way toward him. "The Wilder girl's got herself a problem," the older woman declared out of the blue.

Braden arched his brow at her sudden appearance. "Good evening to you too, Mrs.

Shomacker."

Ignoring his dry humor, she nudged him with her elbow, "Well? Aren't you going to do something about it?"

"What is it now?" Braden asked, already exhausted by the idea of more drama.

Mrs. Shomacker leaned in closer, lowering her voice. "She's arguing with her mother outside the B&B—quite the spectacle if you ask me."

A wave of concern washed over him. Hadley was fiercely private; he knew she wouldn't want their personal matters aired out in public.

His instinct was to look into the matter, but Hadley just told him to stay out of her business. He needed to respect her wishes. With a shrug, he simply said to the nosy neighbor, "I'm sure they will work it out."

With a dramatic gasp, Mrs. Shomacker placed her hand over her heart. "You can't just ignore this. Go and help that poor girl."

"You seem to be doing a fine job of keeping an eye on things, Mrs. Shomacker," Braden replied, trying his best to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He wasn't about to take the older woman's bait and get involved. That was exactly what she wanted so she could go around town spreading more gossip.

"Humph." Mrs. Shomacker wasn't easily dismissed. She crossed her arms over her chest and set her jaw. "Well, I never thought I'd see the day when Hadley Wilder needed help, and you turned a blind eye."

"It's not my job to rescue her. And for the record, she's perfectly capable of taking care of herself," Braden told the older woman.

Mrs. Shomacker shook her head, "Why I never," she huffed, waddling away with indignation.

Braden watched Mrs. Shomacker disappear into the distance just as Dash came running back from his playtime, barking excitedly at Braden's feet. As if understanding his partner's concern, Dash looked toward the B&B as well.

"Poor girl indeed..." Braden finally muttered under his breath, impulsively hopping off the bench and starting in the direction of the B&B with Dash at his heels—his concern for Hadley outweighing her request for space.

By the time he got there, Hadley and her mother were nowhere to be found. It was probably better that way, he thought to himself as he made his way to his room. It would have only upset Hadley if he'd gotten involved. Hadley was clearly a hard habit to break, but he was going to have to figure out a way to do it for both their sakes.

Chapter Eleven

Hadley adjusted the hem of the navy blue sequined gown her mother picked out, the fabric lightly shimmering under the lights of the backstage dressing area. The chatter of competitors and their entourages created a racket of nerves and hairspray. She caught snatches of conversation, palms sweaty as she tried to focus on getting ready for her own walk until one voice cut through the rest.

"Of course, my grandbaby's going to take the crown. It's practically in our blood. Plus, a little nudge from Grandma never hurt anyone," Mrs. Shomacker boasted, her laughter booming around the room. "I'm pretty good at getting what I want, no matter what it takes. Just look at how I handled Hadley Wilder. There's no way she's getting the crown after what came out about her and that Air Force judge."

Hadley's grip tightened on the tube of lipstick in her hand. That voice grated on her like nails on a chalkboard. Mrs. Shomacker always had her ample nose where it didn't belong. Now, apparently, in the judges' business too.

"Can you believe her?" Hadley muttered under her breath, catching the eye of George Wallace, who just shook his head from across the room. The young man mouthing 'just ignore her' with a dismissive wave of his hand. Hadley was beyond ignoring.

She strode over to Mrs. Shomacker, heels clicking assertively on the polished floor. "Is that so, Mrs. Shomacker? A little...nudge?"

Mrs. Shomacker turned, her sharp gaze landing on Hadley. "Well, if it isn't Hadley Wilder, as pretty as a peach and twice as sour. What's it to you, dear?"

"Pageants are about fairness," Hadley said, words clipped. "Not nudges."

"Fairness?" Mrs. Shomacker chuckled, the sound like a hen's cluck. "What do you know about that, strutting around here like you own the place? All the while flirting with the judges to get what you want."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Hadley could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, her curvy frame rigid with indignation. "I worked hard for this. I don't need someone else pulling strings for me."

"Worked hard? Maybe on your back, but that's not the sort of person we want representing Hero, now is it," Mrs. Shomacker shot back, her tone dripping with contempt.

"And when you aren't doing the dirty work yourself, mommy dearest is doing it for you," Lily Shomacker added with a sneer.

The air between the trio crackled with tension. Hadley's blue eyes blazed with a fire that had nothing to do with the stage makeup. "You have it all wrong. None of that is true, and I'm sick of you spreading lies. I'm not just a pretty face. I have more to offer than just looks."

"Sure, darling. And I'm the Queen of England," Mrs. Shomacker said with a scoff, patting her hair as if to secure an invisible crown.

Hadley took a step forward, her voice ringing out, "Maybe you should focus on your own family, instead of meddling in everyone else's business."

Mrs. Shomacker bristled, puffing up like an indignant pigeon. "How dare you speak to me that way, you ungrateful child."

"Enough," Hadley snapped, her patience frayed to its breaking point. "This ends now."

Their voices echoed, turning heads and silencing conversations. Even the incessant hum of blow dryers paused as if the very air waited to see what would happen next.

The director's voice cut through the tension like a guillotine. "Hadley Wilder, you are hereby disqualified from this year's pageant."

"Disqualified?" Hadley's voice faltered, her heart plummeting to her stomach.

"Your behavior is unbecoming of a queen," George said, his face an unreadable mask.

"But she—" Hadley's protest died on her lips. Pointing fingers wasn't going to fix this, and she knew it.

Her mother loomed over her, the scent of her perfume suffocating. "Come with me right now." She grabbed Hadley by the arm and yanked her out of earshot of everyone. "Do you realize what you've done?"

"I was standing up for?—"

"Yourself? Or your pride?" Her mother's words stung more than the slap of a sash being ripped away.

"Mom, I?—"

"Years of training, thousands of dollars, and for what?" Her mother's disappointment was palpable; each word, a weight added to Hadley's shoulders. "To throw it away in a fit of temper?"

"Mom, please." Hadley's plea was barely a whisper, her eyes searching for some glimmer of understanding.

"You think this won't follow you?" Her mother's tone was sharp as shattered glass. "Pageant circles talk, Hadley. They'll remember the girl who couldn't handle pressure. The girl who blew up in front of all the other contestants and went after an elderly woman."

Hadley wrapped her arms around herself, the cold realization settling in. The tiara might be gone, but the crown of shame felt all too real.

The music started for the evening gown practice. The noise filled Hadley's ears, drowning out her mother's scolding. She felt numb, like she'd floated out of her body and was watching the scene unfold from a distance.

"There was no need to talk to Mrs. Shomacker," her mother snapped; the red lipstick on her thin lips contrasting sharply with her pale skin. "Why can't you just be quiet and smile like the other girls?"

Hadley opened her mouth to reply, but no words came out. She felt like she was choking on her own regret.

"I can't believe you did this to us. We were this close to having it all, and you had to go and ruin it all."

"Mom, I'm sorry, okay?" Hadley's voice held a tremble she couldn't control.

"Sorry doesn't win crowns," her mother snapped, packing up makeup with sharp, calculated movements.

"Maybe not, but it wins self-respect."

"Self-respect won't get you the title."

"Neither will being miserable." Hadley met her mother's gaze, holding it with a newfound steadiness.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Is that what this is about? You've been unhappy?"

"Unhappy?" Hadley laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I've been a mannequin with a sash for as far back as I can remember, Mom. A pretty thing on a pedestal that you've forced me to be my entire life."

"Being pretty pays," her mother retorted, her hands reaching out to pat Hadley's hair into place.

"Being me pays more." Hadley yanked away, feeling the weight of her heavy gown and costume jewelry like shackles. She unclasped a bracelet, letting it clatter to the ground. "I want more than this."

"More than a chance at Miss Hero, the legacy you were born to have?" her mother's skepticism was almost comical.

"Legacies like that fade, Mom. I want to shine because of something more." Hadley shrugged off the gown, standing in her simple slip. "And not because of some tiara."

"Fine," her mother huffed. "Try to shine your own way. But when you're scraping by without a crown or title, don't come crying to me."

"Deal." Hadley nodded firmly, her blue eyes alight with the chance at freedom. "Besides, who says I can't make my own titles?"

"Like what?" The question was a challenge, a gauntlet thrown.

"Miss Free Spirit has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" Hadley twirled, the fabric of her slip swishing around her. "Or Miss Independent." Hadley took a deep breath, the air around her never tasting sweeter. "No more pageants means no more pretending. No more being told who to be."

"Who will you be then?" Her mother's tone softened, curiosity replacing the edge of disappointment.

"Me. Just Hadley." She pulled on her jeans and black sweater, the comfort of the familiar enveloping her. "The girl who loves books, hates high heels, and can eat a whole pizza by herself."

"Sounds...charming," her mother said sarcastically with a roll of her eyes.

"Charming enough without a crown," Hadley stated firmly.

"I'm going home, and when you're ready to admit what you did was wrong, you can come meet me there and apologize for real this time." Her mother didn't wait for her response. She simply turned and walked away.

Hadley slumped into the metal folding chair, its cold touch seeping through her. She stared at her reflection in the nearby dressing room mirror, a stark contrast to the vibrant competitor who had prepped there just minutes before.

"Ignore your mother," a soft voice said from behind her. Hadley turned to meet Candace's warm eyes. "You did what most people wouldn't dare to do. You stood up to Matilda Shomacker."

Mrs. Shomacker was infamous for causing problems around town, especially for Jenesa and the Bumblebee Bed and Breakfast. She was glad she had done it in the moment, but now, as the weight of her choice settled in around her, she wondered if it

had been worth it.

"But I lost my crown because of it," Hadley whispered, a tear slipping down her cheek.

"And gained your wings," Candace responded, handing her a tissue. "A lot of us are proud of you for making the decision to stand up for yourself."

"Really?" Hadley asked, looking surprised.

"Absolutely. Especially Avery." Candace laughed. "She said she could kiss you."

Hadley blushed but smiled. At least not everyone thought she had lost it. "And my mom?"

"Your mom will need time," Candace admitted, her eyes kind but truthful. "But she'll come around. She loves you, which means she's going to want what's best for you."

"I hope so." Hadley chewed on her lower lip.

Candace patted her shoulder gently. "Just remember, you've won a different kind of crown today."

She nodded. "Thanks, Candace. I appreciate your friendship so much."

Hadley cleaned up her dressing area, took a final look around the backstage, and then shouldered her bag stuffed with pageant paraphernalia for the last time.

As she walked home that evening, she felt lighter and freer, but there was a small part of her that also hated hurting her mom. She decided that going home wasn't an option yet. She needed to go somewhere else to clear her head.

Up ahead, the familiar lights of the B&B beckoned. As she neared the old Victorian, Avery darted out, her cheeks pink, and she caught Hadley in a tight hug.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"I'm so proud of you. You didn't need that crown to prove how amazing you are," Avery gushed, pulling away. She was grinning wide, and her green eyes sparkled with sincere admiration.

Hadley laughed, feeling warmth spreading through her at her friend's enthusiasm. "Thanks, Avery, that means a lot."

Inside the B&B lobby, Jenesa looked up from the front desk. She gave Hadley an approving nod across the room. "Well done," she called over.

Hadley smiled back, suddenly feeling a little surer of herself.

"I knew you had it in you," Jenesa added before turning her attention back to the check-in book.

"How about some hot chocolate?" Avery suggested, motioning towards the cozy dining area. "I swear I make the best in all of Texas."

Hadley nodded. "I could really use that."

Over hot drinks and freshly baked cookies, the trio talked about everything but pageants, beauty queens, and disappointed mothers. It felt good, normal even, as if Hadley hadn't just turned her whole world upside down.

As the women finished their treats, they heard footsteps approaching the dining area. Braden appeared in the doorway, his face breaking out into a large smile when he saw them.

"Well look who I found," he said teasingly as he walked over to join them. "Three of my favorite ladies."

"Braden, hi," Avery exclaimed, standing up to give him a hug. "Care to join us?"

Braden shrugged nonchalantly. "I have to do some studying. I have a big test tomorrow. It's why I wasn't at the pageant practice today."

"Well, you missed a big one," Jenesa told him with a smile. "Hadley spread her wings and is free from pageants now."

"Is that so?" Braden asked with raised eyebrows. "I guess I need to be filled in on what I missed." He took a seat at the table and looked at Hadley expectantly.

Hadley's stomach twisted nervously at the mention of the pageant. She had hoped to avoid talking about it tonight, but it seemed like that wasn't going to happen. She took a deep breath before launching into the whole story. She told them about the director's decision, her confrontation with her mom, and her resolution to give up pageants altogether. As she spoke, she could feel tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She needed to be strong and not let anyone see how much this was affecting her.

