



Librarian for the Jock

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Category: Sport

Description: Gorgeous football star, paparazzi, and stolen jewelry are too much for this small town librarian.

Librarian by day, single mom 24/7— romance was the last thing on my mind.

Then Chet Bennett, my kid brother's friend turned football superstar,

Moves back to his grandparents' house to escape paparazzi —

Suddenly, my predictable life is flipped upside down.

From day one, my son is star struck

And my daughter can't stop admiring how handsome he is.

My heart needs to stop flipping every time Chet flashes that charming smile.

But he's that kid —

Who gave my brother the idea to steal my heirloom jewelry

Over 20 years ago.

Has the hunky adult in front of me become more responsible than that obnoxious kid?

When my children come up with a brilliant plan for Chet to avoid paparazzi

By pretending to be a family guy,

Our pretend relationship starts to feel a little too comfortable and natural.

I'm so confused about what is real and not anymore.

One thing's for sure: life in this small town just got a whole lot more interesting.

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Chapter One

PAIGE

As the rooster crowed in the distance (well, not really, but I like to imagine it for dramatic effect), I began my finely-tuned process of getting my two charming offspring ready for school. The single mom's version of a daily triathlon, if you will.

First up, gently nudging my 14-year-old son, Brandon, out of his teenage abyss of slumber. I was met with a grunt that sounded like the mating call of some exotic jungle creature. I took that as a sign of cooperation. Note to self: invest in earplugs for future encounters. I then moved on to my daughter's room.

Now, convincing my beautiful 11-year-old daughter, Jenny, with words, to get out of bed was met with a resistance that rivaled a superhero trying to lift Thor's hammer, but a bit of tickling and voilà, we had ourselves a semi-awake pre-teen, emerging from her den of stuffed animals.

Now that my two darlings were stirring I went to get myself ready.

The daily ritual of choosing my librarian outfit has always been like solving a puzzle, trying to find the perfect blend of professionalism and bookish charm. The choices in front of me are endless, yet my closet manages to look like it's hosting a book sale of mismatched genres: blazers, cardigans, skirts, blouses, dresses, sweaters, and scarves hang side by side, chatting like characters from different novels, each piece a potential plot twist. Do I go for the "intellectual chic" vibe with a tweed blazer today, or do I embrace the "cozy book nook" aesthetic with a chunky sweater?

Today, I've decided to go for the most comfortable outfit; I chose my red, pink, and white heart tights with a cream-colored oversized sweater. Despite the heat outside, my library is always set at winter temperatures. I do my best not to complain about the cold, especially when I know that everyone else is sweating buckets outside in the hot summer sun.

I retrieved the black rubberband from my wrist and tied my hair up in a ponytail at the back of my head. Holding my hair in my left hand, I twisted the hair with my right hand, watching it coil upon itself. The twists are automatic, a practiced motion that my fingers perform effortlessly. As the twisted hair gains substance, I guide it in a circular motion against the back of my head. The bun takes shape, snug, but not too tight. I press a couple of hairpins between my lips, momentarily tasting the metallic tang. With practiced precision, I secure the bun in place, feeling the satisfaction of a task completed to perfection.

I pause to assess my reflection in the bathroom mirror. A few rebellious strands have escaped the bun, delicately framing my face. I deliberate for a moment, then decide to let them be. They add a touch of character, a hint of rebellious spirit amidst the order. The bun is more a mark of readiness, a symbol of my role. I quickly put on some mascara and lip gloss, simplicity for the win.

Now which scarf? Scarves are my signature style and each one shows my passion for literature. Some days, I showcase Shakespearean quotes, other days, tiny book prints that only eagle-eyed patrons will spot. It's like a treasure hunt for the observant! I am feeling lovable today so I grab the love quotes scarf. Then the pièce de résistance, a necklace with a miniature book pendant that's so tiny even a librarian couldn't read it. My mother gave it to me when I graduated with my Librarian and Information Science degree, so it also has sentimental value.

After a brief debate between my literary goddess red heels, which will almost certainly result in aching feet by the end of the day, and a pair of sensible shoes, the

brown loafers that promise hours of book-shelving comfort, win it. I stand in front of the mirror and look over my librarian ensemble, carefully curated with humor, bookishness, and a touch of questionable fashion sense. I look and feel like me; fabulous .

I head down to the kitchen, calling out, “Are you guys dressed? I’d better see you in the kitchen soon!”

“We beat you to the kitchen this morning, Mommy!” my sweet princess yells.

This is music to my ears. Less morning bickering is my kind of morning. Breakfast in our house is “fend for yourself” on our busy weekdays. Brandon is shoveling cereal into his mouth as Jenny carefully butters her toast. I hand each of them a banana to make their breakfast a little more well rounded. Weekend mornings leave more time for big, elaborate breakfasts.

As I blend up my acai, strawberry, blueberry, banana, and almond milk smoothie, I admire my children’s personal style, which is ever-changing. Today Brandon has chosen a hoodie that could double as a parachute and army camo pants to hide snacks and fidget toys from his teachers. Under the hoodie, I imagine a t-shirt with his favorite football team on it. He loves football but I refuse to let him play out of worry that he’ll get injured.

Jenny’s wardrobe choices have recently oscillated between “unicorn princess” and “colorful explosion.” Today she’s chosen a blue unicorn t-shirt, pink glitter pants that match the pink unicorn on her shirt, and blue socks to go with her rainbow glitter shoes. She’s tied up her hair in two braids and added some clip-on rainbow glitter tinsel. Her whole outfit is so happy and cheerful that I can’t help but smile.

All is going smoothly with our morning until Brandon mumbles, “My field trip form is due today. Did you sign it yet?”

Aw, man! He gave that to me over a week ago. Where did it go? “Um...I think so? It should be on the counter somewhere.”

Brandon rolls his eyes at me. I guess it was too much to ask that a school morning not involve some variation of a frantic hunt for misplaced homework, mysteriously vanishing shoes, or the sudden realization that the permission slip for the field trip due yesterday was still sitting on the kitchen counter, somewhere. A mad scramble through the mountain of papers on the kitchen counter finally, and triumphantly, unearthed the elusive form. Crisis averted! I quickly sign the form and hand it to my boy, then add the field trip to my online calendar. He mumbles, “Thanks.”

With backpacks slung over shoulders, full tummies, and an overall positive feeling in the air, we all head out the door.

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Chapter Two

CHET

The stadium was electric, and the pressure was on. With just seconds left on the clock, this was our last chance to win the game. We were just a touchdown away from victory.

I stepped into the huddle, hiding my jitters behind a confident smile. "Alright, fellas, let's do something they'll talk about for years. Make magic happen!" My teammates exchanged glances, some with wide eyes, others trying to stifle their nervous laughter. That's what I loved about my team—we knew how to keep it light, even in the most intense moments.

As I took my position behind the center, I heard the chants from the opposing team's fans who were hoping to rattle us, but they clearly didn't know the power of our camaraderie. The offensive line formed a fortress in front of me, ready to unleash devastation on anyone who dared to come near.

The ball was snapped perfectly into my outstretched hands, and the play unfolded like a symphony of controlled chaos. I dropped back, scanning the field for an open receiver. Defense came at me like a horde of angry bulls, but I remained calm, weaving and spinning through their grasp like a matador.

With all my might, a flick of my wrist, and a prayer in my heart, I launched the ball high into the air. It sailed through the sky with all the grace of a majestic eagle, right on target. My receiver sprinted toward the end zone, jumping over a fallen player,

arms flailing like a man trying to swat away imaginary flies. What in the world is he doing?

The crowd held their collective breath, unsure whether to cheer or laugh. Time seemed to slow down as the ball and receiver finally connected in a moment of sheer absurdity.

Just like that, he caught it—barely!

The crowd went wild. We just won the game! We won the whole season! We are the champions!

I replayed that last winning play of the season multiple times in my head, still trying to convince myself it really happened. What was different from the other years? I had no idea but I thought I'd give credit to that prayer I sent with the ball. I was too scared to take all the credit because I knew God could take away my gift as quickly as he blessed me with it.

That winning play changed my life, opening up so many new opportunities. I did multiple commercials, photo shoots for ads, and promotional events. People would stop me in the street or stores to get my autograph. I signed things from napkins to cell phones to body parts. Paparazzi even began following me around.

At first it was all really exciting and flattering, but it got old after only a few months. I missed my quiet life. Even though, as quarterback, I was the leader of the team and often its mouthpiece, I was, and still am, more comfortable hanging out in the back of the crowd.

As I approached Hawthorn Hideaway, I snapped out of my memories. I really hoped I'd finally be able to relax in my grandparents' small town. A wave of nostalgia swept over me. It felt like returning to a chapter of my life that had been written with

a gentler hand, a reminder that amidst the rush and chaos of my profession, there still existed a haven where the memories of my grandparents and the legacy they left behind could live on.

I navigated the familiar streets that now seemed both unchanged and slightly weathered by time. I couldn't help feeling a surge of emotions. This small town held a piece of my identity, a reminder of the family I came from and the values that had shaped me. It seemed frozen in time, yet greeted me with open arms, as if it had been waiting for my return.

Hawthorn Hideaway is a charming tableau of quintessential small-town Americana. As I drove, the sun hung lazily in the sky, casting a warm glow over the familiar streets. Neatly-kept lawns bordered the sidewalks, and Main Street boasted a row of quaint shops, their facades carrying the marks of decades of history. A corner bakery emitted the inviting aroma of freshly-baked bread, and a vintage bookstore showcased a worn, but cherished, collection of novels in its wide window. The locals, with their genuine smiles and welcoming nods and waves, seemed to recognize me, even though I hadn't set foot here in years.

My grandparents' house, the embodiment of classic architecture, was nestled within a quiet neighborhood. The house, now my inheritance, stood as a testament to the enduring legacy of my family. My grandparents were both natives of the town. Grandpa Joe grew up in this house, then brought his bride to it. My mom, their only child, was born and raised in this home.

I gazed up at the two-story abode that held generations of stories within its walls. Its white paint had weathered over time, giving it a certain character that only age can provide. Its white picket fence wrapped around a garden, now overgrown with a mishmash of vibrant flowers of all colors nodding in the breeze, whispering stories of my Grandmother Baba's green thumb.

As I stepped out of my SUV, more summer memories quickly came to my mind and a sense of quiet reverence washed over me. A mixture of emotions quickly flooded my heart—gratitude, remembrance, and a deep sense of belonging. I took a deep breath of the clean, fresh air, unloaded my suitcases and bags, then headed up the stone walkway to the house.

I observed the faded blue shutters and the window box planters, overgrown with weeds. The wraparound porch, with its creaky porch swing, two rocking chairs, and many empty pots, felt like a time portal. The memories of carefree summer evenings spent chasing fireflies and listening to family stories on the porch, flooded my mind.

As a professional football player, my life has been a whirlwind of games, training, and media commitments. I knew this quiet town would be a refuge for me from the demands of fame and the rigors of the game. My grandparents' home would be my sanctuary, a place where I could reconnect with my roots and find calm in the simplicity of life here. In this serene haven, time moved at a different pace, allowing me to find solace when I needed it most. It was a much needed connection to something deeper—an identity that went beyond my career. It was a reminder that there was more to life than touchdowns and endorsement deals.

The wooden swing on the porch seemed to beckon, offering a place to soak in the tranquility of the surroundings. The idea of spending quiet evenings on the porch, watching fireflies dance under the starlit sky, held a newfound appeal that contrasted with the stadium lights and roaring crowds.

I reminisced about weekends spent playing catch in the yard with my Grandpa Joe, who had fostered my love of football, or of sitting by the fireplace on chilly winter holiday nights, enveloped in the warmth of family and tradition. I remembered other times spent tending to the garden with Baba. She taught me not only how to tend to her plants, but their names and medicinal uses. She was a kind, wise, sweet woman. This place wasn't just a physical inheritance; it held the essence of my grandparents'

love and the values they instilled in me.

The sun was just about set when I realized I might have forgotten to make sure the electricity was turned back on before I arrived. I dug in my bag and found the key to the front door. I pulled my stuff into the entryway and entered the dark hallway. I tried the light switch and nothing happened - a problem for tomorrow. I turned on my phone flashlight and took a look around. I explored, getting reacquainted with my new home. I could almost hear the echoes of my grandparents' voices as they recounted stories from their own youth. I recalled parties with family and friends, the aroma of home-cooked meals wafting through the air. This legacy of love and connection would forever tie me to this special place.

I headed to the master bedroom with my luggage. This used to be my grandparents' room. I shone my light on the queen-size bed with its beautifully carved oak headboard. There always seemed to be lots of room for me to cuddle with them. Looking at the size of the bed compared to my fully grown body, I guessed Grandpa Joe was probably hanging off the bed just a little to squeeze me in with the two of them. I chuckled at the thought.

I took off the dust cover and found some sheets in the closet, then got ready for bed. Twelve hours of driving was exhausting, and I wasn't hungry since I'd had a huge lunch at my last stop. All I wanted to do now was to close my eyes and pass out. I would figure out my next steps when I had a rested mind. I barely remembered my head hitting the pillow.

Chapter Three

PAIGE

As I approached Hawthorn Hideaway Library, a weathered brick building nestled on a tree-lined street, I smiled. I love my library. Yes, I call it “my library” because it’s not just any library. I’ve heard that librarians get extremely possessive of their spaces and I can’t deny it. This library isn’t just a workplace for me; it serves as a refuge, a safe space for myself and my community to learn and grow.

I carefully opened the heavy, creaky, wooden front door and gently closed it behind me. The familiar and comforting scent of books and polished wood greeted me. Oh, how I love the smell of a library! My library, though modest in size, also holds an undeniable charm. The interior is a symphony of warm hues, from the honey-colored wooden shelves to the inviting earth-toned carpets. Sunlight streams through the slightly faded curtains, casting a soft glow on the rows of shelves that hold treasure troves of stories. The neatly organized shelves showcase a rich collection of both well-worn classics and the latest releases. I can’t help but smile at the sight of the colorful spines that hold the promise of countless adventures.

I head to my workspace nestled behind the polished wooden counter. The space reflects a delightful blend of practicality and personal touches. An antique desk lamp illuminates the vintage typewriter sitting next to my computer, bridging the gap between tradition and technology. In the back stands photographs of my children and a jar of wildflowers that Jenny picked the other day. Most of the photos are from when Brandon and Jenny were little, and camera hogs. Now, as a teenager and a preteen, sweet, sincere smiles are rare, but I adore my children, no matter how many

photos they may strive to ruin with their sullen glares.

I place my purse in a drawer and lock it. Then, I head over to our community notice board with a flier about the upcoming elementary school car wash fundraiser that I received yesterday. I love car washes because that is one chore I just don't do. No car wash fundraiser for months? My car doesn't get cleaned until the next one.

I admire my neatly organized and decorated community board, reviewing the colorful flyers for local events, book clubs, writing workshops, art exhibits, gardening classes, town meetings and the upcoming church bake sale, all of which testify to my library as not just a repository of books, but also a cultural hub of small-town life. I remove the flier about the previous night's city hall meeting.

Grinning, I think of the excitement at the meeting. The heated discussion between "the one who shall not be named" who refuses to pick up after his dog while at the park, and a disgruntled mother, will be the talk of the town today. The mother made a great point; I too would have been very upset that my child enjoyed playing with fresh doggie poop, which would not have been there if the dog's owner had been more thoughtful, particularly near a playground.

I strolled back to my desk and settled into my well-worn chair. I paused for a moment to appreciate the rhythmic ticking of the antique clock on the wall before tackling my to-do list. I had exactly one hour before I opened the doors to our community. I turned on the ten computers that have become a popular destination for many of our patrons. I may have to request a bigger budget from the town so we can add more computers to our library.

After turning on the copy machine, I headed toward what is usually considered the most tedious library task: shelving books. To the average person, this job may seem mundane and extremely boring. Not for me! Shelving books calms my soul and I find it extremely satisfying to put my library in order by author's last name or by using the

right Dewey Decimal System's numerical order. At least one part of my life can always be rearranged and put in order.

An alarm on my phone broke me out of my shelving trance - it was time to unlock the doors.

I could already sense Mr. Saavedra's presence through the doors before they were open. His round brown eyes, set behind thick, bottle pop glasses, peered through the glass of the library doors, eagerly anticipating the moment when he could step inside. He aimed his toothless grin at me and I smiled right back. I adore Mr. Saavedra. There's always a sense of urgency in the way he waits at the entrance.

As I swung open the door, Mr. Saavedra's thin, bony frame darted inside with a speed that suggested a mission to outpace a caffeinated cheetah. His destination is always the computers. As Mr. Saavedra settled into a worn chair, his movements were swift and purposeful. After his beloved wife passed away five years ago, he found solace in the library in front of the computer.

I observed Mr. Saavedra's usual, almost ceremonial ritual. First, he opens his weathered backpack with practiced precision, revealing a notebook filled with scribbles and notes. Then his fingers dance across the keyboard, clicking with a rhythmic familiarity that suggests an intimate knowledge of the digital realm. The screen flickers to life. The computer's glow on his face transforms his anxious expression into one of quiet satisfaction.

He lacks internet access at home and refuses to get it installed because why pay for something when you can get it for free at the library? A subtle smile plays on his lips as he starts reading emails from his family. His fingers dance across the keyboard in excitement as he writes his replies.

At some point, Mr. Saavedra turns to me and shares, "My oldest grandbaby, Daisy,

wrote a story about my beloved Dana and me for a school project. She got an A on her assignment! It's a lovely story." His eyes get teary, yet the gentle smile on his lips remains.

"Oh Mr. Saavedra, thank you for sharing. You must be so proud of Daisy! How old is she now?"

"She is 14 years old now. My, how quickly time flies! She is a little beauty like her grandma."

"I would love to read her story, if you don't mind sharing."

A huge grin split his face. "Of course! I would love to share it. I will forward it to you. Thank you for wanting to read it!"

I smiled back at him. "I'm excited to read it. Thank you again for sharing such wonderful news with me."

"Again, another reason I don't need the internet at home—I wouldn't have anyone to share good news with there! Today, I am going to also do some research on penguins. I saw a documentary on different birds that mate for life and wanted to learn more. It reminded me of my lovely Dana."

"I, too, find it fascinating to know that other creatures choose one mate for life." Laughing, I said, "I'm still looking for my lifetime mate. These birds have got it figured out better than me!" Mr. Saavedra looked at me kindly. "He will find you, my dear. Your time is coming soon, I feel it in my bones."

"Thank you. We will see." I smiled.

Seven years ago, my ex-husband left us for a "better life." When it happened, I

moved my kids back to Hawthorn Hideaway where I grew up. It was a difficult transition for all of us, but thankfully, we had my mom, my brother and his family, and I had many childhood friends here, to help us adjust to our new normal. Yet, despite the hardships, so many blessings also came our way, and I do my best each day to count my blessings with each flower, rainbow, and personal connection that I've built.

The biggest blessing involved both myself and Ms. Smith, our sweet town librarian, who had faithfully maintained my library for over 35 years. She was ready to retire, but no one had any idea who would take over for her. Thankfully, my librarian degree, and our move, happened at exactly the right time - I happily stepped into Ms Smith's position as she happily stepped out of it. She still comes in to volunteer sometimes though, at least once a week.

My favorite part about being Hawthorn Hideaway's librarian is story time. Once a week, mothers and grandmothers bring their children and grandchildren, babies to five years old, to the library to hear a read-aloud story, do an activity, and borrow books. Our book for today was *The Little Engine that Could*. As I read, "I think I can. I think I can." to the seven children, I rotated my arms by my sides like wheels turning around and around. The children copied me and said with me, "I think I can. I think I can." We also repeated together, "Chicka chicka, chicka chicka, chicka chicka, choo choo!" We laughed and smiled throughout the story.

"The end. What was your favorite part of the story?" I asked the children.

Three-year-old Lexi, who is also my darling niece, wildly raised her hand.

"Yes, Lexi. What was your favorite part of the story?"

Lexi jumped up, her sandy blond pigtails swinging back and forth. "My daddy takes a long time to poop on the toilet because he is reading a book. He should read this one

then he'll be faster! He can say, 'I think I can. I think I can.' and then 'Chicka chicka, chicka chicka, chicka chicka, poo poo!' Then his poop will come out faster!" With a nod and a huge grin she plopped right back down on the carpet.

Oh my goodness, the honesty and innocence of children! It was all I could do to not burst out laughing. I smiled broadly, "I think that is a great idea, Lexi. Hopefully your daddy agrees, too."

She nodded her head vigorously. "I have great ideas all the time!"

I looked at Lexi's mother, my sister-in-law, Olivia, who had turned bright red and was looking down at the floor. She shook her head slightly, a small grimace on her face, and I tried to smile at her reassuringly to show her that it wasn't a big deal, but it didn't seem to help. Later, I went over to her and whispered, "We never know what will innocently come out of our children's mouths. No worries, I understand my brother and his "manly" behaviors. Some things never change. I'll share some stories with you later about my kids and how they embarrassed me when they were little, before you met my brother." She looked up and smiled gratefully.

My brother totally married up! I love Olivia, she is smart, kind, and so good for him! He definitely did well finding her.

I turned back to the kids. "Okay, children, come over here and let's make a train for you to take home." The children jumped up in excitement and gathered around the table of supplies.

Later, Olivia and Lexi were the last ones to check out their books. Lexi made sure to borrow The Little Engine that Could for her Daddy. "Please let me know if your Daddy enjoys the story as much as you do!" I told Lexi with a big smile.

"Daddy is gonna LOVE this book, even more than me! Right, Mommy?"

Olivia was laughing too, “I believe he will. We may have to get our own copy of this book for our home library.”

“Yippy!” Lexi jumped up and down now with happiness.

I loved these two so much!

I smiled as I watched them walk out of the large double doors, just as a large silhouette stepped into the door frame. I didn’t recognize the man, but I suddenly realized I was still smiling at the door, directly at him.

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Chapter Four

CHET

With grocery shopping and my other small errands done, I decided to do some exploring so I could reacquaint myself with Hawthorn Hideaway. Naturally, I headed straight for the library, my favorite place to escape to as a child, and a sanctuary for Baba and my mom as well. Libraries have always been the perfect place to take me away from the craziness of life, so quiet, and cool, and tranquil.

People always thought that just because I was a “jock,” I was some kind of idiot. But, I was raised by book-loving, knowledge-hungry women. They taught me the great value of lifelong learning and I always carry a book around with me. And, yes, if you’re wondering, most of my teammates would tease me about what new book I was reading, at least in public. But in private, many players and coaches would come talk to me about the subjects of the books and share their thoughts and opinions.

I started up the library steps, chuckling as a tiny girl in pigtails bounced down the steps with her mom shouting, “Chicka chicka, chicka chicka, chicka chicka, poo poo!”

Her mom laughed, then suddenly turned back to look at me. “Welcome home, Chet!”

She looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember her name. I nodded politely, “Thank you. It’s great to be back.”

“Brad will be super excited you’re back. I know he will track you down soon. Don’t

feel pressured to answer all of his fantasy football questions. Glad I was able to warn you before he found you.”

She laughed and flipped her hand to say goodbye. Brad’s wife. Now I remembered seeing a picture of their wedding online. Is that his kid! Woah, we are getting old! It feels like it was just yesterday when we played tackle football at the park. Now he’s a dad. I grinned. I have so many great memories with that guy.

As I stepped through the big wooden double doors of our small town library, a rush of memories flooded my mind. The musty scent of old books and the gentle hum of whispered conversations transported me back to a simpler time, back to the days when my Baba used to bring me here. I wondered if the librarian, Ms. Smith, would remember me.

I remembered those afternoons with Baba like they were yesterday. Our weekly visit to this cozy haven of knowledge was something I always looked forward to. I got to choose up to 10 books to take home that week to read and they were always my choice. Baba never made me read a book that she wanted me to read. She would only suggest books. Her suggestions were always the best.

Baba, her silver hair neatly tucked into a little bun, would lead me through the aisles, her gentle voice whispering hints of tales of adventure and wonder. The echo of her laughter still resonated in my mind, fueling my imagination as much as the stories themselves.

Suddenly, I realized that I was just standing in the doorway and hadn’t actually taken a step inside yet, which meant that I was completely blocking the entrance. When I came to, I moved sheepishly into the library. My eyes found the circulation desk. I smiled, expecting to see my favorite Hawthorn Hideaway librarian, Ms Smith, with her warm smile and wire frame glasses perched on the tip of her nose.

Instead, my eyes focused on a petite, pretty woman whose brown hair was tossed up in a neat bun on her head. I couldn't help but do a double-take. Was she the librarian now? Her bun hinted at a meticulous personality, someone who preferred order and neatness. It also insinuated a no-nonsense attitude.

I guessed she was in her 30s, just a tad bit older than me. She exuded a quiet confidence that piqued my curiosity. She had the librarian chic down to an art form, possessing an understated elegance that made her stand out in the cozy setting. Her sweet smile totally caught me off guard.

Her glasses were perched precariously on the end of her nose and her brown eyes sparkled with intelligence and kindness. Her tiny frame, about a foot shorter than mine, probably 5'3", added to her charm, making her appear delicate, yet determined. She carried herself with a quiet confidence, belying the strength within. My smile grew as I realized she was the fun-sized guardian of literature.

When our eyes met, we both looked embarrassed, and I suddenly felt like a self-conscious middle-schooler. I stood there staring, probably a few seconds longer than I should have, and then I finally looked away.

Where was Ms. Smith? Who was going to answer my endless questions and satisfy my curiosities? I could almost hear Ms. Smith's soft voice, recommending books and offering insights that only a librarian with years of experience could possess. And she could find the answer to anything! Was I supposed to ask her? My mind was suddenly blank and I quickly did a side step, grateful for my football skills, into the children's section of the library.

As I wandered through the familiar shelves, I tried to shake off the uneasiness of finding a different, albeit very beautiful, young librarian, in my library. Had I ever seen a young librarian before? Obviously all librarians were young once, but where they work when they're young, I have no idea, because I'd never seen one before.

As my thoughts raced, I traced my fingers along the spines of the books that once ignited my passion for stories. So many of the titles have been a chapter in the tale of my childhood, and the memories flooded back like a highlight reel of my past. My thoughts went back to sharing quiet moments here with Baba and my racing heart calmed down at the thought of Baba and those moments. I gently touched the picture books that transported me to far-off lands and the adventure novels that fueled my dreams of glory.

As I strolled through the aisles, I couldn't help but chuckle at the irony. The library felt smaller than I remembered. The shelves used to tower over me like defensive linemen. I half-expected Baba to pop out and scold me for not appreciating the classics as well as the fun books. She'd always say, "Books are your friends, honey. Touchdowns fade away, but knowledge lasts forever."

I found the corner where Baba and I used to huddle, surrounded by the all knowing encyclopedias and the occasional mystery novel. She'd read to me in her sweet, gentle voice and I would soak up every word, her voice making even the most boring stories sound like epic adventures. I chuckled again at the memory of her animated storytelling. She'd turn the most mundane tales into gripping sagas, complete with sound effects and character voices. I swear, she could've given Shakespeare a run for his money. I miss my grandmother so much, and yet at the same time I feel so close to her here.

The football field may have been where I showcased my physical prowess, but the library is where my love for the game of life was born. I owed it to those afternoons spent here in the company of Baba and the literary treasures that surrounded us. I stood there, a big-time football player in a small town library, and I realized that my journey had come full circle. The stories that shaped my youth still lingered in the air here, whispering promises of endless possibilities.

As I picked up a book, I felt the librarian's eyes on me. She was probably wondering

why a big guy like me was in the children's section. I grinned, imagining the headlines: "Football Star Discovers the Joys of Go Dog Go !"

This one little book captures so many good feelings and memories for me. Go Dog Go, the first book I could read all the way through by myself, began the formation of this football bookworm.

Baba's voice echoed in my head, "Knowledge is power, kiddo."

Yes, Baba, you are absolutely right! What I learned in books also helped me on the field as I led my winning team. Who would've thought that the same guy who bulldozed through opponents on the field once sought refuge among the quiet shelves of a small-town library? Life has a way of surprising us all I suppose.

I regain some of my confidence and peek out between books on the tall shelf in front of me to check out the new librarian again. I watch her full lips curve into a friendly smile as she assists a patron with a book inquiry. There's an undeniable charm to her, an air of approachability, an unspoken invitation to explore the literary wonders under her care.

Despite her small stature, she has a presence that makes me think twice about cracking a joke about library fines. The juxtaposition of her subtle curves with her professional demeanor, creates an intriguing contrast that draws the eye. My eye.

A soft voice from behind startles me. "Is my sweet Chet Bennett really back?"

Embarrassed, I turn to see Ms. Smith standing behind me and I feel my face light up with sheer joy. I embrace her thin frame, whispering, "I felt a little lost when I didn't see you at the circulation desk."

"I retired years ago, dear, but I do come in often to help with the shelving to keep

myself busy. Paige took over and she is a beautiful one, isn't she?" she asked, winking at me.

I was caught. I grinned sheepishly and didn't answer her question. "Beautiful or not, she'll never reach the bar you set, Ms. Smith."

"I don't know about that, Chet. Looks like she got your attention quicker than I ever could. Happy to see you are still reading!" She chuckled and went back to her shelving.

I turned back to look again at the new librarian. Paige, her name is Paige. Was I really staring at a woman from behind a bookshelf like a lovesick teenager?

When I approached the counter to check out the books I'd finally chosen, our eyes briefly met again. Her gaze captivated me. No words escaped my mouth. I wondered about the stories hidden behind those deep, brown eyes. There was so much more to her than I could read at first glance. I quickly whispered a "thank you" after she checked me out, but otherwise we didn't speak, and I left the counter with my books. The library had suddenly become an even more intriguing place with her at the helm.

After our encounter I wasn't ready to go home, so I took a seat in the adult section, making an attempt to read one of my books while sneaking glances at her. This was going to be interesting.

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Chapter Five

PAIGE

Focus, focus, Paige! Why is this new library patron distracting me so much? I have work to do! I felt like I should know who he was, he was strangely familiar, yet I also didn't recognize him. I thought I knew everyone in this town. Did he live here during the five years I was gone? He seemed so familiar with the library, and Ms. Smith clearly knew him well, but I couldn't put my finger on who he was. My mind spun with questions.

I discreetly observed him from my vantage point behind the circulation desk. He carried himself with an air of quiet confidence, navigating the rows of shelves with a purposeful stride, an intriguing juxtaposition to the hushed, relaxed ambiance of the library.

He was far from the nerdy type who typically hung out in the library. His athletic frame moved gracefully between the book stacks, his focus unwavering as he scanned titles. His intent gaze swept across the spines, absorbing each book title, and I found his reverence and interest in the books so attractive that at one point my face started to get hot and I had to force myself to look away. I fanned myself and tried to help another patron, but it was suddenly very difficult to do even the simplest thing.

Thankfully, the day went by quickly. My new librarian patron disappeared around lunchtime, but then came back as if to actively torture me further. Doesn't he have anything else to do all day? What is his story? Everyone has a story...

My mind was creating an out-of-world story about a big jock in a library when the familiar sound of the library door creaking open caught my attention. Brandon and Jenny, sluggishly and silently entered the library, their backpacks slung over their shoulders.

"Hi, you two. How was school today?"

I got the typical responses. Brandon shrugged his shoulders in boredom and Jenny only gave me a nondescript "Okay."

Suddenly Brandon's eyes widened like saucers, and his jaw practically hit the floor. I followed his gaze to see what had caught his attention. He was staring at my newest patron, who was currently browsing through the self-help section. Yes, right in the middle of the books on mindfulness and meditation. Why did Brandon look so surprised? Could he know the man and I don't? That's not possible!

"Brandon, stop staring! It's rude, you know! He's a new patron and we need to respect everyone and their personal bubbles in the library." I whispered in an urgent tone.

"Mom, that's Chet Bennett!" Brandon exclaimed in a hushed tone, as if afraid the big man might disappear if he spoke too loudly. His voice was a mix of awe and disbelief.

"Am I supposed to know who that is?"

Brandon turned to me, his excitement turning into a mix of disbelief and irritation. "Mom, he's like a football legend! How can you not know him? I have his poster on the wall in my room!"

"Brandon, in all of your football posters the players are wearing helmets and in full

uniform. I have no idea what they look like in normal clothes without something covering their faces.”

“Yeah, except he’s on the news and commercials all the time! You have to know who he is.”

“That’s not helpful, Brandon. You know I don’t pay attention to the news, especially not sports news, and how often do I watch commercials? What kind of commercial?” Is that why he looks familiar? Have I seen him in a commercial?

Jenny dropped her backpack with an exaggerated sigh. As Brandon's excitement over seeing Chet Bennett in person grew, she couldn't help but roll her eyes.

"Chet who?" she deadpanned, feigning ignorance.

Brandon shot her an incredulous look. "Chet Bennett! The football legend! Seriously, Jen, are you living in an alternate reality?"

She shrugged. "Sports, football, touchdowns—none of that rings a bell. I'm more into the fine arts of daydreaming and avoiding being called on in class."

Brandon sighed, shaking his head. "You're missing out on so much, Jen."

“So where is he? This football legend?”

He nodded his head in the football legend’s direction.

Jenny's eyes wandered toward Chet Bennett, her nonchalant expression suddenly transforming. "Wait, that is Chet Bennett? The one with the dazzling blue eyes and chiseled jawline?"

Brandon blinked in confusion. "Uh, I guess so? Why?"

Jenny smirked. "Well, I definitely pay attention to all those commercials he's in! Wow! Seeing him up close, he's like a walking movie poster. I mean, I always appreciate a good face when I see one."

Me again, "What kind of commercials?"

"Cereal, deodorant, and men's underwear." Jenny sighs.

I look at Jenny in disbelief. Is this really my daughter? I don't think I even looked at the opposite sex until I was a junior in high school!

Brandon gives her a disgusted look. "Snap out of it, Jenny. There is no way you could get a guy like him."

"Looking doesn't hurt anyone! So I can look as much as I want!"

Now I was in shock. My 14-year-old son was talking to his 11-year-old sister about "getting" a grown man! I pulled them closer urgently.

"Shhhh! We are in the library and this conversation is getting way out of hand. And it's certainly a conversation Mr. Bennet should not overhear!"

Brandon and Jenny started shoving each other.

"Stop it right now. Both of you." I was angry now, but I still managed to whisper. "It's none of our business why he's here." But, I really wanted to know why he was here.

Brandon shrugged. "I hear he used to have family in this town. He would come out

here in the summers and on holidays when he was a kid. Uncle Brad is friends with him and he told me all about this guy when he found out that I loved football. I think Uncle Brad used to play football with him at the park when he was in town. That's a huge reason he's one of my favorites. He's like a crazy awesome football player and he knows people here. I figure maybe, just maybe, I might get a chance to meet him here someday. I can't believe it's actually happening! The season just ended so maybe he needed a break from all the craziness that fame gives you. Why don't we just ask him?"

My mind was spinning a bit with all the information that Brandon had just shared with me. This was actually the most I'd heard Brandon speak in one sitting in months. He used to be such a chatterbox when he was little, but apparently not speaking to parents is a teenager thing.

"No, please don't bother him right now," I said firmly. "Maybe when he's leaving you can approach him. Go take a seat and get your homework done. We will leave in about an hour and half. Go." I escorted them to a table far away from Mr. Bennett, praying that Brandon would be able to focus and get some work done. He's incredibly behind in some of his classes.

I went back to my desk and thought about Chet Bennett and his story. Brad and I are six years apart, but I know some of his friends, at least the ones that live here, but I don't remember Chet. I suppose I didn't pay much attention to Brad's friends though. I vaguely remember him talking about a friend that went pro. Was that Chet Bennett?

I suppose in the grand scheme of things it wouldn't have mattered if I'd paid more attention to Brad's friends when we were kids. Because of our age difference, Brad and his friends would have been in elementary school when I was in high school, and by the time his friends were grown up, I was off at college.

I shook my head, trying to shake off this feeling, trying to get Chet Bennett off my

mind. Chet Bennett is one of my brother's friends, which already makes things complicated, and way too young for me. Plus, this handsome man was the professional football player my 14-year-old son idolized. I needed to get him off my mind.

Yet, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like just to talk to Chet. The thought of discussing touchdowns and football plays felt foreign to me and I questioned whether I could find common ground with someone so deeply immersed in the glamorous world of professional sports. I didn't follow football and trying to navigate that conversation seemed a bit daunting. What would we even talk about?

Then there's the fact that he's famous. I love my quiet life. Our lives are so different.

I just need to erase his handsome features from my mind and forget his intriguing love for books and this library. No, I will not be swayed by any fantasy story I might create in my head. Why was I even having these crazy thoughts? Note to self: Chet Bennett is just a library patron that I serve in this community and nothing else. Get back to work, Paige!

As the library's closing time approached, I began gently reminding patrons to wrap up their activities. Chet Bennett, engrossed in a book, reluctantly shut it, gathered his belongings, and stood up to leave. His towering figure garnered a few more glances from intrigued library-goers. As he started making his way toward the exit, I noticed them whispering greetings like, "Hey, Chet! Great to have you home again!"

Always polite, Chet nodded his head, smiled, and whispered back, "Thank you."

Brandon was right, the Hawthorn Hideaway community definitely knows him. Apparently I've been living under a rock, or maybe just hiding in a library.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Brandon, apparently feeling a sudden surge

of courage, decided it was now or never to say something to his football idol. With a nervous grin, he approached Chet just before the man reached the door. I paused what I was doing and watched curiously.

"Hey, uh, Mr. Bennett, I'm a huge fan," Brandon stammered, trying to play it cool but failing miserably.

Chet turned, flashing a friendly smile. "Hey there! Thanks, I appreciate it. What's your name?"

"I'm Brandon," he replied, his excitement evident in his voice. "I watch all your games, and, well, it's really cool to see you here in our library."

Chet chuckled. "Well, I like to mix things up. Libraries are my secret hideout. What brings you to the library?"

"Oh, you know, the usual – homework, avoiding chores, and running into football legends," Brandon replied, attempting to keep it casual.

Chet chuckled again. "Sounds like a solid plan. What's on your mind?"

Brandon laughed nervously. "Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, do you have any advice for someone like me who dreams of making it big in football?"

Chet raised an eyebrow playfully, pondered for a moment, then leaned in conspiratorially. "Well, the first rule of football greatness – always listen to your mom. She's got the playbook to succeed."

Brandon flashed me a look of defeat and I tried not to laugh.

Chet followed Brandon's gaze. "So, your mom is the librarian?"

Brandon slowly nodded.

I couldn't help but join in with a smirk. "He's right, Brandon. Mom knows best."

Chet winked at me. "And secondly, keep hitting the books here at the library. You never know when you might need some smart plays on the field."

Brandon eagerly listened, but I know these tips were not what he was expecting.

"Lastly, keep practicing and never forget to have fun on the field. Oh, and a good touchdown dance never hurt anyone."

Brandon nodded and smiled, soaking in the advice. "Got it, Mr. Bennett. Thanks!"

Chet patted him on the back. "No problem, Brandon. Keep chasing those dreams. Now, I better not keep the library police, aka your mom, waiting. See you around!"

As Chet Bennett made his way out of the library with a wave, Brandon stood there, starstruck and slightly dazed. He rushed back to the circulation desk, a goofy grin plastered across his face.

"Mom, did that just happen? Did Chet Bennett really give me football advice?"

I chuckled, "Seems like it, Brandon."

"He's so cool!"

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Chapter Six

CHET

The next morning, I found myself outside at dawn, tying my running shoes and stepping out into the crisp morning air. A sense of liberation washed over me. There was something invigorating about starting the day with a run, especially in this quiet neighborhood where the only sound was the rhythmic thud of my footsteps on the pavement. It was a relief to escape the constant demands of football, if only for a little while. Here I could simply be Chet, not the football star, just me.