When she finished, there was a small moment of silence before Braden spoke up. "I'm sorry things didn't go as you hoped, Hadley," he said sincerely. "But I'm proud of you for standing up for yourself."

Hadley's heart swelled at his words. It meant a lot coming from someone like Braden, who always seemed so put together and confident.

"But I know it must be tough to let go of something that meant so much to you," he continued with understanding in his eyes.

His words hit her hard because they were exactly what she was feeling—torn between standing up for herself and holding onto fulfilling her parents' dream of being Miss Hero Texas.

"Thanks, Braden, but I really need to be going." Hadley climbed to her feet and waved goodbye.

As she walked home, she replayed in her mind, over and over, the gasps of shock as she confronted Mrs. Shomacker and the look of disappointment on her mother's face when she found out what she had done. It was not the highlight reel of a beauty queen's dream, but for Hadley, it was something more valuable. She'd learned she didn't have to live by everyone else's rules.

Hadley felt an odd sense of peace wash over her. The hardest part was over. She could finally start living life on her own terms. She had shown everyone she was more than a pretty face, proving it even to herself. Sure, there would be fallout and disgruntled chatter in town over the next few days, but for now, she basked in her courage. Her mother's words from earlier echoed softly in the back of her mind, but Hadley fought them off, clinging to Candace's comforting words instead. Suddenly, being 'just Hadley' seemed like the most wonderful thing in the world.

Chapter Twelve

Braden slumped onto a barstool at The Rusty Hinge, the dim lighting matching his mood. His fingers tapped an absentminded rhythm on the sticky surface, the remnants of spilled beer beneath his touch. He'd been staring into the same half-empty glass for the better part of an hour, his mind replaying Hadley's face like a movie on loop.

"Hey there, tall, dark, and brooding," came a voice that was decidedly not Hadley's. A young woman with a flirtatious smile slid into the space beside him, her overly floral perfume cutting through the scent of stale peanuts and despair.

"Sorry, not interested," Braden said without looking up.

"Ouch, shot down before I even took off," she teased, undeterred.

"Trust me, it's not you," he muttered, finally glancing her way. "It's...complicated."

"Isn't it always?" she quipped, twirling a strand of her brown hair.

"Right now, it's Hadley-level complicated," Braden confessed, though he wasn't quite sure why he was telling this to a stranger. Maybe it was the way the light hit her eyes, throwing him back to a pair of striking blue ones framed by black lashes.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Ah, the infamous Hadley Wilder," she nodded sagely. "Heard she's something else."

"Something else doesn't cover the half of it," he said, a faint smile tugging at his lips despite himself. It faded quickly. "She's...she's more than just a beauty queen, you know?"

"Sounds like you're head over combat boots for her," the woman observed with a playful smirk.

"Is it that obvious?" Braden sighed, running a hand through his black hair.

"Only to anyone in a five-mile radius," she replied, raising her glass to him before taking a sip. "But hey, love's a battlefield, right?"

"Feels more like a minefield right now," he admitted. The image of Hadley, with her black hair cascading around her curvy frame, haunted him. She was a force to be reckoned with—her intellect, her humor, her newfound independence. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd let her slip through his fingers.

"Then maybe it's time to stop playing it safe," the woman suggested, sliding off her stool. "Go after what you want, soldier."

"Maybe you're right," Braden said, the words hanging in the air as she sauntered away, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

Braden swirled the amber liquid in his glass, the ice clinking like a siren's call to action. He stared hard at the reflection in the mirror behind the bar—a man out of

sorts, a soldier without a mission.

"Another?" The bartender's question cut through Braden's reverie.

"Hit me," he grumbled, pushing the glass forward.

"Rough night, huh?" The bartender's towel danced over another glass, round and round.

"Rough life," Braden corrected him, the whiskey burning its way down, setting his resolve on fire. "I'm supposed to be good at the rescue part, right? So why do I feel like I've just made everything worse?"

"Rescue part?" The bartender leaned in, curiosity piqued.

"Long story." Braden shook his head. "Let's just say I tried to help someone special, and it backfired."

"Ah, the hero complex," he said, giving a knowing nod. "Comes with the territory. But sometimes, helping isn't about fixing things."

"Then what's it about?" A bitter chuckle escaped Braden's lips.

"Being there. And from where I'm standing, you're still there, aren't you?" The bartender topped off his glass with a wink.

"Being there doesn't feel like enough." Braden's voice was low, edged with frustration.

"Sometimes, it's all we've got," the bartender shrugged, moving down the line to attend to another customer.

"Is it, though?" Braden muttered to himself, thoughts racing faster than his heartbeat. Hadley's blue eyes flashed in his mind, her laughter, her defiance. She wasn't just a beauty queen; she was a whirlwind of dreams and determination.

"Did I screw this up?" he asked his reflection, half-expecting an answer.

"Only if you quit now," the bartender called back, overhearing the one-sided conversation.

"Quit?" Braden scoffed. "I don't even know the meaning of the word."

"Good," the bartender shot him a thumbs up. "Now, what's your next move, hotshot?"

"Next move..." Braden mused. Ideas flickered, possibilities danced. He needed a plan—a grand gesture, something that screamed he was in it for the long haul.

The bartender's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Looks like you've got an idea brewing."

"More than an idea," Braden said, a determined grin spreading across his face. "A mission."

"Sounds serious," the bartender chuckled.

"Life or love—what's the difference?" Braden raised his glass in a mock salute.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Got that right." The bartender laughed, shaking his head as Braden slid off the stool, newfound purpose in his step.

"Watch this," Braden declared, throwing down some bills. "Operation Win Her Over is about to commence."

"Godspeed, Romeo," the bartender called after him, the rest of the bar oblivious to the romantic comedy unfolding before them.

Braden was halfway to the front door to The Rusty Hinge when it creaked open with the familiar squeal that begged for oil. A trio of figures stepped through, casting long shadows across the scuffed wooden floor.

"Hey, Harding," called out Danny, his voice booming over the low hum of country music and loud chatter.

"Heard you've been holding up the bar since sundown," Hunter added.

"Word travels fast," Braden muttered, dropping his hand and turning to face the unexpected intrusion into his brooding solitude by his instructors.

"Like wildfire," joked Charlie, who came over and patted him on the back.

"Or like gossiping neighbors," added Jeff Parker, a good friend of theirs, who was now a local K9 handler for Hero.

"So I'm guessing you heard what happened at the pageant practice," Braden said,

resignation slumping his shoulders as he motioned them closer with a jerk of his head.

"Yep, we sure did," Danny started, taking a seat beside Braden in a booth and slapping a comforting hand on his back. "The missus can't stop talking about it. How Hadley seems to like her newfound independence."

"Don't I know it," Braden grumbled. "Come to kick a man while he's down?" Braden asked, half-heartedly attempting a chuckle.

"Nah," Hunter interjected, leaning against the table. "We're here to pull you out of this funk. You're moping around like a dog who lost its favorite bone."

"More like a guy who lost his?—"

"Enough metaphors," Jeff cut in, rolling his eyes. "Point is, if you think she's the one, then fight for her."

"Fight for her?" Braden echoed, skepticism threading his tone.

"Absolutely," Danny confirmed, nodding earnestly. "You've got to show her what she means to you. Don't let pride or fear hold you back."

"Or a bar stool," jested Hunter, earning a round of chuckles.

"Remember the bomb scenario last week?" Danny questioned, capturing Braden's gaze with an intensity that spoke volumes. "You told the team to give it everything you got, and you all went out there and turned out your best results. Well, it's your turn now to follow your own advice."

"Give it everything I got..." Braden repeated, the words resonating somewhere deep

within him.

"Exactly," Hunter said, slapping the bar top for emphasis. "So, what's it gonna be? You gonna sit here drowning in 'what ifs,' or are you going to be the man we know you are?"

"Geez, I hate it when you make sense," Braden sighed, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

"Good," Danny grinned. "Now get out there and show that girl she's got someone worth fighting for."

"Someone who doesn't give up," Hunter added with a nod.

"Especially not on love." Jeff raised his glass in salute.

"Cheers to that," Braden agreed, the spark of determination igniting in his chest as he clinked his glass with theirs.

Braden drained his glass and set it down with a definitive clack. He pushed back from the table, more determined than ever to fight for Hadley.

"All right, I'm doing this," he declared, squaring his shoulders like he was about to march into battle rather than hatch a plan of romance.

"Doing what exactly?" Hunter arched an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching in anticipation of something entertaining.

"Winning Hadley back," Braden said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Got a plan, Romeo?" Jeff asked, leaning forward, his elbows resting on the table.

"Step one: grand gesture." Braden nodded to himself more than to the coaches.

"Classic," Hunter approved, a warm grin lighting up his face. "But what's the gesture?"

"Something...not pageantry," Braden muttered, rubbing the stubble on his chin thoughtfully.

"Like a rescue operation?" Danny suggested with a chuckle. "Swoop in with Dash and save her from a burning building?"

"Too much," Braden murmured, only half-joking. "And I'm not keen on starting a fire for that plan."

"True that," Jeff said with a nod.

"Okay, okay, so we all agree it has to be less dramatic than that," Braden conceded, a smile finally breaking through his earlier gloom. "I'm thinking something personal. Something that says 'I know you.'"

"Like?" prodded Danny, clearly enjoying the brainstorming session.

"Like..." Braden paused, an idea sparking to life. "A scavenger hunt. She loves puzzles, right? And each clue will lead her to places that mean something to us, that show her I've been paying attention."

"Smart," Danny nodded in approval. "And for the final clue?"

"Me," Braden said, a new confidence surging through him. "Waiting with Dash at the place we first met. The Coffee Loft."

"Symbolic," Jeff mused, his expression showing a rare hint of approval, most likely because he was dating the owner of the place.

"She's going to love it," Danny added with a sage nod.

"Ridiculously cheesy, but I think it will work," Braden admitted, but his grin was now broad and unapologetic. "But that's the point, isn't it?"

"Absolutely," Danny agreed, raising his empty glass as though toasting Braden's impending success.

"Go get her, Harding," Hunter said, clapping Braden on the back.

"Consider this battlefield stormed," Braden cheered, turning to leave The Rusty Hinge with a purposeful stride. His heart wasn't just on his sleeve; it was leading the charge.

"You got this," Danny called out as Braden disappeared into the dim-lit street.

Braden strode through the darkened streets of the small town, a sense of determination in his step. He couldn't believe he had almost given up on Hadley, but now he was more determined than ever to win her back.

As he approached the bed and breakfast, Braden's mind raced with ideas for the scavenger hunt. He wanted each clue to be meaningful and personal, showing her how much he knew and cared about her as well as remembering the places that pay

homage to their time together.

With a determined swipe of his hand, Braden pushed open the heavy wooden door to the B&B. The familiar scent of chocolate chip cookies baking wafted over him.

"Hi, Braden," Jenesa called out from behind the counter as Braden entered. She looked up from where she was stacking freshly baked cookies onto a tray and smiled at him.

"Hey," Braden greeted her with a smile of his own. "Can I get your help with something?"

"Sure," Jenesa said, wiping her hands on a dish towel before making her way over to him. "What's up?"

"I...uh...I have a plan to win back Hadley, and I thought you'd be good at putting it together with me," Braden started, feeling a bit nervous. He wasn't used to asking for help.

"Sure. Why don't you tell me about this plan of yours, and I'll see what I can do," Jenesa said evenly, but there was a hint of amusement in her eyes.

As Braden began to lay out his grand idea, Jenesa listened with a thoughtful expression. "I think it's a splendid idea, Braden." Jenesa's eyes brightened with inspiration. "I've got some great ideas for clues and a couple of more places you might want to add."

In the following hours, Braden and Jenesa plotted and planned into the night. They scribbled on napkins, debated over riddles, and chuckled over memories. With every second that passed, Braden felt more hopeful. His anxiety simmered down, and it was replaced by an electrifying anticipation. Winning Hadley back was within his reach.

Toward midnight, they finalized their plan.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Thanks, Jenesa. You've been a real help," Braden told the B&B owner.

"Any time," she told him with a warm smile. "Hadley's great, and she's lucky to have someone like you fighting for her."

"Now all that's left is to set the plan in motion," Braden thought aloud as he walked to his room, a grin spread across his face. He could already imagine Hadley's reaction to his elaborate gesture, and he hoped it would be enough to finally prove to her that he was all in.

Chapter Thirteen

The dress shop was a carousel of colors and textures, all spinning around Hadley in a whirl of potential. She stood by the mannequin, draping a velvet ribbon across its waist with an artist's precision. Her fingers danced along the fabric, a symphony of silk and chiffon.

"Like this?" Candace asked, her hazel eyes twinkling with creative fire.

"Maybe a bow?" Hadley suggested, her voice light, playful.