As I started my run, memories of yesterday floated through my mind. I couldn't help but think of the pretty librarian. Her captivating smile and an aura of mystery had piqued my curiosity. I'd especially enjoyed my conversation with her son, Brandon. He seemed like a really smart kid.

The morning sun cast a golden glow over the houses and long shadows danced at my feet. I breathed in deeply, filling my lungs with the crisp, fresh air. It's moments like these that remind me of the beauty and wonder that surrounds us, if only we'd take the time to notice.

My mind drifted back to the librarian. It had been a long time since a woman had caught my attention like this. A woman who worked in a library was more than just a pretty face—she had brains. Conversations with her would never be boring!

As I rounded the corner, I spotted two children playing in their front yard, a brother and sister, or cousins maybe, their laughter echoing through the stillness of the

morning. I chuckled, wondering if their parents knew they were already outside. Seeing them was a reminder of the innocence and joy that can be found in the simplest of pleasures. Children, like me, understand how great mornings are. We waved to each other and I continued to smile as I passed by, their enthusiasm infectious.

I looked forward to being a father someday, teaching my children the things my parents and grandparents taught me. The librarian already had at least one kid - did she have more? Was she married? I didn't notice a ring on her finger. I always looked for a ring before I even considered checking out any woman. Could I date a woman with a child or children?

With each step, I felt a renewed sense of energy coursing through my veins. The worries of yesterday faded away, replaced by the promise of a new day filled with endless possibilities. I was grateful for this moment of solitude, this chance to reconnect with myself and the world around me. And with every stride, I became determined to learn more about the intriguing librarian. I had so many questions. Perhaps I'd swing by the library again today, see if I could strike up a real conversation this time.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I nearly ran over a little girl on a tricycle who suddenly darted out in front of me. I grabbed her before she and her bike had a chance to topple over. Her father was running to catch up.

“Lexi! Are you ok? This is why I tell you to stay in the fenced area!”

Lexi. I've heard that name recently.

Her father turned to me, “I am so sorry, she is so fast on this thing!” His eyes widened, “Chet? Chet!”

The little girl looked familiar somehow. Ah, the little girl coming down the steps of the library! “Brad McDermott, whoa it’s been a long time!” I looked at him more closely. He looked so different, fuller, scruffier, less like an athlete and more like a middle-aged man. He used to be so fit and thin, but I suppose people change.

Without another word we automatically went into the special handshake routine that we did as kids. Fists were extended, and we bumped them together firmly. Then we reached out our right hand and tapped each other on the shoulder across. Next was the jump toward each other so that our chest collided mid-air with a satisfying thud. We laughed uproariously as we stumbled backward, momentarily off balance. Next was a complex sequence of hand slaps, finger snaps, and intricate twists that only we could execute flawlessly, and only after hours of practice back when we were kids. We finished with a quick victory dance, shuffling our feet, throwing in a few high-fives, and exchanging a determined nod at the end.

Lexi giggled at us. “Daddy, who is that?”

“Lexi, sweetheart, this is one of my best friends from when I was younger. Meet Uncle Chet.”

She shyly smiled and moved closer to Brad. “Hi, Uncle Chet.”

I squatted down to her eye level and offered up a high five. “Hi, Lexi. I met you with your Mommy coming down the library stairs the other day. I think you were saying something about a train.”

“I borrowed a train book from the library to help Daddy poop faster. I think I can, I think I can. Chicka chicka, chicka chicka, chicka chicka, poo poo!”

As she made the train sounds, she jumped back on her tricycle and pedaled back toward the house. I looked at Brad and started laughing. He was beet red.

“Some things never change, huh Brad?”

He muttered under his breath, “Yah...kids say the darndest things.”

I laugh. “It is so good running into you. Literally running into you.”

“Same! Hey, wanna join us for our family dinner tomorrow night? My mom, my sister, and her kids will be coming over, too.”

“Your mom, Aunty Pam? Wow, I haven’t seen her in forever. Your mom is the best. I would love to join you all! I don’t remember your sister though. Have I ever met her?”

“I’m pretty sure you’ve met Paige. She’s six years older than us so she didn’t want to be seen with the little boys then, but she was around.”

“That makes sense. What time? Same house?”

We exchanged numbers and I got the details from him.

“I better get back to Lexi. Olivia would not be pleased to discover that I got distracted and took my eyes off of her while she was this close to the street. Looking forward to catching up more at dinner!”

“I’m looking forward to it too! Thanks Brad.”

Brad jogged back to his house and I headed home, grinning as memories of our childhood antics filled my mind. Happy times.

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Chapter Seven

PAIGE

As I sat behind the circulation desk, sorting through a stack of returned books, my mind kept wandering back to Chet. It hadn't even been 24 hours since he'd walked into my library, but I found myself surprised that I couldn't shake the memory. Even as I attempted to push him out of my mind, his presence lingered, like a stubborn shadow, refusing to be ignored.

It was ridiculous, really. He was a famous professional football player, and I was just a simple woman with an insignificant job. There was no way anything could ever come of it.

I sighed and pushed my hair back from my face, trying to force myself to concentrate. But every time I closed my eyes, I could see his smile as he picked up book after book yesterday, almost as if each book were an old friend. It was infuriating how much he'd managed to worm his way into my thoughts.

I glanced up as the door to the library opened and my best friend April breezed in, a bright smile on her face. "Hey, Paige! How's it going?"

I forced a smile in return, shaking off my preoccupation. "Hey, April. Just getting through this mountain of returned books."

"Have you heard the news?" April was the head of the town newspaper and loved to share a good story. She often came to visit me in the library, doing research in an

attempt to make sure that her reporting was as accurate as possible. Being an ethical journalist was really important to her.

“No, I haven't heard any big news. What's up?”

“We have someone famous staying in our small town! He's a professional football player and...”

April frowned, noticing the look on my face and my lack of excitement at her ‘big’ news. "What's wrong? You seem a million miles away."

I hesitated for a moment before deciding to confide in her. After all, she was my best friend. "A new patron came in yesterday." I admitted, feeling a flush of embarrassment creep up my cheeks.

April's eyes widened in surprise. “Why are you blushing?” "Was it Chet Bennett? THE Chet? The football player?"

I nodded, feeling a little silly now that I had said it out loud. "Yeah, Chet. He came into the library yesterday and I can't seem to get him out of my head. There's just something intriguing about him."

April grinned mischievously. "Well, well, well. Looks like someone's got a little crush."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help but smile. "It's not like that. He seems nice, but he's famous, and there's a six-year age gap between us, and even the idea of it feels unrealistic and far-fetched. Come on, a librarian with a professional football player? Ever read a story like that before?"

April shrugged, undeterred. "Who cares about age or fame? If you like him, you like

him. Why not see where it goes?"

I sighed, nervously curling a loose strand of hair with my finger. "I don't know, April. It just seems like I'd be setting myself up for disappointment. Besides, I have to focus on my kids right now. I really can't afford to get distracted by some celebrity crush."

The doors creaked open and we both turned. It made me anxious that someone else might have overheard our ridiculous conversation. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Chet step through the doorway, a casual grin on his face as he walked toward us at the circulation desk.

"Hey there," he greeted me and nodded hello to April. She nodded back. He looked back at me. "Fancy meeting you here again."

I couldn't help but smile in return. "Hi, Mr. Bennett. Everyone here already seems to know you, I'm sorry I didn't formally introduce myself yesterday. I'm Paige Campbell, librarian. How can I help you?"

He shrugged and his eyes shifted to the desk. He suddenly looked shy, "I'm in need of some good reading material to get me through the weekend."

I raised an eyebrow, amused. "Really? Didn't you just borrow five books yesterday? Exactly what kind of reading material does a professional football player like yourself need?"

Chet gave a nervous chuckle and ran a hand through his hair. "Believe it or not, I finished three of the books already. I am sorry I forgot to bring them with me today; I'll bring them back on Monday. There are some parts I wanted to look over again in the other two. I'm a bit of a history buff. I've been wanting to brush up on my World War II knowledge, more specifically about Hawaii and Pearl Harbor."

I couldn't help but be intrigued (not that I hadn't been already). This famous athlete, known for his prowess on the football field, was expressing a genuine interest in history. It was a side of him I hadn't expected, and it only deepened my curiosity.

"Well, lucky for you, we have a whole section dedicated to World War II. I also have a fascination with Hawaii so I can point you to some great books on the bombing of Pearl Harbor," I said, gesturing towards the shelves. "Would you like me to show you?"

Chet nodded eagerly, following me as I led him to the history section. As I pulled out a few books and handed them to him, our fingers brushing together briefly, sending a jolt of electricity coursing through me. I did my best not to act as flustered as I was feeling.

He seemed satisfied with the books and I scuttled back to the circulation desk.

April was still there. She silently watched our whole interaction, her "news reporter senses" taking everything in. I could see the hint of mischief still lingering in her eyes.

"What are you staring at?" I asked gruffly.

Grinning widely, in a loud hushed voice, April said, "I am just observing interesting humans interact. I've never seen you act like you just did with Chet. Let me take that back, the last time I saw you act like that was when we were in high school. So, as mature adults, never. It was quite entertaining to watch."

"Oh, stop that and be quiet. I have no idea what you are talking about!" I fiercely whispered back.

"Well, just remember, sometimes the best things in life come when you least expect

them." She smirked and glanced toward Chet, who was still across the room looking at some shelves of books.

"Shh! Why did you really come to the library today, anyway?"

"I came in to get info on Chet and his last season. I should just go ask him now, maybe have an impromptu interview!" Her smile got wider.

"Oh, no, you will not. I will not let you bother him while he is having personal time in the library. You can ask him whatever you want when you see him out and about, just not in the library. I respect my patrons' personal bubbles too much."

Still grinning at me, she said mock-respectfully, "Yes, Madam Librarian. I will not disturb your patrons while they're in the library. I will ask him what he thinks about you outside the library."

She smirked and sashayed away as I growled, "April..."

I sat down at my desk, resolved to regain control over my thoughts and emotions and quell my persistent thoughts of Chet. I pulled out a sheet of paper and began to jot down a list of reasons why I needed to stop thinking about him, and to make my plans to ignore him. These were the five detailed reasons I came up with:

He's Famous: Chet's status as a professional football player meant that he was constantly in the spotlight. Pursuing anything with him would inevitably thrust me into that same spotlight, a place I'm not comfortable with or equipped to handle. Introverted Librarians hate the spotlight—that's why we hide in our libraries. I had to constantly remember that his fame came with a whole set of complications and expectations that I wasn't prepared to deal with.

Age Gap: There's a significant six-year age gap between us, which means we're likely

at very different stages in our lives. While he's living the high life of a single, successful athlete, I'm focused on my children. They are my top priority and any potential distraction, especially one involving someone like Chet, could take away precious time and attention from them. They rely on me for guidance, support, and love, and I owe it to them to be fully present and focused on their well-being. Trying to bridge that age gap and life priorities would only lead to potential misunderstandings and frustrations down the road.

Professionalism: As a librarian and a mother, it's important for me to maintain a sense of professionalism at all times and to model healthy behaviors for my children. A romantic relationship with a patron, especially one as high-profile as Chet, could compromise that professionalism and potentially put my job at risk. Or worse, send the wrong message about priorities and values to my children. I need to demonstrate the importance of stability, responsibility, and self-respect in all aspects of life.

Distraction: Let's face it—obsessing over Chet is a distraction I can't afford right now. Balancing work, parenting, and a personal life is already challenging enough without adding a complicated romance into the mix. I need to use my time wisely and focus on activities and relationships that contribute positively to my life and the lives of my children. Pining over someone like Chet would not only waste time but would detract from my ability to be present and engaged with my family.

Self-Preservation: Ultimately, I need to protect myself and my children from getting hurt. No matter how tempting the thought of a relationship with Chet may be, it would open all of us up to the risk of disappointment and heartache. I can't let myself get swept away by infatuation and ignore potential consequences. I need to be realistic and guard our hearts against unnecessary pain. I need to protect my children and ensure that they feel safe and loved, regardless of any romantic interests I may have.

I reread my list, then folded up the paper and tucked it away in my desk drawer. It

would remind me of all the reasons I needed to stay strong and resist the pull of Chet's charm. I was sure he was like this with all women. I couldn't believe there was anything special about me. The list renewed my determination to put Chet out of my thoughts and focus on what truly mattered: my responsibility as a mother to prioritize my children's happiness and well-being, no matter how tempting the fantasy of a romance with Chet might be.

The library was only open for half a day on Saturday, so at noon, I closed up and headed home, only to open the front door to the sound of my children bickering.

I let out an exhausted sigh. I was not in a mood for this.

“Brandon!!! Put on a shirt!!! Mooommy! Tell Brandon to put on a shirt!”

“What’s your problem? It’s hot! All cool guys go without a shirt when it’s hot.”

“You are not cool! So put on a shirt.”

“I’m definitely cooler without a shirt on! It’s hot!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No! Mommy!!!”

“Stop arguing you two,” I said wearily. “Sheesh, I just got home. Jenny, he’s a boy so he can go without a shirt when he wants to.”

“That’s so not fair. I get older and have to put more clothes on! I hate this stupid training bra. It’s hot.”

“Watch your language.”

“Mommy, Brandon doesn’t even have a body worthy of no shirt!”

“He will soon, my dear.”

“I don’t think so. Life is so not fair.” My poor preteen stomped away to her room.

“Brandon, when you’re lounging around at home, you can go without a shirt. However, when we have company you need to put a shirt on. Is that clear?”

“Fine.” He mumbles.

“I need a nap. I’ll be in my room.”

“Okay.”

Up in my room, I flopped on my back on my bed, kicking off my shoes. Who knew ignoring and avoiding attraction could be so exhausting? I felt a little bad because each time this morning that Chet attempted to talk to me, I found a reason to politely excuse myself. This was for the best, right?

I closed my eyes, still seeing his handsome face in my mind, and drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter Eight

CHET

What in the world happened today at the library? As I sat on my grandparent's porch watching the sunset, I tried to gather my thoughts. I couldn't help a frustration clawing at the edges of my mind. Paige had me stumbling over my words and questioning my every move. It was a far cry from the confidence I usually exuded, especially around women. These past few days this woman magnet, Chet Bennett, had been a bumbling fool around a lady.

Paige was different from other women. Every time I approached her or attempted to start a conversation today, she politely excused herself to attend to another person or a seemingly important responsibility. Was it possible a beautiful woman was avoiding me? That would be a first.

Was her intelligence, which I found hugely attractive, making her immune to my charms—she was a librarian after all? I worried that the stereotype of the stupid jock might be a turn-off to her. I've been dealing with that stereotype my whole life.

And then there's the age gap. She's definitely older than me if she's Brad's older sister, though I don't know by how much. It shouldn't matter, but it felt like she was light-years ahead of me in terms of maturity and life experience. She carried herself with such poise and grace, while I felt like a fumbling teenager without any future goals.

On top of it all, my fame wasn't always helpful. I was accustomed to the adoration

and attention that came with being a star at something, but serious women have never really taken me seriously. Paige, on the other hand, seemed unfazed by my fame and unimpressed by what I do for a living. This was disorienting to say the least, and I found myself in uncharted territory. And, she seemed completely immune to my charms.

The worst part is not knowing why things are so different with Paige. The thought that she was avoiding me gnaws at the edges of my consciousness. It was certainly a blow to my ego that a woman as captivating as her seemed to have no interest in me. Right or wrong, I was used to women throwing themselves at me on a regular basis. Who had I become to be so arrogant, to think it inconceivable that a woman would be entirely uninterested in me? Baba would be so disappointed in me.

Bottom line, Paige was not like anyone I'd ever met before, and it really frustrated me that I couldn't seem to keep her attention. I was left questioning the strategies that always worked for me in the past. Now what did I do? My guess was that I needed to ditch the smooth talk, since she's too smart for that approach. It seemed that I had to do something I was not used to doing. Be patient. Unfortunately, patience has never been my strong suit. This was going to be mega-challenging for this chunk of hunk! Ha! I crack myself up. Yes, I was an idiot, but this charming idiot usually got the girl!

OK—maybe instead of flexing my muscles, I should try humor. Laughter was the best medicine, right? Who knows, maybe Paige would appreciate a guy who made her snort-laugh louder than a stadium full of fans. Hey, it was worth a shot, right?

I just wanted to find someone who allowed me to be me. No mask. The guy behind the helmet and the fame. Very few women knew how much I loved the library and books. I desperately wanted to share not only that love, but also my vulnerabilities, my passions, and my true self. How the heck did I do that?

I woke up on Sunday morning with a sense of purpose. Today was the day I would

seek guidance from a higher power. This was a task for the big guy above because Paige was beyond my natural capabilities. I decided to attend the church my grandparents used to take me when I visited them. The people had always been very nice and the church itself made me feel peaceful and calm.

I stood in front of my closet, remembering how Baba had always insisted that I wear my Sunday best to church. I carefully selected a crisp white shirt and a neatly pressed pink tie. Real men wear pink. I wondered if Paige would be at church too. Something about her mannerisms and her kindness, made me think that she was a God-fearing woman.

Just the thought of Paige made me fumble with my tie and I couldn't shake the nerves that fluttered in my stomach. Sheesh, what was wrong with me? Even the tie felt tighter than usual, as if it were trying to strangle my resolve. I pushed the feeling aside, reminding myself of the importance of the task at hand. Today wasn't just about attending church; it was about finding the strength to be myself around a woman I really wanted to know, even if I wasn't so sure she wanted to know me.

As I walked through the doors of the church, memories flooded my mind. The first memory was of Baba holding my hand, looking me in the eyes and telling me, "God knows you. He knows your thoughts, wishes and desires. Most importantly, He LOVES you. Always remember that, my dear Chet. God loves you and is always there for you in your good and bad times. He will never forget you, so don't you forget him!"

My grandmother would be disappointed to learn that I didn't always go to church, but I hoped she'd appreciate that I always had a prayer in my heart like she taught me. I also did my best to be kind, serve others, and overall be a good guy. I'm far from perfect, Baba, but I am here today and in desperate need of guidance. Suddenly I felt her love and I knew she understood what I was asking.

Kind smiles and warm hellos greeted me as I walked into the chapel. I glanced around, searching for a place to sit where I could both observe the room and be less of a distraction. I settled into a pew near the back of the chapel, next to the wall. How well could I blend into that wall? Hmm, perhaps the pink tie was the wrong choice if I'd hoped to disappear.

I heard a familiar voice calling out my name. Turning, I caught sight of Brad, his wife Olivia, and Lexi. Brad gave me a brief hug, "Good to see you here! I'll catch you after. Olivia hates being late and I slowed us down this morning so I gotta stay on her good side."

I watched as he hurried to catch up with his family as they headed toward the front of the chapel where his mom was sitting. Then I saw her. Paige and her children were sitting in the same pew as Brad's family. It was a curious coincidence, one that sent a ripple through my thoughts. What was I missing here? Had they intentionally chosen to sit together, or was it merely chance?

Paige looked beautiful, a beacon of light in the room, yet she seemed distant, as if lost in her own world. She was wearing a delicate light pink dress, its soft hue complementing Paige's complexion with an ethereal glow that accentuated her features.

As they sat, waiting for the service to start, her children nestled close to her side, their heads bowed in reverence. There was a tenderness in the way she interacted with them, a warmth that softened the edges of her guarded demeanor. It was a sight that stirred something within me, a longing to understand the mysteries of fate and coincidence.

The service began and I closed my eyes and let the music and prayer touch my heart and soul. I listened intently to the experiences and testimonies that were shared hoping that somewhere in the talks, I would find the inspiration I so desperately

sought.

Then someone quoted, “that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God.”