Candace tilted her head, considering. "A bow...yes. I can see it now." She laughed, looping the ribbon into an elegant knot. "Hadley, you've got a knack for this."

"Thanks," she blushed, a warm sensation bubbling within her.

Hadley thought she had found happiness in pageants, but as she stood in the dress

shop surrounded by all the beautifully handmade garments, she realized that this was different than anything she had ever experienced before. This was joy—a pure, unfiltered jubilation that pageants never gave her. No crowns or sashes here, just the thrill of creation. An exuberance created on her own, without needing validation from others. Yet, there was still a small part of her that felt guilty for abandoning her mother's dream for her for something so simple yet fulfilling.

"Ever thought about doing this full-time?" Candace said, pinning the bow in place with a flourish.

"Designing? Me?" Hadley's heart skipped. The idea was a seed, suddenly sprouting in the fertile soil of her imagination.

"Sure, why not?" Candace stepped back, admiring their joint effort. "You have an eye for beauty, but not just the surface kind. You see the bones of a piece, how to make it sing."

"Sing," Hadley echoed, the word tasting like possibility on her lips. Up until now, she'd used her voice to express what others thought, but now, with this, she could share her own thoughts and ideas. It was tempting.

"Come work for me," Candace offered; the words hanging between them like a challenge.

"Work for you?" Hadley stammered. Her mind raced—could she? Should she?

"Yep," Candace said, popping the 'p' with a smile. "I could use someone with your vision. And let's face it, we make a pretty good team."

"Team," Hadley repeated, the idea settling in her chest, warming her from the inside out. She imagined days filled with fabrics instead of fake smiles and patterns instead

of pageants.

"Okay," Hadley breathed out, the decision felt right for the first time in...well, ever.

"Yes, I'd love that."

"Fantastic." Candace beamed, and the shop seemed to glow a little brighter.

"Welcome to the chaos and charm of fashion, my friend."

"Chaos and charm," Hadley mused, a smile spreading across her face. Somehow, those words felt like the perfect description for her new beginning.

Candace laughed, her eyes twinkling with amusement. "Oh, you have no idea what you're in for," she warned playfully, sweeping her arm around the workshop laden with fabrics and unfinished garments.

Hadley's gaze followed her gesture, taking in the whirl of colors and textures. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, but there was also a sense of exhilaration. "I can't wait," she admitted, her own excitement mirrored in Candace's bright gaze.

"Good, because we start tomorrow bright and early," Candace declared, clapping her hands together with a hint of mischief in her voice.

"Tomorrow?" Hadley squeaked.

"Yes," Candace said, the word tumbling out like a joyful secret. "And when I say bright and early, I mean dawn."

"Dawn?" Hadley echoed weakly. Her mind grappled with the thought of waking up at such an absurd hour. "Well...I guess beauty sleep is overrated anyway."

Candace threw back her head and laughed, a hearty sound that bounced off the walls

of the workshop. "Now you're getting the spirit. But I was just kidding. I'm not a morning person. The shop opens at nine," she explained in between chuckles.

"Yes, that seems way more reasonable." Hadley nodded, a nervous smile curling up on her lips. What had she gotten herself into? Then again...she looked around the room—their room now—and felt a rush of warmth spreading through her veins. This was going to be hard, maybe even crazy at times, but it was going to be hers.

"And Hadley?" Candace added softly, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For taking a chance on this, on us." Candace's gaze was warm, her hazel eyes sparkling with genuine gratitude. "I wouldn't want to do this with anyone else."

Hadley felt a sudden lump in her throat, brushing it away with a shaky laugh. "Well, thank goodness you didn't ask anyone else then."

Candace snorted, slapping her hand lightly. "Seriously, Hadley. Thank you."

"Well," Hadley said, trying to lighten the mood. "Let's hope you're still thanking me when I accidentally sew our first collection together, and several pieces are slightly off."

"No worries," Candace responded with a grin. "That's what seam rippers are for."

Hadley glanced at the tiny tool on the table, then back at Candace. She gulped. "And...you're sure I can't accidentally stab myself with that?"

The two dissolved into laughter, echoes filling every corner of the workshop. Yes, things were about to get interesting, but neither of them would have it any other way.

A couple of hours later, laughter bubbled over the rim of her cocktail glass as Hadley clinked it against her friends' drinks, the ice cubes dancing like her heart. "To new beginnings," she toasted, the words a cheerful note in the hum of the bistro.

"Spill it, Hadley," Jenesa leaned in, her eyes sparkling with the kind of curiosity that

could unearth secrets. "You're practically glowing. What's up?"

"Is it that obvious?" Hadley teased, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, her smile betraying her.

"Out with it," Avery urged, elbow propped on the table, her grin expectant.

"Okay, okay," Hadley relented, the excitement fizzing through her veins. "I'm joining Candace at the shop. Designing. For real this time."

"Whoa, seriously?" Jenesa's eyebrows shot up. "That's huge."

"Designer Hadley Wilder," Avery mused, nodding approvingly. "It's got a nice ring to it."

"Congrats," Jenesa squeezed Hadley's hand across the table, her enthusiasm infectious.

"Thanks, guys." Hadley's cheeks warmed from the shared joy, the words 'new job' feeling like a pair of snug jeans—just right.

"Speaking of new—how's things going with Braden?" Avery wiggled her eyebrows, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"Braden?" Hadley's smile faltered. The name was a pebble in her shoe. "Uh, well..."

"Still giving him radio silence?" Jenesa tilted her head, concern creasing her forehead.

"Kind of. We're...between signals." Hadley shrugged, sipping her drink as if it held answers at the bottom.

"Isn't he leaving soon?" Candace's voice asked in a soft tone, threading sympathy into the question.

"Yes, which is why it's complicated," Hadley murmured with a sigh. She traced the rim of her glass, the coolness was a balm to her thoughts.

"Complicated how? Like a rom-com where you run to the airport to stop him?" Avery's chuckle was gentle, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"More like a sitcom where the lead forgets her lines." Hadley forced a laugh. "And misses her cue."

"Girl, life's not a script you have to follow," Jenesa said, squeezing her shoulder. "Write your own ending."

"Right," Hadley nodded, her resolve a paper boat on uncertain waters. "My own ending."

"Hey, let's celebrate your new job tonight," Avery interjected, redirecting the conversation with a smile. "Tomorrow's drama can wait for its own episode."

"Cheers to that," Hadley agreed, raising her glass again. They toasted once more, the clink a punctuation mark to the promise of future laughter and the hope that maybe, just maybe, missed cues could lead to unexpected scenes.

Laughter bubbled around the table like champagne fizz, but it popped and vanished as Hadley's mother approached with the determination of a stage mom looking for her prodigy.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Mom?" Hadley blinked, surprise etching her features. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking on my star," her mother said, her icy blue eyes scanning the jovial scene before settling on Hadley with an intensity that could rival stage lights. "And what, may I ask, is all this?"

"My friends." Hadley gestured to the group. "We're celebrating."

"Really?" Her mother's perfectly arched brow lifted. "And what's the occasion?"

"I got a job offer," Hadley replied, her voice a mixture of pride and defiance. "From Candace. At the dress shop. And I accepted."

"Is that so?" Her mother's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Well, darling, I have news, too. Bigger news."

"News?" Hadley tensed, the word feeling like the prelude to a storm.

"Miss Panhandle, sweetheart. I was able to work my magic and get you a spot, but we need to leave for upper Texas right away," her mother announced as if she were revealing a winning lottery ticket.

"Wait, what?" Hadley's pulse quickened.

"I already packed your things. We leave now," her mother insisted as she reached out to grab her arm.

Hadley yanked her arm away. "No, Mom. I'm not going."

Her mother's eyes narrowed into slits. "What did you just say to me?" she hissed.

"I said no." Hadley's blue eyes mirrored the steely resolve in her voice.

A collective gasp echoed around the table. The world seemed to pause mid-spin, waiting with bated breath for the explosion that was sure to follow.

"You're turning down the pageant?" Her mom's voice was incredulous as if Hadley had just turned down a meeting with royalty.

"Yes, I am," Hadley affirmed with a nod.

"But why? You could be Miss Panhandle," her mother's voice held a note of hysteria. "What's gotten into you?"

"Because..." Hadley started, then took a deep breath. "Maybe I want more than sequins and tiaras in my life."

The room fell silent once again, every eye on Hadley, who stood tall in her seat despite her trembling hands.

"And what could be more fulfilling than being a beauty queen?" her mother spat out, shocked.

"This," Hadley gestured around the table at her friends, their wide-eyed expressions moving between the two women. "Friendship. Real-life experiences. And a job offer that doesn't require me to wear a bathing suit in front of judgmental people."

Her mother stared at her, jaw working soundlessly. "Hadley Monica Wilder," her

mother finally spluttered, waving a manicured hand in exasperation as her cheeks flamed red in indignation. "You want to throw away your dreams for these...these...common pursuits?"

A silence blanketed the room again, weighty and charged.

"Actually, Mom," Hadley said, her voice firm. "These are my dreams."

Her mother's face fell. "You're serious about this?"

"As a heart attack," Hadley retorted, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Fine, have it your way. But when this all goes terribly wrong, you'll only have yourself to blame," her mother warned before stalking off with an elegant swirl of her designer coat.

"Wow," Avery broke the silence, blinking owlshly at the exit of Hadley's mother. "That was...intense."

"Well, that's one way to drop a bombshell," Jenesa muttered with a shrug.

It may have been chaotic and far from what her mother considered "ideal," but this was where Hadley felt she truly belonged—amidst good friends who were more like family. They were crazy and imperfect, but they were real, and to Hadley, that was more than enough.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

Candace's eyes sparkled with admiration. "Proud of you," she said gently, patting Hadley's hand. "Everyone should get to chase their dreams."

"Even if those dreams involve a sewing machine instead of a tiara," Avery added with a grin.

Jenesa was next to join in. "You know we've got your back, right? No matter what."

Hadley nodded, touched by their support. "I know," she murmured, looking around the table at each face she had grown so fond of. "And I'm so grateful to have all of you in my life."

"Speaking of dreams," Jenesa suddenly said with a warm smile. "I have big news of my own." All eyes turned to her as she continued. "I'm pregnant."

"Oh my goodness," Avery cried, nearly jumping out of her seat. "That's amazing, Jenesa. I'm so happy for you and Danny."

"Seems Hadley isn't the only one chasing dreams these days," Candace mused with a smile. "Congrats."

"Does this mean I get to plan a baby shower?" Avery questioned, but before her friend could respond, she was already rattling off the list of food she wanted to make for it.

Jenesa laughed and nodded. "Of course, you're in charge, Avery," she assured her best friend.

"But we're helping," Hadley insisted.

"Count us in," Candace confirmed. "Whatever you need."

At the quaint little bistro, laughter echoed through the room, stirring up warmth and happiness within its walls as they shifted their attention to dessert.

As they all celebrated their respective victories and dreams amidst hearty laughter and shared tales, Hadley felt an overwhelming sense of contentment. She had chosen a different path—one filled with uncertainties and possible hurdles—but she knew she wasn't alone. With the support of her new friends, she knew she could do anything she set her mind to.

Chapter Fourteen

Braden strode into the "Miss Hero" pageant headquarters, his determination as solid as his military posture. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead like a swarm of agitated bees, casting a stark glow on the scattering of desks and disarray of papers. A sense of urgency propelled him forward, past the clacking keyboards and ringing phones, to the office marked "Organizers" at the far end of the room.

"Excuse me," he said, rapping briskly on the doorframe. Two sets of weary eyes flicked up. One belonged to a man with a bow tie hanging askew, the other to a woman whose glasses perched perilously on the bridge of her nose.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, her tone suggesting that she could do without another problem.

"Braden Harding." He extended a hand, his grip firm. "I have information regarding Hadley Wilder's disqualification."

"Ah, yes, the backstage argument debacle," the man murmured, adjusting his tie as if it would help him think better. "George Wallace told us all about it."

"More like sabotage," Braden corrected.

A collective eyebrow raised. He had their attention now.

"Go on," the woman urged, pushing her glasses up.

"Mrs. Matilda Shomacker," Braden started, but before he could continue, the woman cut in.

"Hero's most nosy neighbor? What about her?" Bow Tie asked with a tilt of his head.

"Turns out, she's more than just nosy. She orchestrated the whole mess to discredit Hadley,"— Braden's voice was even, factual— "and she did everything she could to make Hadley look bad."

"How's that?" Bow Tie asked, leaning forward.

"Let's just say Mrs. Shomacker has a talent for creating chaos where there is none. She did her best to make it look like Hadley was intimately involved with one of the judges when that wasn't the case."

"And how do you know all of this?"

"Well, first, I was the judge in question," he admitted. "And I can vouch that nothing inappropriate ever went on between Miss Wilder and myself. Secondly, there were multiple witnesses as to what happened and how Mrs. Shomacker started the fight. All you have to do is question them to provide proof. I have a list of names if you want them."