That’s it! A good man that loves and serves. Each word the speaker spoke resonated with me, as if it were speaking directly to the doubts and fears that lingered in my mind. As I listened, a sense of clarity began to wash over me, and by the end I felt a newfound sense of peace that everything would be okay. Armed with this newfound clarity and insight, I knew I had gained something valuable—an understanding of the kind of man I wanted to be. I knew that when the time was right to approach Paige, I would find the words to speak to her from the heart, to show her the depth of my feelings in a way that transcended mere charm.

Deep in thought about all that was discussed during sacrament and class, I headed out of the church building.

“Chet!” I heard Brad call out to me.

I turned and saw him with his family and mom. He waved at me to come over. I headed over and greeted his mom, Auntie Pam, with a hug and a kiss.

“Chet! You’ve grown up well,” she gushed. “You’re so handsome. And look at all these muscles!” She felt my biceps and I blushed. Sometimes being around adults that have known you since childhood was just a little awkward. This definitely felt like one of those times.

“Auntie Pam, I never told you this,” I said, hoping to change the subject. “But I used to beg my mom to let me stay in Hawthorn at the end of every break, just so I could have you as my teacher when school started. Mom always told me no.” I chuckled. “I

was always envious of the kids who told me what a great teacher you were.”

“Oh, Chet, that is so sweet of you. I would have loved having you as one of my students. I don’t know if you realized it but during the summers, I often provided ‘learning opportunities’ for the two of you, most of which were science experiments, if you remember.”

“I remember! They were so fun! Especially if they blew up.” Brad and I started laughing.

Brad turned and waved at someone, “Paige! Come, I wanna introduce you to my childhood summer buddy.”

Why would Brad want to introduce me to Paige? Was I that obvious in checking her out? Clearly, I was missing something. I turned to watch Paige walk toward us.

She looked enchanting, like a vision from a dream, her hair cascading in gentle waves around her shoulders. Her pale pink dress hugged her figure in all the right places, accentuating every movement she made. There was an air of elegance about her, a quiet confidence that drew me in like a moth to a flame.

In that moment, everything else faded into the background. All I could see was her. It was as if time stood still and the world around us ceased to exist. It was about as cheesy as anyone could imagine. Maybe more.

I felt a flutter in my chest, a mixture of awe and admiration. How could someone be so effortlessly captivating? It was like she possessed a kind of magic that left me spellbound in her presence. What was happening to me?

Her eyes widened, and then hardened just a little when she saw me. Her children were right behind her. Brandon’s eyes lit up when he saw me. At least her son was

happy to see me.

“Paige, this is my friend Chet. I was telling you about him, remember? He used to come every summer until football camps took over in high school. Maybe you remember him hanging out at our house during the summers, before you took off to college?”

“Chet, this is my older sister, Paige. I don’t know if you remember her. She liked to tell us to go away and ignored us all the time.” Brad started laughing.

Paige and I just stared at each other.

Chapter Nine

PAIGE

I'd known who Chet was when Brad introduced us at the church because Brandon had told me, but I still didn't really remember him from our childhood until I saw Brad and Chet together, when it finally clicked. I remember despising Brad's summer friend so much that I blocked him from my memory. I looked straight at Brad, ignoring Chet, "Is Chet the same kid that you played pirates with and stole my jewelry, then buried it and forgot where you buried it because the map you made was useless?"

All eyes were on us. Brad's eyes went round like saucers. My kids start snickering. They always thought Uncle Brad was the coolest and funniest guy ever.

"Woah, I forgot about that! Hey, we were just 10 years old then. And we didn't steal it, we borrowed it."

"Brad, the word 'borrow' implies that you're going to give something back when you're done with it. I never got it back."

I turned to Chet then. "As I recall, that whole pirate game was your idea."

Chet struggled to find the right words, "It was not my idea to borrow your jewelry." He looked helplessly at my brother then back at me.

I stared Chet down, perhaps a bit too harshly, but I found myself enjoying a little bit

making the fancy football hero squirm a little. “I remember you hiding from me for the rest of the summer. Did Brad ever tell you that the necklace you lost had been my grandmother’s? A necklace she had given to me before she passed? And that she had gotten it from her mother?”

Chet looked horrified. His head drooped and he stared at the ground. “No, he didn’t tell me that.”

Chet, the guy I now had a crush on, was the same person who had innocently "borrowed" and lost my jewelry while playing pirates with Brad when they were children. The rush of mixed emotions and the ferociousness of the memory not only surprised me but reignited the frustration and anger I had felt back then when something so important to me was taken away. Neither Brad nor Chet knew that I had cried for days after they had lost my grandmother’s necklace. It had been all that I had left of her, the woman I’d loved so fiercely and been named for.

I took a deep breath and pulled myself out of that memory and back to the present. I reminded myself that it was the Sabbath and that this happened almost 20 years ago. As I pulled myself together, I looked up to find everyone’s eyes on me.

Brad’s face turned serious and he said quietly, “I’m sorry, Paige; I forgot about that. We had no idea how important the jewelry, especially the necklace, was to you. We were so young then. I’m really sorry.”

Olivia came quickly to my side and gave me a big hug. She’s the sister I’ve always wanted and I’m so grateful that Brad found her.

She whispered, “I’ll make sure those two make it right! Even after all these years.” She hugged me again.

“Thank you Olivia, you are the best.”

“You guys are still coming for our weekly dinner tonight, right?” she asked me.
“Chet will be coming too. Right, Chet?”

“Yes, I plan on being there.” His tone was sheepish.

Before I could say anything, my kids answered for me. Jenny rushed over to hug Olivia, looking up at her lovingly. “Aunty Olivia, you know we never miss out on your delicious cooking!”

Brandon then looked at his Uncle Brad and then at Chet. “I wouldn’t miss this dinner for anything. Can we toss a football around for a bit too? Please?”

Brad looked at Chet, then back at Brandon. “That sounds like a great idea, Brandon.” Chet just nodded. Apparently he didn’t trust himself to speak. I was still mute, so I just nodded at Olivia.

“Great! See everyone at 5pm!” Olivia said, her tone light.

On the way home I was silent while my kids chattered about dinner tonight. Brandon was really excited to have dinner with his idol and Jenny loved how handsome Chet was.

My head was spinning. What the heck had just happened? My feelings and emotions were all over the place. I had already decided that Chet wasn’t right for me before today, so what was the problem? Why couldn’t my mind convince my heart?

By the time we got home, I was exhausted again. “Kids, I’m gonna take a nap,” I mumbled as we walked in the front door. “We will leave for Uncle Brad’s and Aunty Olivia’s at 4:45 pm. Please do your best to behave yourselves and get along until then.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

I headed up to my room and crashed for most of the afternoon.

I was full of nervous energy as we drove to Brad and Olivia’s house for dinner. I reminded myself to stay cool and not to let (very) old grudges color the entire evening. Deep down, I knew that facing Chet would be a test of my ability to balance the past with the present. Could I look at him and see only the person he is now, or would the shadow of the little boy who had lost something so precious to me loom too large? I needed to blame someone and it couldn’t be my brother, because he was too important to me then. I’d blamed Chet then and, clearly, I was doing it now. I knew it wasn’t fair, but it somehow seemed easier.

As I pulled into the driveway, I took a deep breath. It’s just dinner, I told myself. An evening of smiles, shared meals, and familial warmth. I could do this. But beneath it all, the question remained—would tonight bring closure, or would old wounds prove too deep to ignore?

I believed that I was a mature, forgiving woman. This was all so petty, old news. I vowed to forgive and forget, not even bring it up. If I didn’t have anything nice to say, I would not say anything at all. Be nice, Paige! I told myself sternly.

Chet was already there, tossing a ball around with Brad in the front yard, when we got to my brother’s house. I had barely put the car in park when Brandon jumped out of the backseat and ran over to join the guys. I smiled. It was nice to see my teenage son excited like he used to be when he was young.

When I went in the house to see if Olivia needed any help with dinner, she told me she was almost done and sent me outside to enjoy the cool evening breeze. Mom was entertaining Lexi and Olivia joined them when she came out. Jenny was watching the guys so I sat beside her with my book. Yes, I’m one of those librarians who always

carried a book just in case I found an opportunity to read. When I needed to get out of my head, a book was the best way for me to do it.

I was just starting to get sucked into my book when I heard a loud gasp. “Mommy, look! Now that’s a body worthy of having his shirt off,” Jenny said awestruck.

I looked up from my book to see Brad, Brandon, and Chet still tossing around the football in the front yard. It took a second to register that Chet had taken off his shirt as they played and that his body was incredible. He had beautifully developed abs, and I suddenly found myself wanting to be wrapped up in his huge, muscled arms. I realized that I was staring, hard, with my mouth open. When I was caught by my brother and a very bemused Chet, I immediately looked back down at my book. Thankfully, Brandon seemed not to notice that his mother was acting like a teenage girl.

“Jenny, don’t stare!” I knew it was hypocritical to say, but I said it anyway.

“Mommy, what’s wrong with looking at a beautiful man?”

She was right, of course. There was nothing wrong with looking at a beautiful man. I’d never had a preteen daughter before and definitely never had thoughts like the ones she just expressed when I was her age. I hadn’t even noticed the boys around me then. Then again, I had never seen a man like Chet when I was her age. At the moment, though, I was more worried about the mayhem going on in my own mind. I hadn’t thought I could still feel the things I was feeling after my ex-husband had left us. Breathe, Paige, breathe.

“You’re right, my love, we should enjoy the beautiful things around us,” I said slowly. What in the world am I saying? “We just need to be careful of how we express our thoughts about beauty in the opposite sex, or it could be taken wrong.”

“He’s so handsome.”

“I suppose so. He’s just so much younger than I am, I hadn’t thought to look at him that way.”

“Really? How old is he? Let’s Google it.” She fumbled with her phone. “ESPN, a trusted site, says he’s 29 years old. That’s only a 6-year difference, Mom. Doesn’t age become, like, ‘just a number when we get older? At what age does that happen?’”

Sheesh, this is what happens when you raise a smart child, it backfires on you.

“Honey, that’s a really great question and I honestly don’t have the answer. Does Google have an answer for that? All I know is that I was six years old when he was born. When I graduated from college with my Masters degree in Library and Information Science, he was just graduating from high school. He’s just too young for me.”

Of course, as I was rambling off all the reasons I couldn’t date Chet to my daughter, she wasn’t listening, thankfully. She was too busy searching “when does age become nothing but a number?” on her phone’s web browser.

“So, according to my research,” she finally said triumphantly, “the idea that ‘age is just a number’ is an excuse people use to justify their actions. Age matters more when it comes to health and other boring stuff. So, here is my honest thinking, Mommy. Does it really matter if a man is younger than you if he is kind, responsible, fun, and handsome? And you are both in good health?”

Goodness, how is this 11-year-old so wise for her age? “I guess you’re right, sweetheart. Are you trying to play matchmaker?” I asked suspiciously.

She gave me the biggest grin, “Maybe. I really like Chet, Mommy.”

I couldn't help but laugh at her honesty, and at how much of this 'honesty' was based on the existence of Chet's good looks. "I agree, Chet is really nice, but let's not force things. Let things happen naturally, if they're supposed to happen at all."

Jenny nodded her head, but I could tell she wasn't listening, as usual. I had a feeling that I'd better stay alert for any shenanigans.

Having this conversation with Jenny, ridiculous as it had been, had made me realize that I'd clearly forgiven Chet for what he and Brad had done to me when they were children. I didn't need Chet figuring out that all he had to do to get me to forgive him was to take off his shirt though. This was hysterically bad. When was dinner going to start? Why was I so nervous? I had better sit as far away from Chet as possible.

Chapter Ten

CHET

As I got ready to head over to Brad's place for dinner, there was a lot on my mind. Okay, Paige was on my mind. I couldn't shake the nervous energy buzzing through me. Finding out that Paige was Brad's sister, the same girl whose jewelry Brad and I had "borrowed" for our pirate game all those years ago, had been a shock to the system. It's crazy how much the mind lets us forget.

I was just a kid back then, caught up in the thrill of our adventure. I never considered for even a second we could lose any of the items we borrowed, never mind the consequences of their loss. I doubt that would have stopped us, though, even if it had occurred to us. Now, as an adult, I understood the value of what was lost—not just in dollars but in sentiment, and I felt terrible. I wished I could make it right, but ultimately I couldn't come up with anything, even after racking my brain. I decided to keep thinking about it.

Brad and I were already throwing around a football when Paige and her kids showed up. At first, she wouldn't even look in my direction and I could feel the chill, even from a distance. I was grateful for the distraction of football and her cheerful teenage son. I decided to enjoy the moment and deal with the drama later.

As Lexi, Brad's adorable 3-year-old daughter, came running up to us, her eyes widened at the sight of me without a shirt. I couldn't help but chuckle at her innocent curiosity.

"Dinner's ready, Mommy says!" she announced, her tiny, but somehow big, voice filled with excitement.

I smiled down at her, then crouched down to her level. "Thanks for letting us know, Lexi. We'll be right in," I replied, trying to keep a straight face.

Then, with the innocence only a child could possess, she looked up at me with wide eyes. "You don't look like Daddy. Daddy has a fat tummy," she said solemnly.

Brad, who was jogging over after retrieving the ball, paused mid-stride, his face a mixture of amusement and embarrassment.

"Lexi, Daddy is busy working at a desk all day long to take care of you and Mommy. Uncle Chet needs to be in top physical shape for his job as a professional football player. Do you want Daddy to look like Uncle Chet?"

Lexi squints, thinking really hard. "Hmmm...no. If you looked like Uncle Chet, I don't think you would be as soft to sleep on. Uncle Chet looks too hard. I like the way you are now. I love you, Daddy."

Brad gives Lexi a big sweaty hug, "Baby Girl, I love you too."

Lexi seemed satisfied with their conversation and skipped back toward the house. Brad let out a sigh and a relieved chuckle. He shook his head, "Lexi is the sweetest thing and loves my soft tummy, but my doctor is starting to get on my case to lose some weight. He said for my age I shouldn't be this big. Our little football workout today was great for me, but I will probably feel it tomorrow."

I thumped his shoulder "Take it slow, man. It all starts with more movement in your day. A desk job and yummy treats from co-workers would get to my stomach, too. While I'm here, let's get moving every day."

“That would be awesome! Chet, you are the best.”

We high fived, grabbed our water bottles, and started toward the house. I suddenly turned to Brandon and yelled, “Catch!”

We started tossing the football casually between the three of us as we walked. I’m always amazed at the raw talent some kids have, and Brandon definitely has the knack for the game. He is impressively quick on his feet—must run in the family.

"Hey, Brandon, you've got some serious moves, man. Ever thought about taking football seriously?" I asked, genuinely curious. His eyes lit up at the compliment from a professional player.

He grinned, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Thanks, Chet. You're not too bad yourself for an 'old guy'," he replied, and we all laughed.

"You should've seen your uncle here back in high school." I nodded toward Brad. I think he could have gone all the way if he hadn't decided on a safer job."

Brad shrugged, a bit embarrassed but also flattered. "Well, life takes you in different directions. After hurting my knee in college, a safer job seemed like a better choice."

Brandon caught the ball easily, “Honestly, Chet, I mean, coming from you, a compliment like that means a lot. I really want to play for my school team but my Mom won’t let me, for that very reason. She remembers what happened to Uncle Brad," he said, hugging the ball and looking at the ground.

I nodded. “I understand completely, Brandon. Football can be dangerous and I’ve had my share of injuries. You can play smarter so you get hurt less, but there are no guarantees.”

“Oh, yes! Chet could teach you a trick or two,” Brad chimed in.

I smiled. “Definitely. If you ever want some tips, just let me know. It’s all about practice and, well, listening to your mom about staying safe,” I added, remembering Paige’s protective nature.

“Did Mom ever watch you guys play?” Brandon asked, intrigued by the idea of his mom and football.

“Your Uncle Brad can answer that question better than me, I honestly don’t remember.”

“Not really,” Brad said. “Me and Chet got more serious about football in high school and your Mom was already in college by then. She was never interested in sports; she preferred her books.”

Brandon nodded his agreement. “That’s what I thought. Her eyes always seem to glaze over when I start talking about football.” He tossed the football from hand to hand.

“Hey, Chet, do you think you can convince my mom to let me try out for the football team this coming school year?”

I paused for a moment, not sure how to answer Paige’s son. “I can’t make any promises, but I’m willing to try, maybe with Brad’s help. We’ll work on improving your skills first and getting your uncle out of the house at the same time. Let’s see if we can come up with a training plan. But we have to get through dinner first.”

“Yes, sir! Thank you, Chet!” He jogged ahead of us, so excited that he looked like he could have floated the rest of the way to the house.

“Chet, thank you. Brandon has been struggling with the desire to play and his mother’s stubbornness. I’ve attempted many times to get her to change her mind and she keeps saying, ‘Look at you, Brad, No!’”

“I am not making any promises but at least I can show her that not everyone gets hurt playing football if you play smart.”

In the back of my mind I was wondering how on earth I could possibly convince a woman who didn’t seem to like me to do something she clearly didn’t want to do. But, I figured at least it would give me another opportunity to talk to her. Brandon really did seem incredibly talented, so it would be worth it to help him if I could.

Brandon turned at the door. “You are the best, man! Gosh, I’m hungry. Let’s eat!”

No argument here!

Chapter Eleven

PAIGE

The mood around the dinner table was light and animated, filled with the buzz of lively conversation and the clinking of cutlery. The aroma of home-cooked dishes wafted through the air, mingling with laughter and the occasional outburst from the kids. I couldn't help but steal a glance at Chet. His presence added a spark of excitement to our usual routine. I did my best to ignore the subtle flutter in my stomach as Chet gave me a hesitant but handsome smile.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Brad and Olivia exchange a knowing glance, their eyes twinkling with shared affection. I shook my head in a subtle “no.” They grinned even wider and I looked away. Meanwhile, Brandon and Jenny were happily listening to sweet Lexi chattering excitedly. My Mom was sitting at the head of the table, radiating warmth and hospitality. She finally managed to get our attention and led us in a prayer before we attacked the food.

While we were eating, my mom turned to Chet and said, “It’s so wonderful to have you back visiting us in Hawthorn Hideaway, Chet. It’s been such a long time since I last saw you. Brad told me you are a big football star now. Did you always want to play professionally?”

Brad shyly replied, “No, Aunty Pam, I didn’t think of doing any sports professionally when I was growing up. I actually wanted to become an author.”

I can’t help myself. I looked at him in shock, then quickly closed my mouth before

anyone noticed.

"I wanna be a princess!" Lexi shouted, wanting to be part of the conversation.

Chet turned to the little girl. "Lexi, you'll be the prettiest princess ever." He brought his attention back to my mom. "My Mom and Grandmother taught me to love books and the library. So much so that I wanted to have my own book in the library, too." He chuckled. "Actually, becoming a professional football player, oddly enough, just kind of fell into my lap. I am enjoying it, but I don't like all of it."

Now it was Brandon, who had been attentively listening, who was shocked. "How can you not like all of football? What's not to like?"

Chet shrugged, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Tons of running around in tight pants and getting yelled at by coaches."

Brad laughed. "Sounds glamorous."

Chet nodded, his expression turning more serious. "Honestly, the worst part is the paparazzi when you get really popular."

The table fell silent for a moment, processing Chet's unexpected revelation. Olivia leaned forward, an expression of curiosity on her face. "I can't even imagine what that's like. Do they follow you around everywhere?"

"Pretty much," Chet answered. "It's like having your own personal shadow, but one that's armed with cameras and a relentless desire for gossip."

My mom looked horrified, "Oh, Chet, that sounds horrible."

I couldn't help but feel a newfound sympathy for Chet. "Must make it hard to have

any privacy."

"You got that right. Sometimes, I feel like I'm living in a fishbowl. That's actually part of the reason I came back to Hawthorn Hideaway when the season ended."

Brad started laughing hysterically. We all turned to him, surprised, because there had been such seriousness in the air just seconds ago.

"You should've seen the time Chet tried to go incognito with a fake mustache," he finally got out. "Let's just say it didn't exactly fool anyone."

"Hey, I thought it added a touch of sophistication!" Chet tried to defend himself.

Olivia giggled, "I'm sure the paparazzi appreciated the effort, at least."

"Oh, they loved it. I think I made the front page of some tabloid with the headline 'Football Star's Mustache Mishap,'" Chet grimaced.

Brad was now gasping for air, "That's right! I forgot about that. I wonder if I can pull it up on my phone."

"Brad, don't," Chet begged. "Please don't, not now. It will ruin everyone's appetite."

Brad relented, "Fine, fine. Oh, remember that time the paparazzi caught you trying to walk your dog incognito?" Brad started laughing like a maniac again.

Chet's eyes widened in mock horror, realizing where this was going. "Oh no, not that! I thought I was being so sneaky. It wasn't even my dog. With all the travel I do, having a pet is hard, so I borrowed my neighbor's dog. I just wanted some fresh air."

"Yeah, Chet here thought he could avoid the cameras by donning a ridiculous

disguise—a fake mustache, the same ugly mustache as the first time, sunglasses and ugly black hat combo, straight out of a bad spy movie."

The table erupted in laughter as Chet shook his head, clearly embarrassed by the memory.

"In my defense, it seemed like a good idea at the time."

I had to ask. "And did it work?"

Brad, out of breath from laughing, choked out, "Let's just say the paparazzi were more interested in capturing the 'mysterious stranger' walking a tiny dog than they were in the actual celebrity."

Chet added, "I think I made headlines this time for 'Football Star's Failed Disguise Attempt'."

As the laughter subsided, I couldn't help but admire Chet's ability to laugh at himself, even in the face of embarrassing moments captured for the world to see. It was a reminder that behind the glitz and glamor, he was just a regular guy navigating the ups and downs of fame with humor and humility.

My mother instinct kicked in, "Well, Chet, you're in the right place to seek refuge from the paparazzi here in Hawthorn Hideaway. Just be prepared for the occasional camera-wielding grandma," I added with a grin.

Jenny piped up, "Chet, other than at home, the next best place to hide here is in Mommy's library!"

I looked at Jenny in disbelief. Was she weaving a set-up plan?!

Then Brandon had to contribute. “Oh yeah, Mom doesn’t let anyone bother her patrons about anything.”

“That’s not true!” I said in my own defense, then had to back down as I remembered my recent conversation with April at the library. “Well, it might be a little true.”

Brad, Olivia, my Mom, Jenny, and Brandon all nodded their heads and said in unison, “It’s true!”

I slouched in my chair, totally embarrassed. I couldn’t believe everyone at this very moment.

Chet smiled directly at me. “I do love the library.”

What in the world just happened?

Chapter Twelve

CHET

As I jogged through the quiet streets of Hawthorn Hideaway the next morning, my mind drifted back to last night's dinner. The laughter, the warmth of the conversation, and the way everyone made me feel like part of the family—it was exactly what I needed, especially after that horrible conversation after church.

I thought, too, about the jewelry that Brad and I had lost when we were kids. It was a small thing, but the way Paige mentioned it, I could tell it still bothered her. Honestly, it bothered me now, too. How could we have been so careless? Yes, we were young and ignorant, but that necklace had meant a lot to her, and we had just buried it and forgotten about it. The guilt gnawed at me, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to make it right somehow.

I forced myself not to dwell on it for the time being and went back to the fun memories of the family dinner. The highlight was Paige, of course. She had been so angry at me after church, but somehow she'd softened during the evening. I could still hear her beautiful laugh in my mind. I also loved seeing the sparkle in her eyes as she looked affectionately at each of her family members throughout the evening.

I had always liked Brad's family, but last night brought up new feelings. I felt love in my heart for the McDermott family growing. It was a new feeling for me, and I really liked it.

Lost in my thoughts, I almost missed seeing Mr. Saavedra, my neighbor, out in an

empty field wearing headphones and holding a strange futuristic device in his hand. The sight pulled me out of my reverie, and I slowed down, curiosity piqued. What was he holding? What was he doing?

“Morning, Mr. Saavedra!” I called out, jogging up to him.

He looked up and pulled off his headset, a twinkle in his eye. “Morning, Chet! Just out here doing a bit of treasure hunting.”

I glanced at the device in his hand. It was a long pole with a circular disc at the end and a small control box at the top near the handle with a screen. Wires snaked around it, and it emitted a soft, rhythmic beeping sound. It seriously looked like something out of a science fiction movie.

“Treasure hunting?” I asked, intrigued. “What kind of treasure are you looking for with that... contraption?”

Mr. Saavedra chuckled. “Oh, you know, the usual—old coins, lost jewelry, relics from the past. You’d be surprised what people have buried or lost over the years.”

I nodded, trying to wrap my head around it. “So, this thing helps you find metal objects underground?”

“Exactly,” he said. “This is a metal detector. The disc at the bottom sends out a magnetic field, and when it encounters metal, it disrupts the field and sends a signal to the control box here. That’s what causes the beeping.”

I was curious. “Say, Mr. Saavedra, have you ever come across anything particularly valuable in your treasure hunts?”

He smiled knowingly. “Well, let’s just say I’ve stumbled upon a few interesting finds

over the years. Like old aluminum trade tokens, copper wheat cents, lead bullets I like to imagine were from the Civil War, lost wedding rings, and necklaces. So many neat things. You never know what's lurking beneath the surface."

"Wow, that's really cool, Mr. Saavedra! What a fascinating hobby. I've never heard of a trade token or a wheat cent."

"I didn't know what they were either, until I found them! Whenever I find something new, I always go to the library and do some research about this area and what it is I might have found. It's so much fun. I have even found a few arrowheads. Imagine Native Americans living around here. I assume they were part of a nomadic tribe."

I listened raptly as he spoke about his finds. Wait, did he also say jewelry? Necklaces? A thought sparked in my mind. A metal detector! Could that be the key to finding Paige's lost jewelry? The idea filled me with excitement and a sense of purpose. Maybe, just maybe, I could make things right.

"Did I hear you say you found lost rings and necklaces, too?" I eagerly asked. "Did you ever connect the owners to the lost jewelry?"

"Oh yes! Lost jewelry is my favorite find because when I return it back to the owner, or the owner's family, there are almost always tears of joy and so much gratitude. Many have said that I was the answer to their prayers." He paused, and a soft look of love filled his face as his thoughts flitted to his late wife. "My beloved wife was an angel to many. She had the gift of listening and knew exactly when people were praying for help. Through her service, she answered many, many prayers. I feel closest to her when I am able to help others." His eyes filled with tears, but a soft smile lifted the corners of his lips.

"Mr. Saavedra, thank you for sharing your story with me. I think you can be an answer to my prayers right now." I told him about how Brad and I had lost Paige's

jewelry when we were children and how much the jewelry had meant to her.

He smiled, clearly delighted to be of assistance. “Of course, Chet! Anything for the beautiful Ms. Paige. She has helped me in so many of my searches. You need to find her lost jewelry! I’d be happy to show you how this metal detector works, and you can borrow it anytime.”

We made arrangements for me to borrow his metal detector later that afternoon. I thanked him profusely and finished my run. I couldn’t help but feel a surge of hope. This could be my chance to make things right with Paige, to show her that I cared. It was about more than just the jewelry—it was about gaining her trust.

Brad and I met up after he was done with work, and I told him my plan. We still had a few hours of daylight left. I figured he could get some steps in and we’d look for Paige’s jewelry at the same time. With the metal detector in my hand, we headed toward the home he grew up in before we checked out other areas we had liked to adventure to.

My heart was filled with hope that today we’d be able to right this childish mistake from our childhood. I didn’t know if Paige’s image of me would change, but making an effort to find her jewelry was the right thing to do. I hated knowing that I was the cause of such a sad memory from her past.

We started by going back and forth from the right side of the yard to the left. I didn’t realize how big Brad’s yard was until then! As Brad and I scoured the backyard with the metal detector, the rhythmic beeping mingled with our laughter as we reminisced about our childhood adventures. It was amazing how being in a specific location could bring back so many memories.

"Hey, remember that time we tried to build a treehouse in the old oak tree?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "How could I forget? We thought we were master carpenters with those tiny nails and rubber mallets we stole—I mean, borrowed—from your dad's tool shed."

"Yeah, we didn't even have a proper blueprint. We just hammered random pieces of wood together."

"How about that wobbly ladder we attempted?"

Brad started belly laughing. "Oh my gosh, once we started climbing that thing, I was so terrified, but I refused to admit it. I thought that ladder would be the end for me."

Now I was laughing uncontrollably. "I was terrified too. I thought it was just me. I didn't want to say anything because the ladder build was my idea. It totally needed more than two small nails per piece of wood! I went up that thing after you so fast that most of the steps fell off shortly after my foot moved to the next rung."

Brad shook his head. "It's amazing we didn't make any trips to the emergency room because of that treehouse! Remember? The whole thing collapsed the moment we tried to climb into it, leaving us clinging to the tree like monkeys."

I grinned. "I can still hear the sound of all our hard work crashing to the ground. Who was it who finally found us screaming for help and hugging the branches for dear life?"

"It was actually Paige who found us stuck in the tree," Brad said. "She was laughing on the ground while we were bawling our eyes out in the tree. If I remember correctly, she called us baby monkeys for the rest of the summer. Let's not remind her of that memory!"

I nodded my head vigorously. "I agree, I prefer not to have a monkey nickname of

any sort again. I also remember that your dad wasn't too happy about the mess we left.”

“Yeah, my dad was pretty furious. Now that he’s gone, I even miss him being mad at me.”

We went silent for a moment, thinking about Brad’s dad. When I’d found out about his passing, I’d been off at college. I cried and hid in my dorm room all night. He had been my summer dad. He passed during football season, so I wasn’t able to come back to Hawthorn for the funeral, but I’d called Brad to check on him and let him know how sorry I was. It had been a hard time for us both.

“He was a really good guy,” I finally said. “He helped us build a real and sturdy treehouse after our failed attempt. I have so many memories around that treehouse. Is it still there?”

“It actually is, although it probably needs some love and care. I know Brandon and Jenny used to sneak up there when they were younger. I always made sure that they knew their grandpa built it. I think knowing that made them love it even more.”

Brad and I reminisced a lot that night as we looked around the yard with the metal detector. We found a spoon, bottle caps, coins, and a lost hammer, but no jewelry. Even though I was hopeful that our hidden treasure was in the yard, I also knew that our young pirate minds would probably never have hidden treasure that close to civilization. But where in the world had we hidden it?

When we ran out of sunlight, we had to give up and make plans to try again the next night, and I headed home.

Chapter Thirteen

PAIGE

It had been a slow library day, like most Mondays, so I was shocked to see Brandon and Jenny rush in after school and head straight to the computers, excitedly chattering. I had to shush them as a few patrons looked up from their tasks.

Brandon and Jenny rarely shared common interests these days, so my curiosity got the best of me. I headed over to them to see what they were up to. They were hovering over one computer, clearly excited about something. As I got closer, I saw Chet's picture on the screen. What were they doing? My steps quickened.

"Why are you looking up stuff about Chet?" I asked.

Brandon shook his head, and Jenny chimed in, "It's not rude, Mommy. He's famous, so he's already on the web. Plus, Chet told us last night at dinner what we would find, "We want to see the paparazzi pictures ourselves."

Now I was curious and wanted to see too.

"Let's look up that time Chet tried to walk his dog incognito first," Brandon suggested, his eyes gleaming with anticipation. "What was the title of that article?"

Jenny whispered, "I think it was something like, 'Football Star's Failed Disguise.'"

The three of us grew quiet as Brandon typed in the search bar. Up popped a picture of

Chet wearing a fake mustache and sunglasses, trying to walk a tiny dog. The headline read, "Football Star's Hilarious Disguise Fails to Fool Anyone." We all started laughing softly.

Ms. Smith, shelving books nearby, came over, curious to know what was so funny.

"Oh my gosh, look at that mustache!" Jenny exclaimed, giggling. "It looks like something from a costume store. It's so ugly and fake!"

I laughed, gasping to catch my breath and trying to keep my voice down. "He really went all out, didn't he? I can't believe he thought that would work!"

Ms. Smith, adjusting her reading glasses, moved in closer for a better look. "Is that my dear Chet? I have fond memories of him coming in every summer with his grandmother. I don't understand—what is he doing?"

Brandon chuckled. "Yup! It's Chet. He should've known better. With a body like that, that mustache wasn't fooling anyone. He looks huge next to that dog. Whose dog was it anyway?"

"I think he said it was his neighbor's dog. True, he should have known better," I said, still smiling. "But you have to give him credit for trying. I bet he was just desperate for a bit of peace and quiet."

I turned to Ms. Smith and explained, "Chet told us the main reason he came back to our little town was to get away from the paparazzi. I didn't realize it was this bad until now."

We found a few more pictures of Chet in that terrible mustache. It was so bad. We laughed at every picture.

Jenny was still giggling. “I gotta ask him why he chose that mustache instead of a more real-looking one.”

She clicked on another link, finding a video clip of Chet being swarmed by paparazzi while trying to leave a coffee shop. Chet was polite but clearly frustrated as he navigated through the crowd.

“Look at him, he’s so patient,” Jenny observed. “I would be so annoyed if I had to deal with that every day.”

“It takes a lot of composure to handle that kind of attention,” I agreed. “It’s a tough part of his job.”

“I can only imagine. You know me—I rarely left the library before, and even after retirement, I prefer to be here where it’s quiet. I’ve never liked attention or crowds,” Ms. Smith said softly, then shuddered.

“I get why he wanted to come here for some peace,” Brandon added. “No one in Hawthorn is going to chase him around with cameras.”

“Exactly,” I said. “It’s nice for him to have a place where he can relax and be himself without all the pressure.”

Jenny found another article, this one about a charity event where Chet dressed up as a superhero to visit a children’s hospital. This costume was appropriate, and he looked amazing in it. You could see the definition of all his muscles. I couldn’t help but admire how good he looked, though I kept my thoughts to myself. We watched another video clip of Chet in a cape and mask entertaining the kids and bringing smiles to their faces.

“Wow, Chet is really sweet,” Jenny said, her voice filled with admiration. “Look at

how happy those kids are.”

“He does have a good heart,” I said, feeling a warm sense of pride. “It’s nice to see that side of him, beyond the football star image.”

“Yeah, he’s definitely more than just a celebrity,” Brandon agreed. “I hope we get to see more of him while he’s here.”

“Me too,” I said softly. “He seems to enjoy being here, and it’s good for all of us to reconnect. Plus, it’s fun hearing all these stories and seeing this side of him.”

Ms. Smith took another look at the screen. “That’s the little boy I remember! He was such a good, kind little one. Anyway, I better get back to shelving—these books won’t shelve themselves,” she said as she slowly walked back to her book cart.

We explored more stories and videos about Chet for a few more minutes. I found myself feeling a deeper appreciation for Chet growing within me. It was nice to see my children in awe of a man not just for his career but for being a good person. I had almost forgotten that I was still at work, so I hurried back to the circulation desk.

Just as I reached to grab a stack of books to check back in, April sashayed into the library and came straight up to me. She seemed especially excited today, her eyes sparkling with curiosity and mischief.

She leaned onto the counter. “Hi, my beautiful librarian friend.”

April always knew how to make me smile. “Hi, my gorgeous friend. What’s the latest news in Hawthorn Hideaway?”

“Guess who I just finished interviewing?”

I picked up the top book on the stack and glanced at April, raising an eyebrow. “Hmm, let me guess—the mayor?”

April shook her head, grinning. “Nope, even better. Chet Bennett—the professional football player and your new neighbor.”

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of Chet. She had my full attention now, though I tried to sound uninterested. “Really? What did you talk about?”

April knew me too well and wasn’t about to fall for my fake disinterest. “I knew this news would perk you up. Oh my goodness, Paige, he is such a nice guy! You wouldn’t even know how famous he is just by chatting with him. He’s so down-to-earth and easy to talk to.”

Was she talking about the same guy I knew? Chet always seemed to be at a loss for words when it was just the two of us.

“We talked about everything—his career, what it’s like playing football at that level, and why he’s back in our little town.”

I finally found my voice. “Yeah, he told us at dinner last night that he was here for some peace and quiet. He wanted to get away from the paparazzi and all the craziness that comes with fame.”

“Oh! Dinner with Chet is news to me! Tell me more!”

I quickly filled her in about dinner with my family the night before. “Okay, now back to your interview.”

“Girl, sounds like some good stuff is cooking in your love life.”

“Stop it. What else did you guys talk about?” I asked, going back to scanning books since she was happily dragging out this conversation and I needed to get things done.

“Yes, he also told me that he needed a break from the craziness of his life, but that’s not the interesting part,” she said, leaning in as if sharing a secret.

“What’s the interesting part?” I asked, curiosity getting the better of me.

April’s eyes gleamed with amusement. “He mentioned something about reconnecting with old friends and making amends for some childhood mishaps. Apparently, he’s on a bit of a personal mission while he’s here.”

My mind raced, trying to piece together what Chet might be up to. Could he be talking about the jewelry he and Brad lost when we were kids? The idea seemed far-fetched, but with Chet, maybe it was possible.

April continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “And here’s the real kicker—he’s been learning how to use a metal detector. He said he wants to help someone find something important that they lost a long time ago. Sounds like he’s really committed to this mission of his.”

I looked at her sharply and blinked in surprise, my heart pounding. “A metal detector? Really?”

April nodded, clearly enjoying my reaction. “Yep. He didn’t go into too much detail, but it sounds like he’s determined to make something right. Do you know what he could be looking for?”

I could hardly believe it. Could Chet really be thinking about finding my lost jewelry after all these years? The thought sent a rush of mixed emotions through me—hope, excitement, and a little bit of nervousness.

“I might have an idea, but I don’t want to assume anything,” I said slowly, trying to keep my voice steady.

April gave me a curious look but didn’t push. She knew better than to pry information from me. “Well, whatever it is, it sounds like he’s serious about it. I have a strong suspicion it has to do with you, and I’m looking forward to the full story when he finds whatever he’s looking for. I’m going to hold off on publishing his interview until the end of summer to keep the paparazzi from realizing he’s here in Hawthorn with us.” She winked and walked away toward the computers.

I took a deep breath. My head was spinning. Could Chet really be looking for Grandma’s necklace? It had been so long now that I could hardly remember what her necklace even looked like. Would I recognize it if I saw it? I didn’t want to get my hopes up, so I did my best to forget my conversation with April and got back to work.

Chapter Fourteen

CHET

It had been over two weeks now, and I was trying not to feel frustrated that we still hadn't found our hidden treasure with Mr. Saavedra's metal detector. We had searched Brad's entire two-acre yard, the playground, and my grandparents' yard. Getting into our childhood minds to figure out where we could have hidden our "treasure" was proving to be much harder than I expected. What in the world had we been thinking 20 years ago?

I strolled through the local market, basket in hand, still grappling with the mystery of the lost treasure. I was enjoying the simple pleasure of picking out fresh ingredients for dinner without the constant presence of men with cameras dissecting my every move. I'd recently read about the many health benefits of eating salmon at least twice a week—that it would be good for my heart, brain, and mental well-being—so I was eager to give a beginner's salmon recipe with lemon and garlic a try.

Cooking for myself was a refreshing change from my usual life, typically filled with events and meals out. I was actually feeling a bit excited about it. It was like a science experiment—mixing the right amounts to get the perfect formula. If it turned out well, I might offer to cook dinner for Paige and her kids. I figured giving her a break from cooking for one night would be a nice gesture.

I was carefully selecting a bunch of ripe tomatoes for a side salad when I caught something strange out of the corner of my vision. A pair of eyes were peeking out from behind a tall stack of toilet paper. At first, I thought I was imagining things, but

then the eyes blinked, and my heart sank a little as I realized who it was. James Baldwin, better known in the industry as “Rigs,” was a notorious paparazzo. He was young, flexible, quick, and infamous for hiding in the most unusual spots to get his shots.