Braden watched as realization dawned on the organizers' faces, their expressions shifting from skepticism to concern.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Goodness," the woman exclaimed, removing her glasses and polishing them on her blouse as though trying to clear her vision of the situation. "That changes things."

"Indeed," Bow Tie concurred. "We can't have someone falsely accused because of...pettiness."

"Exactly." Braden nodded. "Hadley deserves to compete. Fair and square."

"Agreed," Bow Tie and Glasses said in unison.

"Then you'll reinstate her?" Braden pressed, eager to deliver the good news to Hadley himself.

"First thing tomorrow," the woman confirmed, already scribbling notes onto a sticky pad. "Just in time for the opening ceremony this weekend."

"Thank you," Braden's voice carried relief. He turned to leave, a smile tugging at his lips.

"And as far as I go, if you need me to step down from the judging panel because of the previous allegations, I can do that."

Braden's words hung in the air like a challenge, daring the organizers to question his integrity.

Bow Tie and Glasses exchanged a look, then turned back to Braden with solemn expressions.

"Look," Bow Tie started, smoothing down his namesake accessory, "we respect the whole honor code thing you've got going. Soldier's integrity and all that jazz."

"Appreciate it, but?—"

"Let me finish, son." Bow Tie held up a hand. "We respect you, yes. But stepping down? Unnecessary. We trust your judgment, Sergeant Harding. Not only are you a respected soldier, but you're also a part of the Hero Search and Rescue Academy. Mr. Bowman wouldn't have granted you admittance if you weren't above board."

"And you're certain?" Braden echoed, skepticism lacing his tone.

"Absolutely," Bow Tie confirmed with a firm nod. "You're not biased. You're the guy who sniffed out foul play, for fairness' sake."

"Fair point," Braden conceded, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Besides," Bow Tie added with a conspiratorial lean, "you think any of these ladies wouldn't want a dashing soldier judging them? Good for morale."

"Morale, huh?" Braden chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Guess I can stick around then."

"Good man," Bow Tie nodded his approval.

Braden nodded gratefully. "Thank you again."

With that, he turned and strode out of the meeting room, feeling like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He couldn't wait to see Hadley's reaction when he told her the good news.

Braden found Hadley inside the dress shop, the late afternoon sunlight casting a warm glow on her peach-colored skin through the window. She was sketching at the dress shop, her black hair tied up in a loose bun, strands framing her focused face.

"Hey," he said, approaching with a cautious smile.

Hadley looked up, her vibrant blue eyes reflecting a mix of surprise and curiosity. "Braden? What are you doing here?"

"Can't I guy check in on his friend when he wants," he teased with a wide grin. "Besides, I got some big news." He leaned against the table, hands in pockets. "The Miss Hero Pageant—you're back in."

"Am I?" She set down her pencil, her brows furrowing together with surprise.

"Yeah, I cleared things up for you by going to the pageant organizers. Mrs. Shomacker's out, you're in," Braden explained, watching for her reaction.

"Thanks, but..." Hadley sighed, picking at the edge of her sketchpad. "I'm done with that scene."

"Done?" His eyebrows shot up.

"Pageants aren't...they're not me anymore." She gestured to her drawings. "This is me. Designing. Creating. I want something different for my life now. It took me losing my place to finally admit that to myself, but there it is."

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Seriously?" The words tumbled out before he could filter them.

"Seriously." Her tone was firm, conviction clear.

Braden whistled lowly. "Hadley Wilder, designer extraordinaire. Has a nice ring to it."

"Doesn't it just?" A genuine smile replaced her earlier hesitation.

"Can't say I saw that coming," he admitted.

"Neither did I until I had the time to think about it without pageants blurring my vision." She looked at him then, a quiet strength in her gaze. "But I'm happy about it. Truthfully, I've never been happier."

"Good." He nodded, impressed. "You should be. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Braden." Her gratitude was palpable. "And I appreciate you standing up for me. That means a lot, even though I'm choosing not to compete."

"That's okay. You need to find your own path," he continued, "that's brave."

"Or crazy," she kidded, her humor peeking through.

"Bit of both," he agreed with a chuckle. "Best kind of people are, though."

Hadley laughed, the sound light and free. It was the laugh of someone who'd shed a

weight they'd been carrying far too long.

Braden fished a folded piece of paper from his pocket and held it out to Hadley. "Before you dive too deep into those designs, I've got something for you."

"Is that so?" She raised an eyebrow, curiosity lighting up her blue eyes as she reached for the note.

"First clue," he said with a hint of mischief. "For the scavenger hunt I made for you."

Unfolding the paper, she read aloud, "'Where tails wag and we first teamed up.'" A knowing smile spread across her face. "The dog park."

"Got it in one guess. Impressive." Braden's brown eyes twinkled with anticipation. "Now we just have to go there."

Hadley grinned, tucking the note inside her pocket. "This sounds like fun. Lead the way, Sergeant."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am," Braden gave a playful salute, guiding her from the dress shop and out onto the sidewalk.

They walked in comfortable silence until they reached the park. Dash immediately bounded up, wagging his tail and heading for the play area as Danny waved goodbye and took off to leave them alone.

The park was fairly quiet, save for a few other canine owners tossing balls and frisbees. Braden led Hadley toward a bench overlooking the open field where Dash was now happily chasing after a thrown tennis ball.

"Here's your next clue," Braden said, pointing to the bench where an envelope lay

propped up.

"I'm often quiet but can be quite loud at times. People come to me for news, education, and entertainment, but I don't have a mouth. What am I?"

"The library," Hadley guessed after several moments.

"You're really good at this," Braden told her with an impressed smile.

They went on a short walk over to the library, where the musty scent of books enveloped them as Hadley searched the shelves. Her fingers traced the spines until they paused on a book titled "Designs of the Heart."

"Subtle," she teased, pulling the book to find another note wedged between the pages.

"Thought you'd appreciate that," Braden replied, shrugging playfully.

"Some like me hot, some like me cold. Some prefer mild, some prefer bold. What am I?" Hadley read the next clue out loud. "The Coffee Loft," she shouted, a little too loud. Several of the library patrons shushed her, causing Hadley to giggle.

The garden behind the Coffee Loft was a quiet sanctuary amidst the town's bustle. They arrived to find a single red rose lying atop a stone table with an iced mocha to-go beside it.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:35 am

"Remember this?" Braden asked as he took Hadley's hand, leading her in an impromptu dance on the cobblestones.

"Hard to forget," she murmured, laughter lacing her words while they swayed without music, save for the rhythm of their own connection.

"I've got one more destination for you," he whispered against her ear. He pulled back gently and fished the final clue from his pocket.

"I have a neck and no head, two arms but no hands. What am I? A blouse," Hadley guessed with a massive grin. "But where do we get one?"

"I thought it would point to the dress shop better than that," he told her sheepishly. "I guess I should have thought of that one better."

"That's okay. It still works," she said, taking his hand and pulling him toward her new work, where Candace greeted them with a knowing nod.

Hadley's latest sketch hung in the window—a knee-length dress of flowing fabric the color of twilight skies.

"Try it on," Braden encouraged.

"How did you get this done so fast?" Hadley questioned wide-eyed. "I just sketched it a couple of days ago."

"Lucky for me, Candace is a fast seamstress," Braden explained.

Hadley took the garment and slipped into the dressing room. She emerged minutes later, looking radiant. The dress seemed to capture her essence—elegant yet vibrant.

"Stunning," Braden breathed out, meaning every syllable.

"Thank you," she whispered, cheeks flushed with a blend of pride and pleasure.

"Braden, this..." Hadley searched for words as she twirled around in the dress. "No one's ever done anything like this for me."

"You're worth it," he said quietly. "You're worth so much more."

"Still," she insisted, reaching over and squeezing his hand. "It means everything."

"Good," he replied, his smile soft and genuine. "Because that's what you mean to me."

"I don't know how to thank you."

"There's no need to. But I do have one more clue for you," Braden's voice cracked the way it did when nerves got the best of him. He pulled out one last piece of paper and handed it to her.

"Oh really," her attention snapped to the paper as she unfolded it. "What did the boy squirrel say to the girl squirrel when he wanted to take her out on a date?" Her brows furrowed together for several seconds before she shook her head. "I have no idea what the answer is."

"I'm nuts about you," Braden told Hadley as he took her hands in his. "Would you like to go out with me? On a date?"

For a moment, there was silence. The sort that stretched just long enough to make Braden consider enlisting Dash for emotional support.

"A real date?" Her head tilted, dark curls tumbling over one shoulder.

"Like...dinner and a movie. Just you and me—" He stumbled over his words, his usual confidence taking a backseat.

"Okay, then." She looked up with a smile. "Yes, I'd love to go on a date with you."

"Really?" He blinked, surprised by the ease of her acceptance.

"Really," she confirmed, squeezing his hands. "But if you bring up swimsuit competitions, the deal's off."

"Deal." He laughed, relief flooding through him. "Swimsuits are officially banned from our conversations."

"Good." She pulled back, the spark in her blue eyes igniting something warm inside him. "So, when is this date?"

"Is tomorrow night too eager?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Tomorrow is perfect," she said with a decisive nod. "It gives me just enough time to find the right pair of combat boots. I have officially retired my heels, so I hope you're ready for a more casual Hadley."

"Looking forward to it."

"Me too," Hadley said as they walked toward the exit together. "You might regret the combat boots, though, if we go dancing."

"Never," he replied with mock solemnity. "I live for danger."

"Keep telling yourself that, Sergeant," she winked with a smile.

"Will do," he promised, already plotting how to make their first date unforgettable.

Chapter Fifteen

Hadley swept a feather duster across her trophy shelf, the golden figures and shiny plaques standing as silent witnesses to her beauty queen history. Every surface in her room glistened with the remnants of her pageant past—sashes draped over her bedpost, a tiara perched atop her dresser like a regal cat eyeing its kingdom.

"Seriously?" she muttered under her breath, her fingers brushing against the cool metal of yet another crown. It was as if her childhood bedroom was frozen in time, a shrine to the person everyone else expected her to be.

"Mom, can we talk about this?" Hadley called out, knowing full well that the silence

from the other side of the house was just as heavy as the crowns she used to wear.

There was no reply. The cold shoulder from her mother was practically arctic since she dropped the bombshell she was quitting pageants.

"Fine, be that way," she huffed, turning back to her cleaning. It was liberating, really, to clear out the old to make room for something new—her true passion, fashion design.

Amidst the sashes and sequins, she found a photo tucked away in an old, forgotten album. A younger Hadley beamed back at her, gap-toothed and exuberant, clutching a plastic scepter and wearing a tiny crown askew on her head of black curls. Next to her stood her dad, his blue eyes crinkling with pride, one arm wrapped around her little peach-tinted shoulders.

"Look at us," she whispered, tracing the outline of her father's face with the tip of her finger. The laughter seemed to echo from the photograph, a moment of pure joy frozen in time.

"Guess I was pretty cute, huh, Dad?"

The memory of her first crown, a token of innocent triumph, felt heavier in her hands now than any of the real ones she had won. She let out a short, humorless laugh, imagining what her dad would say about all the pageantry fuss.

"Probably something cheesy like 'You'll always be my Miss Hero Texas,'" she said to the empty room, the corners of her mouth lifting despite herself. "But I'm ready for my own spotlight now. One not shaped like a crown."

Hadley placed the photo on the desk, straightening her shoulders as though preparing to step onto a stage far grander than any pageant runway. Her reflection in the mirror

caught her attention—a young woman with determination sparkling in her blue eyes, ready to trade in tiaras for textile triumphs.

Her fingers paused mid-fold over a satin evening gown, the fabric whispering secrets of past glories. Her room was a museum of sparkles and sashes, but her heart pulsed for a different rhythm now. She sighed, tossing the gown onto the 'goodbye' pile.

"Last hurrah, huh?" she mumbled to herself, eyeing the gleaming tiaras that lined her shelf. "What do you think, Dad? One more walk across that glittered battlefield?"

She could almost hear his voice, a soft rumble of encouragement from a place just beyond reach. His words came back to her in echoes, a wish from when the world felt simpler and their days together seemed endless.

"Miss Hero Texas," she whispered, the title bittersweet on her tongue. It was his dream for her, one that had shone in his eyes every time he watched her practice her pageant wave or perfect her poised smile. When he passed away ten years ago, it morphed into her mother's dream when she picked up the mantle in honor of his memory.

"All right, Dad. For you." Hadley's decision hung in the air, filling the room with a silent promise. "Let's show them what a Wilder is made of," she declared, her voice stronger than she expected.

Snatching the most recent crown from her shelf, she placed it atop her head, tilting it slightly—a salute to days gone by and a nod to the final curtain call.