“Not here, not now,” I muttered under my breath. Hawthorn Hideaway was supposed to be my escape, my sanctuary away from all the prying eyes. How in the world had Rigs tracked me down here?

I tried to stay cool, not wanting to draw attention to myself or to let Rigs know that I’d spotted him. I had to admit, the guy was good. Most people wouldn’t have noticed him, but I’d had plenty of practice.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight of him, mostly hidden, balancing on one foot behind the quilted soft toilet tissues. He was trying to be stealthy but looked utterly ridiculous. The absurdity of it almost made me want to pose for a photo, just to give him a break—but why encourage him?

Pretending I hadn’t noticed him, I moved to the next aisle, hoping to lose him in the store somehow, though I knew that was probably impossible. As I passed the bakery section, I spotted an opportunity—a large display of oversized sun hats. Grinning to myself, I grabbed one of the most ridiculous ones, complete with a bright floral pattern, and put it on. Maybe this would throw him off a bit. At the very least, it would make for a fantastic headline.

I continued shopping, making my way toward the dairy section. As I glanced back, I saw Rigs trying to hide behind a stack of cereal boxes, still snapping away. I couldn’t help but shake my head at his persistence.

Then, inspiration struck. I headed over to the seafood counter, where Mr. Ramirez, the fishmonger, was arranging fresh catches of the day.

“Hey, Mr. Ramirez,” I greeted him with a grin. “Can you do me a favor?”

He looked up, a curious smile on his face. “Sure thing, Chet. Nice hat. What do you need?”

I leaned in slightly. “I’ve got a paparazzo on my tail. Think you could help me out with a little diversion?”

Mr. Ramirez’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Paparazzi? In this town? That’s a first. Absolutely. What do you have in mind?”

I quickly explained my plan, and Mr. Ramirez nodded enthusiastically. A moment later, he called out loudly, “Hey, Chet! You’ve gotta try this fresh calamari!”

I made my way over, putting on an exaggerated show of examining the seafood. Mr. Ramirez handed me a piece of calamari on a small plate. “Try this—it’s fresh off the boat this morning,” he said loudly, winking discreetly.

As I took a bite and made a show of enjoying it, Mr. Ramirez continued his performance. “You know, we’ve got some special cuts in the back that just came in. Why don’t you come take a look?”

I nodded, playing along. “Sounds great, Mr. Ramirez. Lead the way.”

Mr. Ramirez stepped out from behind the counter and gestured for me to follow. He led me through a narrow door behind the counter, and we quickly found ourselves in a small storage area. A huge freezer door stood in the back corner, and shelves lined with various seafood supplies surrounded us, the air thick with the scent of the ocean.

“This way,” Mr. Ramirez whispered, motioning toward another door at the far end of the room. We moved quickly and quietly, the urgency of the situation adding a sense

of adventure to the whole thing.

We slipped through the second door into a dimly lit hallway, where Mr. Ramirez had already arranged for a cashier to meet me and assist with checking out my groceries. “This leads to a side exit,” Mr. Ramirez explained in a hushed tone before heading back to his responsibilities. “You should be able to get out without being seen.”

I clapped him on the shoulder, grateful for his help. “Thanks, Mr. Ramirez. I owe you one.”

“Anytime, Chet. Good luck out there,” he said with a grin.

Groceries and hat paid for, I made my way down the hallway and pushed open the door to the outside. Stepping into the bright sunlight, I sighed deeply in relief. I’d managed to outsmart Rigs—at least for now.

With my market haul in hand and a sense of triumph, I headed home, looking forward to a quiet evening cooking dinner without any more unexpected paparazzi encounters. A few minutes later, I found myself walking past the library. On a whim, I decided to stop. The library had become part of my daily routine since my first Sunday dinner with the McDermott family. It had been fun getting to know Paige and her kids, and I thought maybe they could help me come up with a plan to avoid Rigs. Plus, any excuse to see Paige was always welcome.

I looked around, making sure Rigs hadn’t caught up to me before going up the library steps. I pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped inside, the familiar scent of books immediately soothing my nerves. I spotted Paige behind the front desk, engrossed in her work. Her kids, Brandon and Jenny, were nearby, seemingly doing homework.

“Hey, Paige,” I called out softly, not wanting to disturb the peaceful ambiance.

She looked up, surprised but pleased to see me. “Chet! What brings you here with such a gorgeous hat and groceries?” She tilted her head, smiling wide as she observed my outfit and the bags I was carrying.

I had totally forgotten that I still had the ridiculous floral hat on, but I was more amused than embarrassed by the idea of Paige seeing me in it. “Actually, I could use some help,” I admitted, leaning casually against the desk. I was quite sure that my extremely attractive floral hat was working in my favor, but I tried to be serious. “I’ve got a bit of a situation with a paparazzo who’s been tailing me this morning. I thought maybe you and the kids could help me brainstorm a plan to avoid him so I can enjoy my stay here a little longer.”

Paige’s eyes widened with interest. “Paparazzi? In Hawthorn Hideaway? That’s unusual. Are you really that famous?” she teased.

I shook my head, my shoulders slumping a little. “Seriously, I really don’t know why I have a personal paparazzo. There are so many more interesting people to stalk in the world.”

Her whole demeanor softened, and a kindness entered her eyes. “Let’s see what we can come up with. Kids?”

Brandon and Jenny perked up at the mention of paparazzi, their curiosity piqued. They gathered around as Paige invited me to sit down in the reading area.

Jenny had a confused look on her face. “I heard paparazzi and then paparazzo. What’s the difference?”

I enjoyed watching Paige switch into teacher mode. “Great question, Jenny! ‘Paparazzi’ refers to photographers who follow celebrities to get photos of them, and it means there’s more than one. ‘Paparazzo’ is the masculine singular form of the

word, and ‘paparazza’ is the feminine form. They’re Italian words.”

Jenny had an expression of wonder on her face. “Ooooh...”

“So, what’s the situation?” Brandon asked, clearly excited by something new and far less interested in his mother’s grammar lesson.

I explained the run-in I’d had with Rigs in the grocery store. I also told them about my experiences with Rigs in the past, detailing how he had hidden in ridiculous spots around the city, trying to get photos of me, and how he had been following me for years.

Jenny giggled. “It’s like an endless game of hide-and-seek—but with a camera!”

“Exactly! That’s a great way of putting it,” I said with a chuckle. “But it’s getting a bit tiresome, and I’d like to find a way to avoid him.”

Paige thought for a moment. “Well, one option could be to create some diversions around town. Maybe if Rigs thinks you’re in one place, when you’re actually somewhere else, he’ll get frustrated and give up when he can never find you.”

Brandon nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, we could use decoys. Like, we could all start wearing different outfits or using props to throw him off—a misinformation campaign!”

Jenny chimed in, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Yeah! Someone could pretend to be you. Someone who looks like you from a distance, like Uncle Brad. He would be perfect!” She then started laughing hysterically.

Paige smiled at her daughter’s suggestion. “That’s a good idea, Jenny. I’m positive your uncle would be thrilled with the idea—or at least thrilled by the notion that

someone believes he and Chet currently have the same body. I'm thinking we can get some of the townspeople involved, make it a bit of a community effort to protect our local celebrity. I know many people from our community would gladly join in the fun to 'protect' you. We don't get much excitement in Hawthorn, as you can imagine, and we want you to feel safe and comfortable here. Once I let April know, the whole town will be in on the plan."

I was touched by their eagerness to help and the creative ideas they were coming up with. "Those are all great ideas. I like the decoy plan—getting Brad involved," I chuckled to myself, "and I think having the townspeople involved could really throw Rigs off too. Mr. Ramirez was a huge help today and didn't even bat an eye when I asked for his assistance. I'm pretty sure he enjoyed the subterfuge as much as I did, and I'm grateful to him."

Jenny stood up then and started hopping from one foot to the other in sheer excitement. "I've got the best idea ever! Rigs is looking for you alone, right? Single, eligible bachelor, right?"

I was confused. "Yes..."

"What if we present you as part of a family? He might overlook you entirely because it's not what he's expecting."

Brandon's face lit up. "Holy smokes, Jenny, that is a brilliant idea! Rigs wouldn't look for you as a dad with teenagers!"

Paige's eyes widened with shock, probably thinking about what her role in all this meant. I was chuckling inside as I thought about the plan, knowing full well it wouldn't fool Rigs—but loving the idea of feeling like a family with Paige and her kids. I raised an eyebrow, pretending to be intrigued, like I might need to be convinced, even though I was all in the second the words came out of Jenny's mouth.

“You mean, like, play the role of a family man?”

Jenny nodded eagerly. “Exactly. Spend time with us, blend in. We can do things together around town—picnics, walks in the park, things like that. It’ll make it harder for Rigs to single you out.”

Brandon grinned. “Yeah, we can be your cover. Rigs won’t know what hit him.”

I turned to Paige. “You okay with this idea?”

She opened her mouth and then closed it, speechless, while her kids answered for her. “Of course, she is! She loves helping people!”

Jenny clapped her hands in excitement. “Operation ‘Fool the Paparazzo’ is a go!”

We spent the next half hour hashing out the details, coming up with various scenarios and disguises. Brandon and Jenny’s enthusiasm was infectious, and I left the library feeling excited about the idea of spending more time with Paige and her family. I doubted we’d manage to outsmart Rigs, who knew exactly what I looked like and wouldn’t be fooled in such a small town, but I knew that this plan would make the rest of my time in Hawthorn Hideaway just wonderful, and I couldn’t help but feel excited.

Chapter Fifteen

PAIGE

The next day, after my workday was done, we decided to test out our first “Operation Fool the Paparazzo” plan. I was still a little shocked at my children’s idea to be a pretend family, but I was proud of my sweet kids for wanting to help. I knew it would be fun, so I agreed to go along with it. They were right; I never turned down the opportunity to help someone in need.

We decided to start with a family activity at the park and a sunset picnic dinner. It was a very public plan, and if it worked, Rigs wouldn’t recognize Chet at all, so we were all praying it would succeed. I imagined it must be so hard for Chet to live this way, constantly looking over his shoulder.

As we were getting ready to leave for the park, the excitement in the house was palpable. Jenny and Brandon buzzed around, gathering everything we needed for our evening out. I was in the kitchen, packing the picnic basket, when Jenny suddenly stopped and looked at Chet and me with a serious expression on her face.

“If you guys are going to fool Rigs, you need to look like a real couple,” she announced, hands on her hips like a tiny drill sergeant.

Chet raised an eyebrow, glancing at me with a smile on his lips. “Oh? And how do we do that, Jenny?”

Jenny grinned, clearly loving every moment of this. “You have to hold hands. Real

couples always hold hands. And not like how you hold my hand, Mommy. You have to interlock your fingers like this!” Jenny held up her two hands and interlocked her fingers to demonstrate what she meant.

I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks as I looked at Chet. He stepped closer, extending his hand toward me, his eyes twinkling with amusement and something else—something warmer. “Well, if the expert says we have to hold hands, who am I to argue?” he said, his voice playful, yet sincere.

I took his hand, feeling a little self-conscious, and it felt like electricity ran through our fingertips as they touched for the first time. His hand was warm and strong, and he made me feel safe.

“Mommy, you have to stand closer to Chet! You are standing too far away, like he has cooties or something!” Jenny scolded. Brandon chimed in, nodding in agreement with his sister. “Yeah, you two need to look like you really like each other. It’s part of the plan.”

Which plan, I wondered. I was starting to think that the kids had a completely different plan in mind here.

“Alright, alright,” I laughed nervously, moving closer to Chet and giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “We’ll hold hands and stand closer. Does this look better? Anything else, General Jenny and Sergeant Brandon?”

Jenny giggled, satisfied. “Nope, that’s it. Just make sure you act like you’re having fun together. Oh! And Mommy, you have to look up at Chet once in a while like he is all that to you. I think you should practice that now too.”

I glared at her as she grinned widely. She was enjoying this a little too much, and it was clear that she was more interested in Chet and me getting together than in our

plan to avoid Rigs. But I had to admit, I wasn't minding it so much. I did my best to relax and play along—this was all for Chet, after all. I took a deep breath and looked up at Chet. He was already looking down at me, grinning, which made it a lot easier to smile back. This was all so silly, and yet it felt oddly natural and easy.

“Okay, now hug,” Jenny demanded.

We let go of each other's hands, and Chet brought me in close. We hugged, still grinning goofily at each other. This was starting to get out of hand.

“That's great! Now kiss!” I could hear Jenny grinning with excitement.

I dropped my arms and backed away from Chet. “Okay, Jenny, you are going a little too far now!”

Jenny, Brandon, and Chet burst out laughing. I had to take deep breaths to calm my pounding heart. That was not funny!

We finished gathering everything we needed for our dinner picnic. With our new “couple” directive in place, we headed out to the park. As we walked, hand in hand, with Jenny and Brandon leading, I couldn't help but steal glances at Chet in his baseball cap and sunglasses. There was something different about this—something that felt real, despite the fact that what we were doing was just supposed to be a scheme. Part of me was freaking out just a little bit inside, and I wondered if he felt it too.

At the park, we set up our picnic in a beautiful spot near a group of trees. I had never seen Rigs before, so I wasn't entirely sure what to look for. I noticed Chet scanning the area discreetly, but he didn't seem to find what he was looking for, at least at first. Then, Chet leaned in close. When he did this, my heart started to beat a little faster. I felt his warm breath tickle my cheek, his voice low and casual, as he said, “See the

guy on the bench over by the oak tree, pretending to read a newspaper?”

I struggled to act normal, doing my best to casually turn and glance in that direction while also trying to be subtle. As I spread out our picnic blanket, I spotted the guy. “Yeah, I see him.”

“That’s Rigs. He’s pretty young, probably late twenties. He’s got dark hair, and he’s wearing a baseball cap pulled low. He’s known for hiding in unique places to get his shots.”

I took a moment to observe Rigs. He was lean and wiry, with an air of alertness that didn’t match his casual pose. The way he occasionally peeked over his newspaper with a camera ready confirmed Chet’s description.

The kids claimed they were too old for the playground, so we had planned something more fitting—a frisbee game before we enjoyed our picnic dinner. Although it occurred to me now that we had this plan in place, a game of frisbee didn’t exactly make us less noticeable for anyone watching.

“Hey, Chet,” Brandon said, pulling out a bright red frisbee. “Think you can keep up with us?”

Chet laughed, ruffling Brandon’s hair. “Oh, you’re on!”

We started a lively game of frisbee, with the kids running around and Chet and I making exaggerated throws and catches. Every now and then, I glanced toward Rigs, who briefly looked at us but didn’t seem to recognize Chet because we didn’t hold his attention for long. It was working—he thought we were just an ordinary small-town family.

“Nice catch, Paige!” Chet called out, giving me a high-five that seamlessly

transitioned into holding my hand. It felt natural, and I noticed that the kids were pleased with how well we were pulling this off.

After a while, we moved to the picnic area. We took our seats on the blanket and laid out our feast. The kids chatted animatedly about school and their favorite shows, keeping the conversation lively and normal. Chet and I sat close, our hands intertwined as we enjoyed the food.

“Mommy, please pass the grapes,” Jenny said, reaching over.

I handed her the bowl, smiling at how effortlessly we were blending in. Rigs was still there on his bench looking around, but there was nothing scandalous or interesting for him to capture. He was starting to look a little bored.

As we finished our picnic, Brandon suggested, “How about a walk around the lake?”

“Great idea,” Chet agreed, standing up and helping me to my feet. “Ready for a stroll, Honey?” I made a face at him, but I didn’t say “no” or correct him either.

I nodded, and he jumped up, reaching out to help me up. I gratefully took his hands and got to my feet. It felt so nice to have someone wanting to help and support me in little things like this. We started walking, still holding hands. The kids walked ahead of us, chatting and laughing. We walked around the lake at a leisurely pace, enjoying the scenery and the feeling of togetherness.

As we passed by the spot where Rigs was sitting, he barely glanced at us, clearly not recognizing Chet. The simple disguise and the family dynamic were working perfectly. Rigs actually sighed loudly as we walked by, and we saw him gather his stuff and leave the park. Victory! When he was gone, we continued our walk around the lake, sharing stories and enjoying the day. I noticed that Chet and I continued to play our parts, even though Rigs had already left.

As we headed home later, it was clear that our plan had been a success and everyone was thrilled.

“You guys were amazing,” Chet said, his voice filled with gratitude. “Thank you.”

Jenny grinned. “Operation Family Picnic was a success!”

Brandon nodded. “Yeah, and it was actually a lot of fun.”

Chet squeezed my hand as we walked. “Thanks for playing along, Paige. It meant a lot.”

I smiled back, feeling a warm glow. “Anytime, Chet. Anytime.” And I meant it.

Chapter Sixteen

CHET

I woke up the next morning to the sound of birds chirping outside my window. I stretched and took a moment to appreciate the peacefulness of Hawthorn Hideaway. I loved how this small town had a way of making everything feel simple and uncomplicated, a stark contrast to my usual high-octane life. The more time I spent away from the craziness of the city, the more I felt like I had always been a small-town kind of guy.

Eventually, I climbed out of bed and threw on my running clothes. I smiled as I thought about yesterday's picnic with Paige and the kids. It was one for the books. The plan to blend in as a family and keep Rigs from recognizing me worked perfectly. I still couldn't believe how well it had all come together. I felt like a normal person for the first time in years. I had forgotten what that felt like and really enjoyed being normal.

Ready to start my day, I stepped outside onto the porch, breathing in the fresh, cool air and admiring the beautiful morning sky. As I ran through the quiet streets, I noticed the townspeople going about their daily routines. Everyone knew everyone here, and the friendly nods and waves I received as I ran made me feel like I was truly becoming part of the community. Brandon joined me for a portion of my jog. He had been doing great with getting more active, improving every day. I was proud of him!

Early morning jogs had always been my favorite because I rarely had to deal with any

paparazzi. They seemed to prefer the wildness of late-night shenanigans to getting up early to chase after guys like me.

After my jog, I worked in the garden for a while, which was in dire need of some attention. My grandparents had been avid gardeners, and I had been trying to keep the garden going in their honor. I found it therapeutic, and it kept my mind off Rigs and his relentless pursuit.

The garden had been so overgrown when I arrived in the spring that I decided to start most of it from scratch. I knew I had to keep the rose bushes, my Baba's favorite. Baba had rose bushes all along her front fence and a bunch more scattered around her yard. I did my best to trim each bush using instructions I found in a video online.

Each rose bush was a bit of a battle, and I always walked away with fresh wounds, scratches up and down my arms, usually bleeding. No wonder Baba always wore long sleeves out here in the garden.

Why had my Baba chosen roses with thorns for her garden? All the roses I had ever bought for women didn't have any thorns. Maybe Baba was trying to teach me a lesson, even from her grave.

I moved on to the section I had cleared last week so I could add some new plants and flowers. I was pretty sure none of these flowers had thorns, but suddenly I thought I'd better check. I had done my best to choose flowers I remembered from Baba's garden, but I had to admit, I hadn't paid much attention back then, so I'd done a lot of guessing.

Satisfied with what I'd accomplished in the garden, I took a quick shower before heading into town. I had a few errands to run, and being in town was always a good excuse to blend in with the locals.

My first stop was the hardware store. I needed a few supplies to fix a leaky faucet. As I browsed the aisles, Mr. Parker, the store owner, walked up to me with a knowing smile.

“Morning, Chet. How’s it going? Need any help finding something?” he asked.

“Morning, Mr. Parker. Just grabbing a few things for some home repairs,” I replied.

He nodded, his eyes twinkling. “Well, if you need any advice, just holler. And don’t worry about that pesky photographer. The town’s got your back.”

I smiled, grateful for the support. “Thanks, Mr. Parker. I appreciate it.”

I was really impressed that Paige, her kids, and April had already gotten the word out to the townsfolk. Rigs hadn’t been on my tail since I let them know, and I was grateful. I was hoping that at some point he’d give up and go home when he couldn’t find me again.