"Miss Hero Texas," she repeated to her reflection, a mix of resolve and reverence dancing in her eyes. "It's time to give it one last push. Then we're done, Dad," she added, a playful warning in her tone. "No take-backs."

First, she needed to tell her mother the news. Hadley padded down the hallway and yanked open the door to her mother's study, the scent of leather-bound books and peonies crashing into her. Her mother sat behind an oak desk.

"Mom," Hadley started, her heart pounding like a bass drum at a rock concert.

Her mother looked up, eyebrows raised in that perfectly arched, pageant-approved way. "Yes, dear?"

"I've been thinking..." Hadley's words hung in the air, hesitant but determined.

"About?" Her mother's voice was smooth, deceptively calm like the eye of a storm.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Pageants. Designing. My future." Hadley clasped her hands together, finding strength in her own grip. "I love fashion, Mom. It's my calling."

"Is this about that little sewing hobby of yours?" Her mother's tone was dismissive, but a flicker of interest sparked in her eyes.

"More than a hobby," Hadley corrected, her chin tilting up defiantly. "A passion. A career."

"Ah." Her mother steeped her fingers, considering. "And what of the pageants you mentioned?"

"Miss Hero Texas. Last time. For Dad." Hadley breathed in deeply, as if inhaling courage. "Win or lose, I'm out."

"Out?" The word sliced through the tension, sharp and quick.

"Retiring from pageantry." Hadley steadied herself, ready for the backlash. "After this pageant, I'm focusing on fashion design full-time."

"Retire?" Her mother repeated, the concept seemingly alien to her. "But Hadley, you're at your prime."

"Exactly." Hadley's voice was resolute. "Leaving on a high note."

"And if I can't support this...this decision?" Her mother's voice wavered, revealing a crack in her composed façade.

"Then..." Hadley swallowed the lump forming in her throat. "We might have to make some space between us."

"Space?" A hint of alarm peeked through her mother's controlled exterior.

"Until you can accept my choice," Hadley said, softening slightly. "I hope it won't come to that."

"Me either," her mother whispered, almost to herself.

Hadley turned to leave, pausing at the threshold. "I'll always be your Miss Hero Texas, Mom. With or without the crown."

Her mother's response was a silent nod.

Hadley's hand hovered on the doorknob, her pulse a staccato rhythm against her wrist. She half-expected her mother to launch into another tirade, but the room remained silent, save for the soft shuffle of expensive fabric as her mother shifted in her seat.

"Fine," came the reluctant consent, each syllable laced with resignation. "I won't lose you over this...design business."

Hadley turned, her eyebrows arching in surprise. "Really?"

"Really." Her mother's lips pressed into a thin line, a clear sign of concession rather than approval. "I may not agree with your decision, Hadley, but I respect it."

"Respect?" The word felt foreign, unexpected, and Hadley wasn't quite sure how to respond.

"You heard me correctly. Respect," her mother reiterated, as if tasting the word for the first time.

"Wow." Hadley let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. "That's...big of you, Mom."

"Let's not make a spectacle out of it," her mother replied, waving a dismissive hand. "You've always been dramatic."

"Me? Dramatic?" Hadley feigned shock, her hand clutching at her chest. "I learned from the best."

"Cheeky." Her mother's eyes twinkled despite herself, a rare glimpse of humor peeking through. "Just remember, Hadley Wilder, fashion is no walk in the park either."

"Believe me, after all the stories I've heard from Candace, I'm quite aware," Hadley nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "But if nothing else, I've learned how to handle a tough crowd from pageants."

"I suppose that's something," her mother murmured.

"Just remember, after this competition, no tiaras, just textiles."

"Textiles that better be worth this sacrifice," her mother added, managing a begrudging smile of her own.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Count on it." Hadley's response was confident, lifted by the unexpected support. "Who knows, maybe one day you'll wear one of my designs."

"Perhaps," her mother conceded, standing up. "But only if it's elegant, timeless, and...what's that word you use? Edgy?"

"Edgy," Hadley confirmed, laughing. "Got it. Elegant, timeless, and a hint of edgy. Just like us."

"Us?" Her mother arched an eyebrow, the ghost of a smirk playing on her lips. "Now, don't push it, dear."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Mom." Hadley grinned, opening the door to leave. "Thanks for...well, you know."

"Being a mother?" Her voice followed Hadley out, a hint of warmth seeping through its usual coolness.

"Something like that," Hadley called back, stepping out with a newfound lightness in her step.

Once she finished packing the last of her pageant boxes, Hadley headed for the dress shop. It wasn't long before she was lost in design heaven. Bolts of fabric lined the walls of the back room, patterns and colors colliding in a beautiful chaos.

Candace was there, hunched over a sewing machine, sending fabric flying like it was her business...because it was.

"Candace," Hadley announced, stepping around mannequins. "I'm ready to tackle this fashion thing."

Candace looked up, her hazel eyes sparkling with excitement. "Well, it's about time. I knew you couldn't resist coming in today." She gestured towards a stack of fabrics. "You're just in time. Pick your poison."

Hadley examined the stack, running her fingers over chiffon and silk. "So many options." She eventually settled on a bolt of sapphire blue chiffon.

"You got good taste," Candace praised, nodding approvingly. "Let's get to work then."

Hours later, coaxing bobbins and threading needles, Hadley felt the thrill of creating something from nothing with the help of her new friend and mentor.

Candace leaned back on a stool, watching Hadley's concentration. "You know," she mused, twirling a ribbon around her finger, "you might be more cut out for this than even me."

"That's a huge compliment," Hadley replied with a grin, adjusting her piece of fabric. "Mom's going to love this," she murmured to herself.

"Oh?" Candace raised an eyebrow. "Planning on dressing your mom?"

"Hopefully," Hadley laughed, tugging at the fabric in her hand. "I need to do something if I'm going to convince her that switching my focus from pageants to design was a good idea. I figure bribing her with an eye-catching outfit might be a step in the right direction."

Candace chuckled as she watched Hadley sew. "Well, you're a natural. I'd say you've

found your calling."

"Maybe," Hadley mused. "Or maybe this is just my way of rebelling."

"Rebelling by sewing?" Candace asked, her eyebrows raised in amusement. "You're definitely my type of girl, then."

Hadley shrugged, continuing with her stitches. "I've learned rebellion doesn't have to be loud," she said quietly.

Candace nodded, watching Hadley work. "Rebellion comes in all shapes and sizes, after all."

"I think I'm done," Hadley finally announced, holding up a self-made skirt and matching jacket with a proud grin. "Now, all I need to do is make a shirt that complements it."

Candace whistled, walking over to inspect it. "Pretty impressive for a beginner," she said with an approving nod. "It took me over six months to get this good, and with chiffon no less."

"Well," Hadley started, her blue eyes sparkling with mirth, "I am being mentored by the best, so this win goes as much to you as it does me."

"You sweet talker," Candace said, nudging Hadley playfully. "By the way, I say we celebrate this victory with a glass of wine."

"Oh?" Hadley gave her a sidelong glance. "You're not trying to get me drunk and steal my designs, are you?"

"Caught me," Candace laughed, shoving her lightly. "But seriously, you did a great

job. Let's toast to the start of your new career."

They spent the evening in high spirits, toasting and laughing at shared jokes. Wine glasses clinked, and fabric swatches fluttered around the room as they celebrated.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"So," Candace began as they cleaned up for the night. "Tell me about your mom. Is she finally getting on board with your new path?"

Hadley hesitated, fiddling with her wine glass. "She...she says she'll do her best to support me, but I can tell she's disappointed I'm leaving the pageant world."

"I see," Candace murmured, looking thoughtful. "Parents can be tough, but remember, this is your life."

"Yeah," Hadley said, sighing softly. "I just want her to be proud of me for something other than my looks."

"And she will be," Candace replied, reaching out to give her hand a comforting squeeze. "You've got talent, Hadley. No one can deny that."

Hadley smiled at this, looking at Candace through grateful eyes. For the first time since choosing her new path, she felt confident about her choices. Candace was proving to be just the support system she needed. With the perfect partner in crime—or better put, 'in design'—by her side, Hadley was certain she could finally make something of herself that didn't depend on her looks.

"I have one more request of you," Candace told her as they locked up the dress shop. "I want you to give Braden a real chance. My boyfriend is a great judge of character, and Charlie says Braden's an exceptional guy—the kind any woman would be lucky to have."

Hadley's heart pounded loudly in her chest at the mention of Braden. She hadn't

expected Candace to bring him up, but looking at her friend, she could see the earnestness in her gaze.

"Braden is a great guy..." she began, her voice barely a whisper.

"Yes, he is," Candace replied firmly. "The guy who has been head over heels for you since the moment he laid eyes on you."

Hadley groaned, dropping her eyes to the ground. "It's not that simple, Candace," she mumbled. "I agreed to go out with him tonight, but even if it goes well, he's leaving soon."

"I never said it was simple," her friend frowned, patting Hadley's arm reassuringly. "The best things rarely are," she began, "and love...love is a tricky beast. It's messy and painful and frustrating beyond measure sometimes. But when it's right—when it's really right—it's worth every bit of mess and pain."

Against her will, Hadley felt a small flicker of hope ignite within her at Candace's words. Perhaps she was right. Perhaps she needed to stop thinking of all the things that could go wrong and just lean into the 'what if' things worked out for them.

"Okay, when we go out tonight, I'll give him a real chance," Hadley finally agreed, her heart skipping a beat at the thought.

Candace smiled triumphantly, linking arms with Hadley as they began to walk off. "That's all I'm asking. Why don't we head to my place and pick out the perfect outfit for your first date?"

Hadley nodded. "I'd like that."

Chapter Sixteen

As the nerves in the pit of his stomach tightened, Braden checked his watch for the third time in as many minutes, the second hand ticking away his composure. He paced the length of his freshly washed pickup truck, the reflection of the setting sun gleaming off the cherry red paint. His heart drummed a nervous beat against his ribcage.

"Come on, Harding," he muttered to himself, "it's just dinner. Not a search and rescue mission. She already likes you, or she wouldn't have said yes to the date."

Even with the pep talk, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was out of his league. Hadley was the entire package, and he was just a sergeant in the Air Force. He glanced down at his outfit, wanting to make sure that the black slacks and blue button-up were wrinkle free and ready to give great first date vibes.

He glanced up at Hadley's house, the porch light glowing like a beacon. Any moment now, she'd step out, and...the front door creaked open, and there she was. Black hair cascading over her shoulders, blue eyes catching the last rays of daylight, her peach skin illuminated by the soft porch light. She wasn't wearing a crown or sash, but she didn't need them. Her presence alone commanded attention in her simple lavender dress.

"Hi there," Braden blurted out, a little too loudly, as he caught sight of her curvy frame descending the steps.

Hadley smiled, a genuine warmth spreading across her face. "Hi yourself, Sergeant."

"Wow, you look...I mean...wow." He hated his lack of eloquence and chastised himself under his breath.

"Good wow or bad wow?" Hadley teased, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Best kind of wow," he assured her, opening the passenger door with a flourish. "Your chariot awaits, m'lady."

"Charming and chivalrous," she said, climbing into the truck with a laugh. "I might just have to keep you."

"Duly noted," he grinned, closing the door gently behind her as he resisted the urge to reach out and kiss her. The beginning of their first date was entirely the wrong time, and he knew it. If everything went right, he hoped there would be an opportunity to do so later, though.

Braden pressed his lips together in frustration as he rounded his truck to the driver's seat, the nerves barely manageable at this point. The weight of this being their first official date pressed down on him like a heavy rucksack. He wanted to be more than the average guy she was used to dating; he wanted to be memorable.

There was a brief, awkward moment when he couldn't get his key in the ignition. Their eyes met, and a blush crept up his neck. "Air Force trained, and I can't find a keyhole," he joked.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

Hadley chuckled. "They don't teach that in search and rescue?"

"Apparently not," Braden said, finally turning the key and bringing the truck to life.

As they drove down the winding roads of their small town, he snuck peeks at Hadley, her face illuminated by the dashboard lights.

"How about some music?" he asked, trying to fill the silence that was slowly creeping in.

"Sure," she replied, flipping through the radio stations until she found something that got her nodding and humming.

To his surprise, it wasn't pop or country but old-school rock that made her sway from side to side. With each passing moment, Hadley seemed less like a beauty queen and more like a woman he could fall in love with. Just like that, Braden felt his heart grow lighter. Maybe he wasn't so out of his league after all.

"Ready for our escape to Woody?" he asked as he pulled into the neighboring town.

"Absolutely. The less gossip, the better," Hadley replied, unbuckling her seatbelt as they pulled into a parking spot. "Plus, I'm curious about this mysterious spot you've been hyping up."

"Trust me, it's worth the suspense," he said, a smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

"Lead the way, Captain Mysterious." She smiled, a playful challenge in her voice.

"Captain Mysterious, huh?" Braden glanced at her, the humor in his brown eyes undercutting his feigned indignation. "You do realize I'm a sergeant, not a captain, right?"

"Technicalities," Hadley dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Tonight, we're both whatever we want to be."

"Then tonight," he said, the words rolling off his tongue before he could stop them, "I want to be the guy who makes you forget everything except how much fun you're having."

"Bold move," she said, a grin spreading across her lips. "Let's see if you can deliver, Sergeant."

"I'm up for the challenge," Braden replied with a wink. He got out of the truck and moved to open Hadley's door, extending his hand.

She looked at him for a moment, her eyes sparkling in the moonlight, before she finally took his hand and stepped out. "You're quite the gentleman, Sergeant. I didn't realize they taught that in the Air Force."

"There's more to us than just guns and wars, Miss Wilder. We have layers." He tapped his temple playfully.

"Just like onions." She laughed as they made their way to his secret destination.

He led her through a small, almost hidden path that opened into a breathtaking patio illuminated by the glowing moon and countless stars above. A few old-fashioned lanterns were hung between the surrounding trees, casting their warm light around the

special area.

Hadley gasped at the sight. "This...this is incredible, Braden."

He gave a proud nod, looking at her reaction rather than the setup itself. "Well, it seems I'm delivering on my promise."

If the night was about showing Hadley that he could be more than just a soldier and she could be more than just a beauty queen, then it was off to an excellent start.

Braden pulled out a chair for Hadley, and the warm aroma of garlic and tomato filled the air as the door behind them opened.

"Welcome to Mama Mia's Italian Ristorante," a man with a thick Italian accent said as he came out with two menus and handed them over.

Hadley flashed Braden a thankful smile, settling into her seat as she took her menu. The candle flickering between them cast a soft glow on their faces.

"Can I get you something to drink?" the man offered.

"I'm game for some wine. Want to split a bottle?" Braden offered.

Hadley nodded. "Sounds nice."

"A bottle of your finest red wine," Braden requested.

The server hurried off, leaving them alone.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Never pegged you for a red wine kind of guy," Hadley teased, perusing the menu.

"I'm full of surprises," Braden jested back as the server returned with their wine.

He poured them both a glass, then settled the bottle on the side of their table before reciting the specials.

"I'll have the spaghetti and meatballs," Braden ordered.

Hadley smiled and snapped her menu shut. "And I'll have the chicken Alfredo."

"Very good," the server said before scurrying off.

"Is the spaghetti a childhood favorite?" Hadley asked, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

"Actually, yeah." Braden leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Mom made it every Friday night. It was our thing, especially after Dad took off on us."

"Family traditions," Hadley nodded, a wistful smile dancing on her lips. "We had Taco Tuesdays at my house. I always overloaded mine until they fell apart. Once my dad was gone, though, my mom stopped. She thought there were too many calories and switched to salad Tuesdays. It didn't have the same ring to it, but I learned to live with it."

"She has a thing about food, doesn't she?" Braden pressed gently.

"Oh yeah, she would be furious if she knew I was eating Alfredo tonight. She would be like, 'Hadley, do you know how much fat is in that cream sauce? Remember, a moment on your lips, a lifetime on your hips.'"

"Good thing your mother isn't here because I'd tell her that you have the right to eat whatever you want. She probably wouldn't like that either," he stated with a chuckle.

Hadley shook her head. "No, she wouldn't, but I'd pay to see you say it to her."

Their laughter mingled in the warm air of the outside patio as they shared stories of his sibling rivalries and her treehouse escapades with the neighbor kids; the initial awkwardness melted into a comfortable rhythm.

"Ever thought about a treehouse rescue mission?" Hadley asked, a playful glint in her eye.

"Dash would probably love that," Braden answered, warmth spreading through him at the mention of his golden retriever partner.

"Aw, he's adorable," Hadley cooed, leaning closer to see better. "You're really lucky to have him as a partner. You should have brought him along."

"Really? You think so?"

Hadley nodded. "I love dogs. My mom never let us have one because we were always traveling for pageants. But now that's over, I was thinking of getting a teacup Yorkie. Candace has a toy poodle named Lace, and she's so sweet. They could play together while we're working at the dress shop."

"I can see that," Braden responded, a warm smile spreading across his face. "A tiny, yet stylish, furry companion for Designer Hadley Wilder."

"Oh, be careful, Sergeant Braden Harding," Hadley playfully warned, waving a finger in his direction. "You make it sound like I only care about its appearance. A Yorkie would be good company."

"Fair enough," Braden conceded, lifting his hands in surrender. "And Dash would finally have someone to boss around."

"Hmm..." Hadley rested her chin on her palm pensively. "That's a good point. Maybe they could become friends."

"Only one way to find out," Braden said, lifting an eyebrow suggestively.

Hadley met his gaze with a gleam in her eye. "Are you suggesting a puppy playdate?"

"Well," he replied, leaning back in his chair with an air of nonchalance. "If Dash approves, maybe we'd have to keep hanging out for their sake."

"I suppose we'd have no choice then," she agreed with a laugh.

Their food arrived just then, piping hot and enticingly fragrant. They dug in with unabashed gusto. The conversation continued between bites about family traditions and favorite recipes. It was a night of genuine laughter and shared experiences. Sharing bites of food and laughter with Hadley felt easy—something he hadn't experienced in a long time.

Dinner concluded with shared tiramisu, their forks playfully dueling for the last bite. A glance at his watch told Braden it was time for the next act.

"Ready to laugh 'til your sides hurt?" he asked, rising from the table.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Try to keep up," Hadley shot back with a grin.

The movie theater was cozy, an intimate setting perfect for their burgeoning connection. They settled into the middle row, the big screen promising unrestrained humor and romance. As the lights dimmed, Braden felt Hadley's hand brush against his, an electric jolt shooting up his arm. He tentatively reached over, fingers entwining.

Onscreen, slapstick antics unfolded, each gag funnier than the last but also bringing the main characters together in a special way. Their laughter echoed together, a symphony of shared amusement. During a particularly cheesy scene, Hadley rested her head on his shoulder, her hair tickling his cheek.

"Can you believe people actually fall for that stuff?" she whispered, her breath warm against his skin.

"Every day," Braden murmured, the truth of his words surprising even him.

Their shoulders touched, her body curled into his side, and he pulled her just a little bit closer. Every chuckle vibrated through him, the connection sparking like a live wire. When their eyes met, laughter subsided into something softer, something real. For a moment, they were the only two people in the world, caught up in the romantic whirlwind onscreen and between them.

Braden's laughter tapered off as the credits rolled, the echo of Hadley's giggles still bouncing around his chest. The theater slowly brightened, nudging them back to reality. He stretched, feeling oddly light.

"Best date movie?" he teased, side-eyeing her as they stood up.

"Top five, at least," Hadley replied, playfully bumping his shoulder. "But the company made it the best."

"Smooth," he said with a chuckle. His heart did this weird somersault thing that he wasn't used to.

Outside, the night had settled in comfortably, stars winking above the slumbering town of Woody. They strolled together, their steps syncing without effort.

"Tonight was..." Braden started, searching for the right word.

"Nice?" Hadley offered, tilting her head, the streetlights catching the blue in her eyes.

"More than nice." He stopped walking, turning to face her. "It was real."

"Real is good," she agreed, her smile reflecting something that felt like hope.

"Real is scary," he confessed, his voice dropping a notch. "I'm not used to this."

"Used to what?"

"Feeling like...like I don't want the night to end," he admitted. "Like I'm falling?—"

"Look out," Hadley interrupted, pointing behind him.

Braden spun around but only found empty air and a poorly placed trash can. Turning back, he caught the mischievous glint in her eye. "You're terrible," he said, but he was laughing, and it felt incredible.

"Got you," she beamed, pride dancing across her features.

Braden shook his head; he couldn't remember the last time he felt this light-hearted. Like a shadow, however, the thought of his impending departure crept up on him, dimming the glow.

"Hey, you okay?" Hadley's voice pulled him back.

"Yeah, just...I go back to the air base soon. In a week, actually," Braden blurted out, the words tasting bittersweet.

"That soon?" Her eyes searched his.

"Duty calls," he explained. "It's who I am."

"Sounds intense," she said, her tone softening.

"It is," he sighed. "Just wish I could freeze this moment."

"Let's not think about next week. Let's think about now," Hadley suggested, reaching for his hand.

"Right. Now." He squeezed her hand, grounding himself in the present. There was something about Hadley that made him believe it could work, that they could make the moments matter.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Come on, let's find some trouble before you take me home," she said, tugging him forward with a playful smirk.

"Lead the way," he said, allowing the future to blur into the background as he focused on the girl with black hair and blue eyes who was quickly stealing his heart.

Braden's truck hummed along the quiet streets of Hero, the night wrapping around them like a gentle shroud. Streetlights flickered, casting a soft glow on Hadley's features as they drove by.

"Tonight was fun," she said, breaking the silence.

"Fun doesn't cut it. Tonight was...amazing." Braden glanced at her, his heart racing with anticipation of a possible good-night kiss.

"Agree to disagree," she teased, her lips quirking up in that familiar smirk.

"Stubborn," he chuckled.

"Observant," she shot back.

They pulled up at her place, the engine idling as neither made a move to say goodbye. The moment stretched, filled with unsaid words and unexplored feelings.

"Walk me to the door?" Hadley asked, her voice softer now.

"Of course," Braden replied, a sense of finality sinking into his stomach.

They walked up the path, their steps synchronized. At the doorstep, they turned to face each other, the porch light illuminating their hesitation.

"About next week..." Braden started, the weight of his departure heavy on his tongue.

"Shh," Hadley placed a finger on his lips. "Remember? Now, not next week."

"Right, now." He nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat.

The sweet scent of her vanilla perfume mixed with the heady aroma of his aftershave, a perfect pairing that lingered in the space between them. She stood on her tiptoes, her blue eyes reflecting the stars above. Their lips met with a tender collision that spoke volumes as their bodies entangled as if pulled by an invisible force. Their mouths moved together like a choreographed dance, perfectly in sync and full of emotion. It was a promise, a hope, a silent plea for time to stand still.

"Good night, Braden." Her breath was warm against his cheek.

"Good night, Hadley." His voice was barely a whisper.

He watched her disappear inside, the click of the lock echoing in the quiet night. Braden let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. A perfect first date indeed, he thought, his heart insisting on memorizing every detail before duty called him away.

Chapter Seventeen

Hadley glided onto the stage, her black hair cascading like a midnight waterfall down her back. The spotlight was a lover's gaze, warm and fixed on her curvy frame as she faced the judges, a panel of composure and scrutiny. Her rivals, a sea of sequins and hairspray, lined the wings, their eyes trained on her with a blend of wary respect and

concealed envy.

In each section, Hadley shone. Not because she sought validation but because she no longer needed it. She was a comet streaking across a once impenetrable sky, and the audience couldn't help but be caught in her gravitational pull. Each step, each note, each smile was a testament to the woman she had become—confident, authentic, unstoppable.

"Who are you, and what have you done with Hadley Wilder?" a rival joked backstage, her grudging admiration poorly veiled by humor.

"I'm evolving, darling," Hadley retorted with a wink, her newfound sense of worth a brilliant aura that outshone even the most dazzling tiaras.

Hadley twirled onto the stage, laughter bubbling up from her core. The opening dance was a whirlwind of color and music, and she found herself lost in the rhythm. Her black hair swung in time with the beat, and her blue eyes lit with a spark that hadn't been there before.

"Look at you go," Candace cheered from the wings, clapping her hands above her head.

"I'm just getting started," Hadley called back, her voice lost in the swell of the music.

She spun again, this time catching Braden's gaze from the judge's panel. He wore a proud grin that said he knew—knew that this Hadley was the real deal. She winked at him, her curvy frame moving across the floor with a freedom that felt like flying.

"Who needs perfection when you've got moves like these?" she jested to a fellow contestant as they passed each other, both swept up in the joy of the moment.

The dance ended too soon, the final note hanging in the air like a promise. Hadley skipped offstage, her cheeks flushed and her heart pounding—not from exhaustion, but exhilaration.

Page 61

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Okay, swimsuit time," Candace said, holding out the simple one-piece. "You sure about this?"

"Absolutely." Hadley slipped into the swimsuit with ease. It hugged her in all the right places, not for the sake of display but for comfort. She didn't need to show off her assets; her confidence was her greatest charm.

"Wow, Hadley," Lily murmured as she reemerged, "that's...different."

"Good different," she corrected, flashing her rival a cheeky grin.

"If you say so," the other woman shrugged, her eyes skeptical, but it didn't faze Hadley.