With my supplies in hand, I made my way to the next stop—the local bakery. They had the best pastries, a special treat Grandpa Joe and I used to pick up to surprise Baba, who loved their treats.

Baba would always act surprised when we brought her treats from the bakery, especially her favorite Danish custard pastry. Grandpa Joe and Baba always looked so sweet together, gazing deeply into each other’s eyes, always kissing and laughing. Even as a little boy, I knew I wanted that kind of love someday. I smiled at the memory as I looked into the bakery window now.

I felt like I deserved a special treat today after all my work in the garden, so I decided to go inside. As I entered, the warm aroma of freshly baked goods greeted me, making my mouth water in anticipation and my stomach grumble. Had I not eaten all

day?

“Hey there, Chet!” Mrs. Lawson, the bakery owner, called out from behind the counter. “What can I get for you today?”

“Morning, Mrs. Lawson. Everything looks so delicious! This is my reward for spending so many hours in Baba’s garden this morning, and I haven’t eaten yet today. I’ll take two of those apple turnovers, two blueberry muffins, two Parmesan pretzels, two pepperoni calzones, one glazed donut, one chocolate cake donut, two chocolate milks, and a lemonade, please,” I said, my mouth already watering.

“My poor boy, you must be starving! Your grandmother’s garden was always so beautiful. I used to purposely take my walks past your grandparent’s home just to enjoy your grandmother’s beautiful flowers. Thank you for working on that. I really miss it. I’ll give you an old-fashioned chocolate donut from me. I remember how much you loved those when you were little.”

“Wow, you remember that?! I was trying to be grown-up and try different things. You’ve just made my day. Thank you, Mrs. Lawson, for the extra special treat!”

I suddenly thought I should get something for Paige and her kids too. “Mrs. Lawson, do you happen to know what Paige and her kids enjoy? I want to get them something to thank them for all their help.”

“Of course! I know what everyone in this town enjoys.” She winked at me. “Paige loves my butter croissants, but when she wants a special treat, she gets a Long John. Brandon always goes for the chocolate donut, and sweet Jenny still loves her pink-frosted donuts with sprinkles.”

“I’ll get one of each of their favorites, please.”

As she packed up my order, she leaned in and whispered, “We’ve got little surprises planned for our unwelcome guest. Just enjoy your day and leave him to us.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “You guys are incredible. Thanks, Mrs. Lawson.”

After Mr. Parker and Mrs. Lawson’s comforting whispers, I was definitely curious about what they had planned for our friend, Rigs. I chuckled. I was positive that I was going to enjoy every minute of what was to come.

With my treats in hand, I decided to take a leisurely walk through the park as I headed to the library to surprise my fun pretend family. I looked at the time and realized the kids were still in school, so I decided to hang out in the park for a bit and enjoy my delicious bakery feast. I found a bench facing the lake and set up my meal next to me. My stomach was growling loudly, upset at me for taking so long to feed it.

As I sat there, savoring the peacefulness, I noticed a group of kids, too young for school, playing nearby under the watchful eye of parents and nannies. I recognized Lexi right away by her bouncing pigtails, and then I saw her mom, Olivia, who waved when she noticed me. I waved back. Everyone looked so happy and relaxed—it really was a beautiful day.

The kids’ laughter and energy were infectious, and it reminded me of how much I enjoyed spending time with Paige and her kids. They’d become a significant part of my life here, and I was grateful for their presence.

Just as I was about to lose myself in my thoughts, I spotted Rigs out of the corner of my eye. He was trying to be inconspicuous, but his attempt at blending in was laughable. He was crouched behind a park bench, his camera aimed right at me. I had no idea why anyone would be interested in seeing me sitting at the park eating pastries. Why couldn’t he just leave me alone?

Just then, I noticed Olivia pointing out Rigs to all the children. They spotted him, and, being their naturally curious selves, all headed over to him to see what he was doing. Two children went behind the bench and squatted next to him, trying to figure out what he was looking at. The other three children scrambled up onto the bench, standing over Rigs and peering down at him, blocking his perfect view of me. Then, they all started asking him questions in their loud, childish voices.

“What are you doing?”

“Are you playing hide and seek? Who are you hiding from? Can I play?”

“Why are you hiding behind a bench? You look funny.”

“Is that a camera? Can I try?”

“Who are you? I’ve never seen you before.”

Rigs, surprised and obviously not a kid guy, lost his composure first and then his balance, falling backward while cradling his camera to keep it safe.

“Oh! The man fell down!”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha! You fell down!”

“Be nice! You don’t like falling down!”

“Why did you fall down? You’re a grown-up, and grown-ups don’t fall down.”

“We should ask him if he’s okay.”

“What if he’s a bad guy? Then we don’t care if he’s okay.”

“We should always be nice to everyone. Plus, our mommies are watching us, so we’re safe from bad guys.”

They all turned to make sure their moms were still watching, which they were. They were smiling and laughing amongst themselves. I, too, couldn’t help but laugh aloud as I watched everything going on. This was the most entertainment I’d had in a long time. Boy, I loved these kids.

“Hey, Mr. With the Camera, are you okay?”

“Do you have an owie?”

“My mom has princess Band-Aids. Do you need one?”

“Can I try your camera? It’s so big! Why does it have a big nose?”

“Do you want to play with us?”

They had all gathered around him in a circle, staring at him as they continued to bombard him with questions. Rigs had a terrified look on his face as he hugged his camera close to him, trying to keep the children’s grubby little fingers off his precious camera. He scrambled to his feet, still at a loss for words, then quickly turned and jogged away.

The children chased after him, but only briefly.

“Where are you going?”

“Are we playing tag now?”

“Hey, come back! You’re too fast!”

“Maybe we can play next time you come to the park! We’ll be here waiting for you!”

“Bye, bye, Mr. Camera Guy!”

Laughing and laughing, the moms called their children back to them to head home. They all waved at me and smiled. I couldn’t stop smiling and laughing as I waved back. “Thank you! You guys are great!”

I didn’t think Rigs would be coming to the park too often after this.

I finished up the rest of my meal in peace and enjoyed every bit of it. Then, I gathered up the rubbish, grabbed the treats for Paige and her kids, and headed toward the library. I couldn’t wait to tell Paige what had just happened.

Chapter Seventeen

PAIGE

I wished I could have been there to see the children bombarding Rigs with curiosity and questions as he hid behind a park bench. I was pretty sure it was most of the kids from my weekly read-aloud session. I could easily imagine each child and who was saying what. I did my best to keep my laughter to quiet snickers as Chet told me about his morning.

Shortly after Chet finished telling the story, my kids came tumbling into the library. When they reached us, Chet whipped out the treats he'd brought for them from behind his back. He got our favorite donuts from Mrs. Lawson. All three of us showered him with thank you's. It had been a while since we'd had our favorite treats from Mrs. Lawson's bakery, and they were heavenly!

I ushered my kids and Chet into the tiny break room to eat while Chet told the story again to the kids. I laughed hearing it a second time. I think it was more because I enjoyed watching Chet's expressions as he reenacted the children's actions and words. It had been a great idea getting our little community to support Chet in having a relaxing stay here.

That Long John hit the spot, and as I swallowed the last bite, I let out a contented sigh and fluttered my eyes shut for a second. When I opened them, Chet was staring at me with a gentle look. I flushed with embarrassment and jumped up.

"I need to get back to the front desk. Kids, finish up your snacks, tidy up, wash your

hands, and start your homework in the study areas.”

Barely a full minute after returning to the circulation desk, the wooden door creaked open slowly. Whoever was trying to enter was trying to do so quietly, but no one sneaks into my library! I stood there patiently, waiting to see who it would be, though I already had my suspicions.

It felt like an eternity before Rigs stuck just his head in the door, looking around. Not seeing me staring at him, he carefully slid into the library, quietly closing the door behind him. When he finally noticed me staring at him, he jumped nervously, and I couldn't help but laugh.

“Welcome to Hawthorn Hideaway Library. I'm Ms. Campbell, the town librarian. I believe you're Rigs, visiting our lovely town for a bit.”

Rigs seemed shocked that I knew who he was and that he hadn't managed to sneak in unnoticed, as I imagine he was used to doing, and he just stared at me.

“It's a small town, and news of anyone new spreads quickly. How may I help you today?”

Pulling himself together, he said, “Hello, Ms. Campbell. This is a lovely town you have here. I wanted to take a peek at your library and enjoy some cool air on this hot day. Maybe even do a little research while I'm here.”

“Anything in particular you're researching that I can help you with?”

Looking around at the library with absolutely no interest in our conversation, he replied, “No, thank you. I'll be fine. I know my way around libraries. Thanks.” Then, he took off towards the nonfiction area.

As I watched him walk away, I knew that his only plan was to “research” what Chet was doing, but I was required to give him the benefit of the doubt. So, I resolved to keep an eye on him. I watched as he moved stealthily through the aisles, his camera ready, looking around.

I lost track of Rigs after a while because I had to help a patron. When I finished, I looked around and saw Chet hanging out in the children’s section on the opposite side of the library, talking with my kids, who were lounging on the beanbags and doing their homework. The children’s section was Chet’s favorite part of the library, and I smiled, thinking about how my kids had suddenly stopped acting like they were too old for it. There was no sign of Rigs, so I got back to work.

A little while later, something told me to check on Rigs and Chet. I walked over toward the nonfiction section but couldn’t find him. I picked up my pace and searched the library. Finally, I found him crouched behind a short shelf in the junior section with his camera aimed at Chet and my children.

My blood boiled. This was a place of peace and respect, and I wouldn’t tolerate anyone disturbing it, especially not someone like Rigs. I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and made my way over to where Rigs was hiding, snapping photos of an unsuspecting Chet.

“Excuse me,” I said firmly, but not too loudly, mindful of the other patrons. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Rigs looked up, startled, his camera still in hand. He tried to give me a charming, disarming smile, but I wasn’t buying it. “Oh, just taking a few photos. I’m a journalist, you see.”

I stepped closer, my eyes narrowing. “This is a library, not a photography studio. We have rules here, and one of them is respecting the privacy and peace of our patrons.

Please put the camera away and leave.”

Rigs straightened up, clearly not expecting to be confronted. “I have a right to be here, just like anyone else.”

“Yes, you do have a right to be here, to use the library for research and study. However, definitely not with that camera aimed at unaware patrons,” I retorted, crossing my arms. “You’re disturbing the peace and violating our patrons’ privacy. This is a place for reading and learning, not for your harassment.”

He scoffed, clearly annoyed. “Look, lady, I’m just doing my job. I have a right to capture public figures in public spaces.”

I felt my temper flare, but I kept my voice steady. “And I have a right to enforce the rules of this library. Chet is here as a patron, just like anyone else. He deserves the same respect and privacy. Now, you can either put the camera away and leave, or I’ll have to call the sheriff.”

Rigs glared at me, clearly weighing his options. “You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

I took a step closer, my voice lowering but firm. “I’m making a big deal out of protecting the sanctity of this library and the well-being of everyone in it. If you don’t leave now, you’ll be the one making headlines, and not the kind you’re used to.”

The tension was thick, and for a moment, I wondered if he’d actually leave. But then, something in my expression must have convinced him that I wasn’t bluffing. He muttered something under his breath and reluctantly put the camera away.

“Fine. But this isn’t over,” he said, turning to leave. Rigs hesitated, glancing around as if hoping for support but finding none. The other patrons were now watching,

many with disapproving looks on their faces. Realizing he was outnumbered and out of place, Rigs slowly made his way to the door, leaving the library.

I followed him. “And don’t come back unless you’re here to use the library properly,” I added, my tone leaving no room for negotiation. I watched him go, making sure he was really gone before returning to my responsibilities.

As the door swung shut behind him, I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. I could feel the heat coming off my body—I was so angry. Taking a few deep breaths to calm down and finally starting to feel better, I turned back toward the library, only to see Chet standing there. He had watched the whole scene and now had a look of awe and admiration on his face.

“You okay?”

“Paige, that was incredible,” he said, his voice filled with genuine respect. “Thank you.”

I shrugged, trying to downplay it, but inside, I felt a rush of pride. “Just doing my job. This is a place for books and learning, not for being harassed by paparazzi.”

He smiled, and there was something in his eyes—something warm and appreciative that made my heart flutter. “I’ve never been protected like that before. I actually kind of liked it. You’re my hero, you know that?”

I laughed, feeling a bit embarrassed but also deeply touched. “Well, if it keeps the peace in here, I’m happy to help.”

As I walked back to the front desk, I could feel Chet’s eyes on me. Today, I stood up for my library and for him, and it felt like a small victory for both of us.

The rest of the day passed smoothly, with the peaceful atmosphere restored. Every now and then, I'd catch Chet looking my way, a smile playing on his lips. And in those moments, I felt a little stronger, a little more confident, knowing that I'd made a difference.

Chapter Eighteen

CHET

I sat on the floor of my old childhood room, surrounded by boxes of dusty memories, my mind swirling with thoughts and emotions. I had thought tackling this room would be a quick chore, but it was taking me much longer than expected with so many fun distractions.

A burst of color caught my eye from beneath a pile of comic books. I reached in and pulled out a deflated, but still intact, whoopie cushion adorned with a goofy cartoon face. The sight of it instantly brought a wide grin to my face, and I couldn't help but chuckle as a flood of memories washed over me.

I vividly recalled one summer when Brad and I were about ten years old. We had just discovered the endless entertainment that a simple whoopie cushion could provide, and we were eager to put it to use. Being the mischievous kids we were, we decided that our ultimate target should be none other than Grandpa Joe, the patriarch of the family and the man with the most infectious laugh I'd ever known.

Grandpa Joe was a stern-looking man on the outside, with his thick mustache and piercing gaze, but anyone who knew him understood that he was a big softie at heart. He loved a good joke and was always up for a laugh, especially if it involved his grandson. So, Brad and I concocted a plan to execute the perfect prank during Sunday dinner when the whole family gathered around the big oak table in the dining room.

That evening, as everyone bustled around preparing the meal, Brad and I snuck into

the dining room and carefully placed the inflated whoopie cushion on Grandpa Joe's chair, making sure it was perfectly concealed under the cushion. We could barely contain our giggles as we took our seats, eyes darting nervously as we awaited our unsuspecting victim.

When Grandpa Joe finally entered the room, carrying a steaming dish of his famous mashed potatoes, Brad and I exchanged an excited glance. He pulled out his chair, settled down with a satisfied sigh, and then—*PPPPPBBBBBBTTTTT*—the most glorious, thunderous fart noise echoed through the room.

For a split second, there was complete silence. Brad and I held our breath, eyes wide, unsure of how Grandpa Joe would react. Then, without missing a beat, Grandpa's eyes grew wide in mock surprise as he looked around and exclaimed, "Well, I guess those beans I had for lunch are coming back to haunt me!" The entire table erupted into laughter. Baba shook her head with a smile, and even Mom tried to stifle her giggles behind her napkin.

But Grandpa Joe wasn't done yet. With a twinkle in his eye, he shifted in his seat, causing another loud *brRRRTTT*, and added, "Looks like there's a whole symphony in there!" Tears streamed down our faces as we laughed uncontrollably, and soon enough, the whole room was caught up in the contagious joy of the moment.

After dinner, Grandpa Joe pulled Brad and me aside, his face serious but his eyes still sparkling. "You boys think you're pretty clever, huh?" he said, towering over us. We looked down, trying to hide our smiles, unsure if we were in trouble. Then he broke into a grin and ruffled our hair, saying, "That was a good one. Reminds me of something I would've done at your age. Just wait until I get you back!"

And he did get us back—a few days later, he swapped out the sugar in our cereal for salt, leading to some spectacular spit takes at the breakfast table. It became a running

game between us, each trying to outdo the other with harmless pranks and jokes that filled that summer with so much laughter and warmth.

Holding the old whoopie cushion now, I couldn't help but feel a pang of longing for those simple, joyful times. Even though Grandpa Joe was long gone, moments like these kept his spirit alive in my heart. He had taught me the importance of laughter, of not taking life too seriously, and of cherishing the time spent with loved ones.

I gave the whoopie cushion a little squeeze, and it emitted a faint, pitiful squeak. I laughed to myself, deciding to tuck it back into the box as a keepsake. Maybe one day, I'd get the chance to pass on the tradition and share a good laugh with my own kids or grandkids.

For now, though, I had this mess to clean up and new memories to make—hopefully ones that would make Grandpa Joe proud.

The next box I opened was filled with books. My favorite summer books! I had been wondering where all of these had disappeared to. Of course, the books then took me to thoughts of my favorite book lady and what had happened yesterday at the library.

I'd been in plenty of tough situations before, both on and off the field. I'd faced down opponents twice my size, dealt with aggressive reporters, and I'd navigated the cutthroat world of professional sports in general. But never, in all those years, had I had someone stand up for me the way Paige did yesterday.

The way she confronted Rigs was something I'd never forget. There she was, this seemingly tiny, quiet librarian, turning into a force of nature right before my eyes. She didn't hesitate, didn't back down for a second. She was calm, strong, and completely in control of the situation. The way she shut Rigs down—telling him to put his camera away and leave—was nothing short of incredible.

I had always been the one to handle things on my own. It's what I was used to, what I'd come to expect. I'd never needed anyone to come to my defense, and honestly, I didn't think anyone ever would. But Paige... she hadn't even thought twice. She saw what was happening, and she stepped in like it was the most natural thing in the world.

It wasn't just what she did, though; it was the way she did it. There was this quiet strength about her, a confidence that I couldn't help but admire. She hadn't raised her voice or made a scene, but the stern "don't mess with this librarian" look she gave Rigs, the way she spoke to him—it was clear she wasn't going to let him get away with anything. And it worked. Rigs, the guy who'd been a thorn in my side for years, actually backed down when confronted for the first time. All because of Paige.

I kept replaying the moment in my mind, the way she turned to me afterward, her eyes softening as she asked if I was okay. I'd never had someone come to my defense like that before. It was a feeling I wasn't used to—a mix of gratitude, respect, and something else, something deeper that I couldn't quite put into words.

Sitting there now, I realized just how much Paige meant to me. She wasn't just a friend, not just someone I'd been spending time with. She was someone who had shown me a different kind of strength, a kind of courage that didn't come from physical power but from a deep sense of right and wrong, of protecting those she cared about.

In that moment at the library, Paige became my hero. I'd never thought of a woman in that way before, and it was making me see her in a whole new light. She was fierce, compassionate, and unafraid to stand up for what was right. And that was something I admired more than I could say.

I had to do something special for her to express my gratitude. I had to find her lost jewelry. It was hard not to feel frustrated. I'd been searching for that lost jewelry for

almost a month now, but no matter how many places I dug or metal detectors I used, I'd come up empty-handed. The idea of making things right for Paige had been eating at me, and I was starting to wonder if I'd ever find it. Maybe something in this room would trigger the specific memory of where we hid that treasure, like the whoopie cushion just had with other memories.

I reached for another box. This one was filled with old toys, summer art projects, and bits of my past that I'd almost forgotten. I sifted through the contents, smiling at the sight of my old baseball glove and a few action figures I used to treasure. But as I dug deeper, something caught my eye—an old, weathered book that didn't seem to fit with the rest of the items.

I pulled it out, curious because it looked so familiar. It was a hardcover edition of **Treasure Island**, the pages yellowed with age. Now, memories started flooding back to me! I remembered reading this book over and over as a kid, imagining myself as a pirate on the high seas, searching for buried treasure. Brad and I carried this book with us and had so many adventures, just like in the book.

Oh! I remembered something! Brad and I, pretending to be pirates, had sneaked Paige's jewelry as our "treasure" and buried it somewhere we thought no one would ever find. I quickly flipped through the pages. Where was it?! In my urgency, something slipped out from between the pages and fell to the floor. It was a piece of paper, folded several times, the edges frayed. My heart skipped a beat as I picked it up and carefully unfolded it. Was it it?!

It was! It was THE map—an old, hand-drawn treasure map with familiar landmarks scrawled in a childish hand. Of course, the best place to hide our map would be in the book that inspired us to bury the treasure in the first place!