As she walked out for the swimsuit segment, heads turned—not for the skin she wasn't showing, but for the self-assurance she wore like a second skin. She sauntered down the runway, one hand on her hip, a playful smirk on her lips.

"Who says a one-piece can't be sexy?" she tossed the question into the crowd, half-rhetorical, half-defiant.

"Go, Hadley," someone shouted, and a ripple of agreement ran through the audience.

"Comfort over couture," Hadley mused aloud, reaching the end of the runway and pausing for effect. "Feels like victory to me."

The judges nodded, scribbling notes that Hadley imagined read: 'Confidence is the

new black.'

"Take that, two-pieces," Hadley muttered under her breath, a light-hearted jab at pageant norms as she made her way backstage, every step a declaration of her newfound sense of self.

Backstage, a flurry of nerves and sequins swirled around Hadley. Instead, she was an island of calm in the chaos. With a deep breath, she stepped into the spotlight for the talent portion; guitar cradled like an old friend, the thrum of excitement in her veins.

She approached the microphone, the familiar weight of it grounding her. A hush fell over the crowd, expectation hanging thick as summer humidity.

"Here's a little song I wrote," she smiled, "It's called 'More Than a Crown.'"

"Ooh, original," someone in the crowd called out.

"Hit it," she said to the sound technician, her voice steady.

Her voice broke free—a melody rich and soulful, an anthem of her journey. She sang of dreams and drive, of looking beyond the surface. It wasn't just a song; it was her heart set to music. Laughter rippled through the audience at the playful lyrics, a stark contrast to the usual pageant ballads.

"Who knew Hadley could sing and play guitar like that?" one of the other contestants said from the side as the judges scribbled furiously on their scorecards.

"Girl's got pipes," a man in the audience shouted, nodding along to the beat.

Her fingers danced along the strings as if they were born to do just this. She leaned into the microphone, her black hair cascading over her shoulders, her voice a mixture

of honey and daring.

"Because I'm more than just a tiara on my head," she belted out, and the crowd erupted into cheers.

"Sing it, Queen," Candace shouted from the wings, pride beaming from every pore.

As the last note lingered in the air, applause erupted, swelling like a wave crashing against the shore. Hadley's blue eyes sparkled with unshed tears of joy—not for the recognition but for the sheer thrill of sharing her truth, her music.

"Bravo, Miss Wilder," someone shouted from the back of the gymnasium, and the crowd's enthusiasm doubled.

"Who knew beauty queens could rock?" Randy chuckled from the judges' table, scribbling furiously.

"Thank you," she mouthed, bowing playfully, her heart racing as she left the stage with the strength she'd forged in the fires of personal struggle.

"Killed it," Candace grinned, high-fiving her as she went to the dressing room with her.

"Only the beginning," she winked, her confidence soaring.

It was time to get ready for the evening gown competition, and the backstage area was a whirlwind of activity.

"Stand still," Candace ordered with mock severity, adjusting the diagonal strap of the cream silk gown. "Perfection takes patience."

Page 62

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Or a phenomenal designer," Hadley quipped, admiring the simple elegance of the dress in the mirror. It felt like a second skin—her skin, not the pageant's.

"Phenomenal is right," Candace agreed, standing back to appraise her work. "You're going to slay out there."

"Or at least glide gracefully," Hadley chuckled, slipping into a pair of beige heels.

"Both," Candace confirmed, giving her a reassuring squeeze. "Now go show them how it's done."

"Thank you for helping me get this dress just right," she told her friend as she reached out and squeezed her hands.

"You did this. It was all you. I just helped stitch it together," Candace reminded her.

Hadley took her place behind the curtains. The announcer's voice boomed, "Next up, Miss Hadley Wilder."

"Showtime," she murmured, stepping out.

Gasps filled the room, a sea of faces illuminated by the stage lights. The gown shimmered with each step she took, the fabric flowing behind her like a trail of liquid moonlight. Her stride was unhurried, serene, and yet it carried the quiet strength of a woman who knew her worth.

"Stunning," Braden mouthed, while the other two judges simply nodded, lost for

words.

"Simple and elegant," a voice echoed from the back row, encapsulating Hadley's essence in three words.

"Exactly," Hadley thought, reaching the end of the runway and pausing for a beat. Her gaze swept across the audience, a silent conversation. This was her design, her moment, her future.

"Thank you," she said softly, more to herself than anyone else, as she turned and walked back, the cream silk trailing behind her, a banner of newfound freedom.

At last, it was time. The final question. Hadley's heels clicked against the stage, each step a measured beat as she approached the microphone. A spotlight pinned her in place, and she could feel the weight of every eye in the audience. Her heart hummed a nervous tune, but her smile never wavered.

"Miss Wilder," Randy, the head judge began, leaning forward with an expectant gleam in his eyes. "Tell us, what does true beauty mean to you?"

A loaded question. Old Hadley might have spun a sugary response, all frosting and no cake, but not tonight.

She leaned into the microphone, her voice steady. "True beauty?" She paused, glancing out at the sea of faces. "It's laughing so hard your stomach hurts. It's kindness when no one's watching. It's being brave enough to be yourself, even when it's easier to fit in."

The crowd hushed, hanging on her words.

"True beauty is this dress," she continued, gesturing to the cream silk hugging her

frame. "Because I made it. Not just to wear but to embody who I am. No frills, no fluff—just me."

Laughter rippled through the audience. She'd hit the mark, struck a chord.

"Thank you, Miss Wilder," the judge said, visibly impressed.

"Thank you," Hadley replied, her blue eyes shining with mischief. "And remember, calories don't count if you eat them standing up."

The auditorium erupted, a crescendo of cheers and applause that rolled over her like a warm wave. As she walked offstage, a genuine grin broke free. Who was this girl? She liked her.

Backstage, tension buzzed like static. Girls fretted and preened, but Hadley found a quiet corner, closing her eyes as she prepared to go back out with the rest of the women.

As they lined the stage, she could almost hear her own heartbeat, a drumroll to the moment they'd announce the winner.

"And the crown and title of 'Miss Hero Texas' goes to..." The host's voice boomed, stretching the silence. "Miss Hadley Wilder."

Shock froze her for a split second before joy thawed her into motion. She floated toward the stage, disbelief and pride warring for space within her chest.

"Look at her go," someone whispered, awe coloring the tone. "Like she owns the world."

"Because she does," another voice chimed in.

The hot pink sash settled across her shoulder, the crown perched atop her black hair—a glittering halo. This wasn't just a victory walk; it was a parade of self-acceptance.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Own it, Hadley," she told herself, taking the first step.

"Work it, Queen," Candace shouted from the side, and laughter danced through the room.

"Thank you," Hadley's voice rang clear and jubilant. She waved as she walked along the stage, each gesture a note in a symphony of triumph. This was her—unfiltered, unfettered, unbeatable.

"Guess you can win by being more than pretty," she mused aloud, the crown catching the light, sparkling as brightly as her future.

A half-hour later, confetti still clung to her hair, an emblem of the night's unexpected magic. The crowd's applause still echoed in her ears, a harmonious backdrop to the new rhythm of her life.

"Champagne showers and greasy fries, that's how winners do it, right?" Braden's voice cut through the haze of her euphoria as he approached, his grin as infectious as the energy pulsating through the room.

"Only the classiest for this queen," Hadley shot back, the title feeling less like a crown and more like a medal she'd earned in a marathon of self-discovery.

Braden offered his arm, a knight escorting her from her latest battlefield. "I always knew you had it in you," he said, his brown eyes reflecting pride and something deeper.

"To win?" Hadley teased, slipping her arm through his.

"To win your own way."

"Guess I'm full of surprises, too," she winked, the cheerfulness in her chest lifting her words into a playful lilt.

"Speaking of surprises..." He led her toward the exit, where cheers erupted.

"Surprise," a chorus of familiar voices wrapped around her like a warm embrace.

"Oh my gosh, guys, you all waited for me," Hadley's laughter bubbled up, her friends' faces blurring into a kaleidoscope of joy.

"Of course we did," Avery cooed with a wide grin, clinging onto Hunter's arm. "Your victory deserves to be celebrated."

"Let's get this party started," Candace shouted, and the group moved en masse, a sea of camaraderie flowing out into the night.

"Anywhere specific in mind?" Hadley asked, the reality of her victory still a distant concept compared to the immediacy of her friends' elation.

"Your favorite dive bar," Jenesa said as she walked beside her husband, "where the fries are golden, and the best memories are made."

"Sounds perfect," Hadley murmured as her heart did a somersault, the simplicity of the plan grounding her in the moment.

"Queen Hadley," Avery called, nudging her with a smile, "ready to ditch the heels for a pair of sneakers?"

"Born ready," Hadley declared, stepping out of her pumps and into the promise of a night unscripted, her laughter the truest crown she could ever hope to wear.

"And don't forget," Jenesa added with a smile of her own, "We're treating you this time."

The evening toasted to the melody of laughter and cheer, each moment dipped in golden frames of camaraderie.

"Where are those world-famous fries?" Jenesa pouted playfully as they entered the dive bar. "The baby isn't going to wait."

"Coming right up," Danny winked, disappearing toward the counter.

As laughter filled the corners of their night, Hadley looked around at her friends. The crown on her head felt lighter; she didn't feel like a queen but rather a girl among friends who saw her for who she truly was—not a beauty queen but just...Hadley.

"Here's to Hadley," Braden raised a toast, their glasses clinking in symphony.

"To Hadley," they chorused back, and as she looked at their smiling faces drenched in the soft bar lights. Hadley knew she wouldn't trade it for anything else.

"You okay it's ending?" Braden asked softly as they walked out much later into the cool night.

"Totally. It's the perfect end," she smiled back.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Or a beautiful beginning," Braden countered, returning the smile.

"No more pageants, rules, or regulations," Hadley added as she leaned into his comforting frame. "Just me and designing clothes from here on out."

Feeling lighter than she had in years, hand in hand, they strolled, echoing laughter bouncing off the brick walls of the surrounding buildings. Under the dim street lamps, their shadows stretched out long and thin, dancing on the pavement as they disappeared into the quiet hum of the night. This was indeed a beautiful beginning.

Chapter Eighteen

Braden's boots crunched against the gravel as he strode out of the academy's main building for the last time. He tugged at his uniform, the fabric still stiff and new—a tangible reminder of his accomplishments and the future that awaited him. His hand lingered on the golden badge pinned to his chest, top graduate—gleaming like a promise.

"Well, it's official, you're a hotshot now," a voice called out from behind, teasing but proud.

He turned to see his fellow graduates, smirks playing on their faces. "Guess they'll let anyone be top dog these days," Braden shot back with a grin, deflecting the weight of his achievement with humor.

"Seriously though, congrats, man," Sawyer said, clapping him on the shoulder. "You earned it."

"Thanks," Braden replied, his smile lingering but eyes betraying a flicker of concern. He'd trained hard, pushed himself, but as the reality of graduation sunk in, so did the implications. Leaving Hero. Leaving Hadley.

"Got your head in the clouds already, Harding?" Mike joked, nudging him playfully.

"Something like that," Braden admitted, his laughter hollow as Dash brushed against him. The thought of returning to the Air Force, searching for bombs and securing entry points thrilled him. What about her? Hadley, with her stormy blue eyes and defiance that matched his own.

"Hey, don't get all mushy on us," Sawyer ribbed, bringing him back to the moment.

"Never," Braden retorted, schooling his expression into one of mock seriousness. "I'm a stone-cold bomb detector now. No room for mushy."

"Right, right," they laughed, moving off toward the graduation ceremony awaiting all of them inside the academy auditorium.

Left alone for a moment, Braden took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the insignia on his chest—a weight far beyond its physical presence. It was the gravity of decisions to be made, of a conversation he wasn't sure how to start with Hadley. How do you tell someone who's fought to be seen beyond her beauty queen façade that you might become just another photo she'll put away in a memory box?

"Hey, Harding," Mike called out, snapping him from his reverie. "You coming or what?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Braden called back, striding forward to join the others, his steps as confident as they were uncertain.

A half-hour later, Braden's name echoed through the auditorium, bouncing off the walls like a tangible force. He stood and walked across the stage, a sea of crisp uniforms and proud faces blurring around him.

"Sergeant Braden Harding, top marks and top of the class."

The applause was thunderous, but above it all, he heard one voice. It cut through the noise, clear and exuberant. Hadley's voice. His heart did an odd little flip-flop, and he couldn't help but scan the crowd until he found her. There she was—blackhair, blue eyes bright as sapphires, standing and clapping wildly for him. He flashed a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Go, Braden," Hadley called out, her cheer a beacon in the formality of the ceremony.

"Thanks," he mouthed, not sure if she could see it, but needing to say it all the same.

"Look at you, top dog," someone shouted as he returned to his seat, medal heavy around his neck.

"Yeah, who'd have thought," Braden responded, a dry chuckle escaping his lips as he took his seat with the rest of his graduating class.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur, Braden watching Hadley the entire time.

Afterward, everyone made their way into the back of the academy. "Graduation party" meant a backyard bash with all the trimmings of a classic celebration. Music pulsed through the evening air, fairy lights twinkled, and the smell of barbecued food filled the space. Their friends gathered, a tapestry of shared memories and inside jokes.

"Congrats," they toasted, slapping Braden on the back one by one.

"Couldn't have done it without you guys," Braden said, a genuine smile breaking through. His gaze, however, kept flitting to Hadley, who was being swept into conversations about her latest pageant win and future design ideas.

"Hey, Hero," Hadley laughed, finally escaping her admirers and nudging his arm with her shoulder. "You ditching me for the military already?"

"Never," Braden shot back, but the word hung between them, heavy with unspoken truths.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Let's dance, then," she challenged, grabbing his hand and pulling him toward the makeshift dance floor.

"Careful," he warned playfully, "I might step on your toes."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Hadley teased, her laugh easing the tightness in his chest.

They moved together in easy rhythm, the world narrowing down to just the two of them. Her hand on his shoulder felt like a promise, her smile like hope. Yet, as they danced, Braden's mind raced ahead to the inevitable departure, to the air base in upper Texas waiting for him. He wanted to freeze this moment, to stop time, and stay here where the future was a distant whisper.

"Thinking hard or hardly thinking?" Hadley asked, her gaze searching his.

"Bit of both," he admitted with a half-smile.

"Live in the now, Sergeant," she advised, spinning under his arm. "Tomorrow can wait."

"Easier said than done," he murmured, but he let the beat of the music and the warmth of her presence pull him back to the now, to the laughter and the light and the girl who saw him as more than just a bomb detector in uniform.

After a wonderful evening, the last strains of music died down, and the room began to empty. Braden watched as friends said their goodbyes: hugs exchanged, promises to

keep in touch, laughter echoing off the walls. He stuffed his hands into his pockets, the weight of what he needed to say settling like lead in his stomach.

"Hey," Hadley nudged him gently, her blue eyes scanning his face. "You've gone all quiet on me."

"Sorry," he managed a weak smile. "Just thinking about packing."

"Ugh, packing." She rolled her eyes dramatically. "The worst."

"Actually," he hesitated, watching as her expression shifted from playful to cautious. "It's more than that."

"More than the horror of folding? Do tell." Her attempt at lightness didn't quite reach her eyes.

"Upper Texas," he blurted out. "I leave for the air base soon."

"Upper Texas," she repeated, the words falling flat between them. "That's...pretty far away."

"I wish it wasn't so complicated," he said, running a hand through his hair.

"Complicated," she echoed, wrapping her arms around herself. "Is that what we are?"

He took a step closer, the space between them charged with unsaid fears and unasked questions. "Hadley, I?—"

"Braden, don't." She held up a hand. "Let's not do the whole 'define this' talk now. Not tonight."

"Then when?" His voice was soft but insistent.

"Later." The word hung in the air, hopeful and hopeless all at once.

"But we don't have time to put this off until later," Braden challenged.

Hadley fidgeted with the hem of her sweater, a nervous habit. "Braden," she started, her voice uneasy, "when you leave..." She paused and took a breath. "I've been thinking."

"Thinking can be dangerous," he teased, but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. They both knew this conversation was inevitable.

"Ha-ha," she shot back, rolling her blue eyes. "Seriously, though. I don't want 'us' to end just because of some miles."

"Neither do I," Braden said, but his brows furrowed as if he were solving a complex math problem rather than discussing their future.

"Then we won't let it," Hadley stated firmly. "We can make this work. Long distance. We're not the first couple to do it."

"Long distance..." He trailed off, considering.

"Video chats. Texts. Calls. I'll send you selfies where I look like an absolute goddess," she quipped with a smirk.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Sounds tempting," a chuckle escaped him. "But it's not just about seeing your pretty face, Hadley. It's hearing your laugh, feeling your hand in mine?—"

"And we'll have all that when you visit." She cut him off before the somberness could settle between them again. "Or when I come to the base. We'll plan trips, explore new places together, and turn the distance into an adventure."

He looked at her then, really looked at her, his gaze softening. "You really believe we can do this?"

"Believe it?" She leaned closer, her peach-colored skin almost glowing under the moonlight. "I'm counting on it. Because what we have? It's worth every mile."

The corner of his mouth lifted into a half-smile. "You're one of a kind, Hadley Wilder."

"That's the idea."

His heart swelled as he saw the resolve set in her features. "All right," he said finally, the word loaded with promise. "Let's be those lovebirds who conquer the long-distance thing."

"Lovebirds?" Hadley raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in her eye. "That's dangerously close to cutesy couple territory."

"Maybe I'm feeling dangerously optimistic," he shot back, and this time, his smile was full and genuine.

"Optimistic, huh?" She nudged him gently. "I could get used to that."

Braden's lips met Hadley's with tenderness. She melted into the kiss, his heart thudding against his ribs like it was trying to keep pace with the flickering streetlights overhead.

"Did you know that otters hold hands when they sleep?" Hadley asked, her head resting on his shoulder.

"So they don't drift apart," Braden added, wrapping an arm around her. "Kinda like us."

"Except we have phones. And vehicles."

"True. Modern-day otters, that's us."

They laughed, the sound mingling with the distant hum of the town. Time slipped by unnoticed, the minutes stretching out like taffy as they savored each other's company.

Eventually, it was time to head home. Hand in hand, they meandered back toward Hadley's place, neither willing to mention the impending goodbye.

"Hey, Hadley?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for being there for me today."

"Anytime, Sergeant."

The promise hung between them, light and hopeful. They reached her doorstep,

lingering in the doorway.

"See you soon?" Braden's voice was soft, almost hesitant.

"Count on it," she replied, standing on tiptoes to plant a quick kiss on his lips.

"Good night, Hadley."

"Night, Braden."

With one last squeeze of her hand, he turned and walked away. Even though it was the hardest thing he ever did, he knew it was only temporary. When two people cared for each other as much as they did, it was worth the fight to make it work. As he headed back to his air base, his heart was full yet aching, already counting the days until he saw her again.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Sunlight streamed in through the half-open blinds, casting stripes of gold across the crisply made bed. Hadley stretched, her black hair fanning out on the pillow like a dark halo. She blinked sleep from her blue eyes and turned to find Braden's side of the bed empty, the sheets cool.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Braden?" she called out, her voice still thick with sleep.

"Kitchen," the reply came, followed by the rich aroma of coffee.

Hadley swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Her peach-colored skin glowed in the morning light filtering into their on-base housing—a cozy bungalow that had become their love nest since exchanging I do's a few weeks prior. She padded across the room, a smile tugging at her lips.

"Morning, Sergeant," she teased as she entered the kitchen.

Braden stood at the stove flipping pancakes. "Mrs. Wilder-Harding," he grinned, without turning around. "You're up early."

"Early? It's almost nine."

"Exactly," he said with a mock-serious look over his shoulder. His brown eyes danced with amusement.

"Ha-ha," Hadley laughed, wrapping her arms around his waist from behind. "What's for breakfast?"

"Your favorite—chocolate chip pancakes."

"I made the right decision. You're definitely marriage material," she teased, pressing a kiss to his back.

"Good thing you put a ring on it," Braden replied, serving up a stack of pancakes onto two plates. He set one down in front of her at their small kitchen table.

"Sometimes I forget this isn't a dream," she murmured, looking around the modestly furnished space that was all theirs.

"Pinch me then," Braden chuckled, sitting across from her. "I'll prove it's real."

"Ooh, so tough." Hadley playfully pinched his arm, eliciting a feigned wince from him. "Guess we're both awake."

"Guess so." He reached for her hand across the table, his touch warm and familiar.

"Happy one year of being together, Mrs. Wilder-Harding."

"Happy one year, Mr. Harding." She squeezed his hand, the simplicity of the moment more perfect than any pageant crown she'd ever worn.

"Let's never change this," Braden said, his gaze earnest.

"Never," Hadley agreed. They ate their pancakes and drank their orange juice, laughter echoing in their little slice of heaven nestled within the heart of military life.

An hour later, Hadley clicked refresh on her laptop, a grin spreading across her lips. Numbers soared, and another dress sold. Her tiny office—a converted second bedroom in their basehousing—burst with swatches and sketches. The hum of the sewing machine was music to her entrepreneurial spirit.

"Braden, did you see this?" she called out, not taking her eyes off the screen.

Footsteps approached, and then Braden appeared in the doorway, his uniform crisp,

the insignia of his rank catching the light. Dash sat at his side, tail thumping against the doorframe.

"See what? Another sale?" Braden leaned against the frame, his smile mirroring hers.

"Another seven sales," Hadley corrected, her blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Seven? That's my lucky number," he teased, crossing the room to peek at her screen.

"Speaking of soaring numbers, how's life at the top?" she asked, swiveling in her chair to face him.

"Being head honcho? It has its perks." He shrugged modestly but couldn't hide the pride in his voice. "Dash here is loving the extra responsibility too."

The golden retriever barked as if on cue, earning chuckles from both of them.

"More like he loves bossing around the new recruits," Hadley joked, scratching behind Dash's ears.

"Guilty as charged," Braden confessed. "But we make a good team, don't we, buddy?" He ruffled Dash's fur, receiving an affectionate nuzzle in return.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 12:36 am

"Best team on base," Hadley agreed, standing up to wrap her arms around Braden's waist. "Just like us."

"Us against the world," he replied, planting a kiss atop her head.

"Except we're conquering it—one dress and one patrol at a time." She stepped back, her gaze returning to the designs sprawled across her desk.

"Conquerors in love and business," Braden mused, his brown eyes glinting with mischief. "Sounds like a cheesy rom-com."

"Only the cheesiest for us, Sergeant." Hadley winked, her laughter mingling with the sound of Braden's hearty guffaws, causing her new toy Yorkie to perk up and whine from his dog bed in the corner of the room.

"It's all right, Valentino," she told him as she went over and picked him up to get him to calm down.

"Speaking of business, I've got a briefing. And you have an empire to build." He pointed toward her computer with a mock, stern expression.

"Go, protect, and serve," she said, giving him a playful salute. "I'll hold down the fashion fort."

"Roger that, CEO Wilder-Harding." Braden saluted back before slipping out, Dash following loyally behind.

Hadley turned back to her work, and the uptick on her website was a testament to dreams unfolding in real time.

After a long day of work, Hadley squinted at the sun dipping below the horizon, its last rays casting a warm glow over the base housing. She leaned against the porch railing, the aged wood creaking slightly under her weight.

"Missing Hero yet?" Braden's voice broke the evening stillness as he walked up the pathway, his uniform crisp and authoritative.

"Sometimes," she admitted with a wide smile, "but this is home now. All I need is you."

"Good answer." He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close.

"Besides," Hadley continued, "we've got our own slice of paradise here." She gestured to the small garden she had coaxed into life beside their quarters.

"Paradise with a side of your killer tomato salad," he teased, kissing her forehead.

"Killer? Really?" She raised an eyebrow, feigning offense.

"Kills me how good it is," he corrected quickly, earning an eye roll and a chuckle from her.

"Smooth save, Sergeant Harding." Her hands found his cheeks, pulling him down for a kiss, soft and slow.

"Every day with you is a smooth save," he murmured against her lips, their laughter mingling.

"Even with my not-so-smooth dance moves?" She pulled back, swaying

exaggeratedly.

"Especially then." He joined in the absurd dance, their bodies brushing together in a playful rhythm.

"Think this place can handle us both together?" She glanced up at him through lashes heavy with humor.

"It's got nothing on us," he declared, dipping her dramatically before another kiss sealed his promise.

"Nothing at all," she agreed, breathless when they righted themselves.

"Oh, I have something for you." Braden pulled out a piece of folded paper and handed it over to her.

Hadley opened it and read the contents out loud. "I hurt the most when lost, yet also when not had at all. I'm sometimes the hardest to express but the easiest to ignore. I can be given to many, or just one. What am I?" She glanced up at him with a confused look for a moment, then she snapped her fingers and smiled. "The answer is love."

"I should have known you'd get that one fast. You're really good at riddles."

"You should know that from the scavenger hunt you made me back in Hero," she teased with a wink.

"I do. It's one of the many things I love about you, Hadley Wilder-Harding," he said, his brown eyes locking onto hers with sincerity shining through the jest.

"Love you more, Sergeant Harding." She stood on tiptoes, her declaration sealed with a kiss that held all the warmth of their shared laughter and the depth of their

unshakeable bond.