I looked closely at the map. Now, where did we bury that treasure? The map showed a spot deep in the woods nearby, a place I hadn't thought about in years. As I studied

the map, more memories started flooding back.

Brad and I had a secret hideout in the woods—a place where we used to escape to build forts and pretend we were pirates or explorers. We spent countless hours there, and it was our little world, away from everything. The hideout was hidden well, and we made sure no one else could find it. We even had a special name for it, though the memory of that name was fuzzy in my mind. Maybe Brad would remember.

As I stared at the map, trying to piece together the fragments of my memory, I noticed a few crude drawings of trees, a small stream, and what looked like a large boulder. It all felt so familiar, but the exact location was just out of reach in my mind. And then I saw it—a small "X" marked near the base of a tree, close to the boulder. Next to it, in faded pencil, were the words: "Pirate Treasure – Do Not Dig Here!" and beneath it, written in a different color and slightly neater handwriting: "Buried for Real Treasure."

Suddenly, it all started coming back. The tree was where we hid our most important treasures, and the boulder was our landmark. We used to bury things there—coins, toys, anything we deemed valuable. And one day, we decided to bury something really special—Paige's jewelry, which we had "borrowed" for our pirate game.

I couldn't believe I'd forgotten about this place so completely. The backyard was never where the real treasure was—it was always in the woods, near our secret hideout. The memories rushed back quickly now, but the exact spot was still a little vague. I could see the general area in my mind, but after all these years, the woods had probably changed. Trees grow, landscapes shift, and my memory wasn't as sharp as it used to be.

I was going to need some help finding the exact spot. I needed to borrow the metal detector from Mr. Saavedra again.

I carefully folded the map back up, my hands trembling with excitement. This was the clue I'd been missing—the key to finally finding that lost jewelry. I couldn't believe it had been hidden in my old room all this time, waiting for me to remember our secret hideout.

I grabbed my phone and quickly dialed Mr. Saavedra's number. When he picked up, I wasted no time explaining. "Mr. Saavedra, it's Chet. I've finally figured out where the treasure might be, but I need to borrow your metal detector again. May I, please? This time, I know I'm on the right track."

He chuckled on the other end of the line. "Well, Chet, sounds like you're getting closer. Stop by anytime to pick it up! Good luck, and I hope this time you find what you're looking for."

Next, I called Brad and made arrangements with him to meet up when he was done with work.

My heart pounded with anticipation. If this map was right, if the treasure was really where it said it was, then I might finally be able to make things right with Paige.

Chapter Nineteen

PAIGE

It was a warm, sunny afternoon, and I was out running errands with the kids. Brandon needed new shoes for PE; his feet were growing so fast that it seemed like he grew a whole size overnight! Meanwhile, Jenny had been begging to stop by the ice cream shop for almost two weeks, so I figured we could make a day of it. We had just finished up at the shoe store, and I felt pretty accomplished, managing to juggle both their demands without too much fuss.

As we headed down Main Street, Brandon and Jenny were walking a few steps ahead, chattering away about some new video game they were obsessed with. I was half-listening, half-lost in thought, when suddenly, Jenny stopped dead in her tracks.

“Mommy! Look!” she exclaimed, pointing excitedly across the street.

I followed her gaze and felt my stomach do a little flip. There, standing in front of the hardware store, was Chet. He was holding a bag of what looked like gardening supplies and chatting with Mr. Parker. He hadn’t noticed us yet, but the kids were already making a beeline straight toward him.

“Guys, wait—” I started to say, but it was too late. They were already across the street, calling his name.

“Chet! Hey, Chet!” Brandon shouted, waving his arms like he was flagging down a taxi.

I hurried after them, feeling a mix of excitement and mild panic. I hadn't seen Chet since that whole incident at the library, and while I had been replaying our conversations in my head ever since, I wasn't exactly prepared for a casual run-in, especially not with the kids in tow.

Chet turned at the sound of his name, and when he saw us, his face lit up with a smile. "Hey, you guys!" he called out, his voice warm and welcoming.

Jenny reached him first, practically bouncing on her toes. "What are you buying, Chet? Can we help?"

"Just picking up some supplies for the garden, and of course, you can help!" he said, holding up the bag. "What about you?"

"We're getting ice cream!" she announced proudly.

Brandon, not to be outdone, chimed in, "Yeah, and I got cool new red shoes for PE. Wanna see?"

"Sure, let's take a look," Chet said, crouching down as Brandon eagerly pulled the box out of the shopping bag.

As I finally caught up to them, slightly out of breath and feeling a little flustered, I managed a smile. "Hi, Chet. Didn't expect to run into you today."

"Paige," he said, standing up and giving me that easy smile that always made my heart skip a beat. "It's good to see you."

Suddenly, without warning, Brandon grabbed Chet's gardening bag, and Jenny pushed me into Chet's arms. I gasped and looked up into his handsome face, heart pounding and my breath taken from me again. What in the world were my kids

doing? Yet, I couldn't take my eyes off him, soaking in his kind and loving smile. Loving smile—did I really just think that? I started to blush and looked away.

Before I could say anything, Jenny suddenly blurted out, “Daddy, let's get ice cream!”

“I want ice cream too, Dad! Let's go!” Brandon added.

I carefully peeked behind Chet and saw Rigs headed straight for us. I quickly wrapped my arms around Chet's waist and looked up at him. I smiled and said, “I would love some ice cream too, my love.”

Oh my goodness, did I really just say that out loud?! It came out so easily and naturally. I couldn't fumble with my words now—Rigs was still within earshot.

Chet looked a little surprised at first but was grinning widely, enjoying every moment of what was happening. He had figured out Rigs was near before I did and played along very quickly. I felt his arms tighten around me.

Still looking at me, he said, “Will ice cream make my queen happy?”

I felt like I had lost my voice and my legs were barely supporting my weight, but I managed to squeak out a barely perceptible “yes” while I gratefully leaned against him.

“Well, we better go get some ice cream then.”

He leaned down and gave me the softest, gentlest kiss, and I smiled up at him, our eyes locked.

Jenny started giggling and clapping. Only then did I remember we weren't alone. I

looked down at Jenny, then over at Brandon, and both my children couldn't stop smiling.

Before I knew it, the kids were dragging us toward the ice cream shop. I followed, feeling a strange mix of awkwardness and excitement.

We reached the shop and all squeezed into a booth, the kids on one side, forcing me to sit next to Chet on the other.

“Did you see that? Rigs walked by without even one glance at you! Guess the idea of you being a family guy isn't even on his radar,” Brandon said.

Chet laughed out loud. “No doubt that's true. The public thinks they know me, but really they have no clue. They don't know that I love the library, especially children's books, or that I've always wanted to be a husband and a father and have an amazing family. I've just never had the opportunity to be with the right woman.”

Jenny was quietly grinning goofily at me, and I felt so embarrassed. I didn't know what to think, say, or do, so I just sat there quietly like an idiot.

Finally, Jenny spoke up. “I think you two make the perfect couple!”

My eyes almost popped out of my head! Out of all the things to say! I did my best to act nonchalant. “Jenny, Chet is a well-respected man with many gorgeous young women to choose from. This is all just an act so Chet won't be bothered by paparazzi and so he can feel a little more normal while here.”

Chet surprised me by quickly turning to me, all seriousness in his voice. “Paige, I have never met a woman as beautiful, smart, strong, and kind as you. Why wouldn't I want to be with someone as amazing as you?”

My mind went completely blank. I was pretty sure my mouth was hanging open in disbelief. I was shocked that a man finally saw the woman I wanted him to see, the woman I actually was, and seemed to appreciate it, maybe even love it. I turned away and saw both my kids grinning at me like clowns.

Sensing my complete inability to use words and respond, which was quite unlike me, Chet came to my rescue. “So, anyone up for some ice cream? What’s good here? My treat.”

Everyone was happy with their selections. Brandon went all out with a huge banana split, which was thrilling for him because I’d never have let him get that. Jenny got two scoops of cotton candy ice cream in a waffle cone, with sprinkles. Chet was apparently a chocolate fan, so for him, it was three scoops of double fudge chocolate chip ice cream, drizzled with chocolate syrup and chocolate sprinkles in a chocolate-dipped waffle cone. I had my favorite—French vanilla macadamia nut ice cream on top of a brownie, drizzled with caramel. Happiness all around.

As we started eating, Jenny suddenly got that mischievous look in her eye again—the one that always meant she was about to suggest something fun. Sure enough, she grinned and said, “Hey, let’s play ‘Would You Rather!’”

Brandon’s eyes lit up, and he nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah! That’s a great idea!”

Chet chuckled, wiping a bit of chocolate ice cream off his chin. “Alright, I’m in. Who’s going first?”

Jenny, of course, took the lead. “Okay, Chet, would you rather fight a hundred duck-sized horses or one horse-sized duck?”

Chet burst out laughing, nearly dropping his cone. “Wow, coming in hot with the tough questions! Let me think... I guess I’d rather take on the hundred duck-sized

horses. At least then I'd have a fighting chance. I could outrun them... I hope."

Brandon snickered. "But imagine all those tiny horses nibbling at your ankles. You'd be toast!"

Chet pretended to shudder. "Okay, now you're making me reconsider my choice. A horse-sized duck might just be too terrifying though. Imagine that beak!"

Jenny giggled, waving her spoon. "You could try to tame it! Ride it into battle!"

We were all giggling at the ridiculousness of it, and I couldn't help but join in. "Alright, Jenny, your turn. Would you rather have to eat only broccoli-flavored ice cream for the rest of your life, or never eat ice cream again?"

Jenny scrunched up her face in mock horror. "Ugh, broccoli ice cream? Gross! But I couldn't live without ice cream, and I do like broccoli as a vegetable. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, so I guess I'd have to go with the broccoli flavor."

Chet pretended to gag. "Brave choice, Jenny. You're tougher than I am—I think I'd just give up ice cream altogether."

We all laughed again, the sound filling the little shop and drawing a few amused glances from other customers. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so light, so free of worries. It felt like the whole world had faded away, and it was suddenly just the four of us, laughing over silly questions and melting ice cream.

Brandon took his turn next. "Okay, Mom, would you rather have spaghetti for hair or marshmallows for fingers?"

I nearly spit out my ice cream, laughing at the absurdity of it. "Oh no, I can't decide! I guess spaghetti for hair? At least I could eat it if I got hungry!"

Chet grinned, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “And you’d always have an excuse to carry around a jar of marinara sauce.”

Jenny clapped her hands, delighted with the mental image. “Mommy, you’d have to keep your hair away from Chet, or he might start eating it!”

I turned and looked at Chet, pretending to be terrified. He pretended to go for my hair and gobble it up. We all burst into laughter.

Jenny couldn’t help but answer this question too, “I’d choose marshmallow fingers! I’d never stop eating my fingernails. I love marshmallows!”

Brandon nodded sagely. “You’d end up with little nubs for fingers.”

Chet grinned, clearly enjoying the chaos. “Plus, you’d be super popular at campfires. ‘Hey, who wants s’mores? Just bring Jenny along!’”

We all dissolved into laughter again, and I felt a warm glow in my chest. It wasn’t just the ice cream or the game—it was the way Chet was fitting so easily into this moment, into our lives. The kids adored him, and I could see why. He was fun, easygoing, and he treated them with a kind of respect that not all adults did.

“My turn. Gotta think of a hard one for Brandon. Would you rather have two long, front teeth like a beaver or no teeth at all?”

“Mom, that’s not a fair question!”

Chet looked confused, so Brandon explained, “Before braces, my front two teeth stuck out a lot, and some mean kids teased me and called me bucky tooth beaver. Mom also knows I LOVE steak, and there is no way I could eat it with no teeth.”

My eyes widened, and I felt horrible for choosing that question. “Oh, Brandon, I didn’t know kids called you that! I knew your teeth bothered you, but I always thought you looked adorable.”

“It’s okay, Mom. I love my teeth now, and I’d have to choose steak over bad memories because all steaks make great memories for me!” he said, smiling, showing off his handsome smile.

The mood shifted for a brief moment, but Brandon brought back the positive mood again. I loved that kid.

As the game continued, the questions got sillier and the laughter louder. At one point, Chet turned to me with that playful glint in his eye. “Alright, Paige, your turn. Would you rather be forced to sing instead of talk or dance everywhere you go?”

I tried to keep a straight face as I pretended to think it over, tapping my chin. “Oh, definitely dancing everywhere. It would keep me in great shape, and I could make any situation ten times more dramatic with a little twirl.”

Jenny jumped in, “Yes, Mommy! You could twirl down the grocery aisles, spin through the post office, pirouette to the mailbox!”

Then Brandon added, “And if someone asks you for directions, you could just dance out the route.”

Chet nodded seriously but with a grin. “You know, Paige, I think you might be onto something. The dancing librarian. You’d be the most memorable person in town.”

I gave him a mock curtsy, trying to suppress my laughter. “Thank you, thank you. I do aim to entertain.”

Chet clapped and laughed, and for a moment, I was struck by how easy it was to be myself around him. There was no need to put up walls or pretend to be anything other than who I was.

By the time we finished our ice cream, my sides hurt from laughing so much. We'd gone through dozens of ridiculous "Would You Rather" scenarios, each one funnier than the last. As we got up to leave, the kids were still giggling and replaying their favorite moments.

Chet walked us to the door, and as we stepped outside into the sunshine, I felt a sense of contentment that I hadn't felt in a long time. Today had been unexpected, unplanned, but somehow, it was exactly what I needed.

Chet looked at me, his smile soft and genuine, and I realized that something more had shifted between us today. I couldn't help but feel a little flutter in my chest. "Thanks for the ice cream and for playing along," I said, genuinely meaning it. "The kids had a blast, and so did I."

"Anytime," he replied, his voice full of sincerity. "I always have a great time with you and your kids. You've got great kids, Paige."

Maybe it was the way he joined in the game without hesitation or the way he made the kids laugh so effortlessly, but there was a warmth there that wasn't quite as clear before. Whatever it was, I was glad we'd run into him today. As soon as we said our goodbyes, I found myself already thinking about the next time I would see him.

I glanced back at Chet as we walked away, and he was still standing there with that same smile. I realized that today was more than just fun—I was starting to see what it might be like to have Chet in our lives permanently, not just as a friend, but as something more. The thought made me smile.

Chapter Twenty

CHET

As I pulled up to the edge of the woods, the sun began to dip low in the sky, casting long shadows across the familiar landscape. Brad was already there, leaning against his truck with a grin on his face, holding the metal detector Mr. Saavedra had been gracious enough to lend us, yet again.

“Well, well,” Brad said with a smirk as I hopped out of my car. “Look who finally decided to remember where we buried our pirate treasure.”

I chuckled, holding up the old, hand-drawn map I’d found in my childhood room. “Hey, cut me some slack. It’s been what, twenty years? I’m surprised I remembered anything at all!”

Brad laughed, clapping me on the shoulder. “Fair point. But I’ll give it to you, finding this map was a stroke of genius. I had completely forgotten about this place.”

I looked down at the map, tracing the childish lines I had drawn so many years ago. “Yeah, me too. Until I saw this thing, I’d forgotten all about our secret hideout... and all the trouble we used to get into back here.”

Brad snorted. “Trouble? You mean like when we tried to dig a tunnel to China and ended up stuck in the mud for three hours?”

I burst out laughing. “Oh man, I forgot about that! Grandpa Joe had to come rescue

us. He was probably so worried because we had missed lunch, which was NOT normal. And then he gave us that whole speech about how if we wanted to dig tunnels, we should've started in our own backyard."

"Yeah, because that would've been so much better—your grandmother would have killed us for digging up her yard and garden!" Brad grinned at the thought. "Grandpa Joe was always the one to encourage our wild ideas. Remember when he helped us rig up that 'pirate flag' from his old fishing gear?"

I nodded, smiling at the memory. We'd been obsessed with pirates that summer, and Grandpa Joe, always game for a good laugh, had brought out his old tackle box and helped us make a pirate flag out of an old bed sheet and some of his fishing rods. We'd felt invincible, like real explorers staking our claims.

"Those were the days," I said, more to myself than to Brad. "Everything seemed so simple back then. Our biggest worry was whether our 'fort' would hold up in the next rainstorm."

Brad's grin faded a little, replaced by a thoughtful expression. "Yeah, simpler times. Now, here we are, two grown men searching for jewelry we stole from my sister twenty years ago. Life comes full circle, huh?"

I laughed, shaking my head. "Borrowed, not stole! We were planning to give it back, right? If you'd told me back then that we'd be doing this, I would've said you were crazy. But here we are. I guess some things never change."

Brad nodded, holding up the metal detector. "Ready to find that treasure?"

"Let's do it," I said, feeling a spark of excitement.

We started making our way into the woods, following the map's rough directions.

The sounds of the forest around us—the rustling leaves, the chirping of crickets, the distant hoot of an owl—brought back more memories of our childhood adventures. I could almost hear the echoes of our young voices, shouting out orders and pretending to be lost pirates on the hunt for gold.

After a bit of searching, we came across the spot I thought might be marked on the map—a clearing with a few old, twisted trees and a large boulder that looked vaguely familiar. Brad and I exchanged a look, both of us feeling the same rush of nostalgia.

“This is it,” I said, pointing to a spot near the boulder. “I’m pretty sure this is where we buried it.”

Brad nodded, turning on the metal detector. He swept it slowly back and forth, listening for any telltale beeps. We were quiet for a few minutes, both of us focused on the task, but also lost in our own thoughts.

Then, out of nowhere, Brad started laughing. “Remember when we convinced that nosey, irritating girl—what was her name, Cathy, Catrina, Cynthia? She moved away when we were in middle school. We convinced her that this place was haunted by the ghost of ‘Captain No-Beard’?”

I grinned, shaking my head. “Oh man, I do! I totally forgot her name though. She wouldn’t come near these woods for months. And then she got her revenge by hiding behind the shed and jumping out at us with that old rubber spider. Scared us half to death.”

Brad chuckled. “Yeah, we made her swear never to tell anyone she scared us like that. She was craftier than we gave her credit for.”

We continued scanning the area, and suddenly, the metal detector started beeping loudly. Brad and I exchanged an excited look.

“This could be it,” he said, his voice filled with anticipation.

We started digging, the dirt giving way easily under our shovels. As we dug deeper, my mind drifted back to all the times we’d dug holes here as kids, convinced we’d find buried treasure, even when all we really found were old nails and rusty cans.

And then, with a soft clunk, my shovel hit something solid. Brad and I froze, and for a moment, we just looked at each other, like we couldn’t quite believe it.

“Did you hear that?” Brad whispered, even though there was no reason to whisper because we were literally all alone in the woods.

“Yeah,” I said, my heart pounding. “I think... I think we found it.”

We dug a little more carefully after that, and soon, we uncovered a small, rusted tin box, barely bigger than a cigar box. My hands were shaking as I reached down and lifted the small box out of the hole.

“This is it,” I said, almost in disbelief. “This was our treasure.”

Brad leaned over, peering at the box. “Man, I can’t believe it’s still here. After all these years...”

I slowly pried the lid open, and inside, I saw the familiar glint of gold. Paige’s jewelry, wrapped in a faded bandana, was still intact. I felt a wave of relief and triumph wash over me. We’d actually found it. After all this time, we’d done it!

Brad grinned, clapping me on the back. “Looks like we finally struck gold, partner.”

I laughed, shaking my head in disbelief. “Yeah, but it’s not about the jewelry, is it? It’s about the memories... the good, the bad, and the ridiculous.”

Brad nodded, his expression softening. “Yeah, it really is. This place, this town... it’s been good to us. And maybe it’s time we start being good to it.”

I looked at the jewelry in my hand, thinking about Paige and how much this jewelry meant to her. “Yeah, I think you’re right, Brad.”

As we packed up the tin box and headed back toward the trucks, I felt lighter, freer somehow. We may have found some old treasure tonight, but my heart told me something of greater value was about to happen.

“I’m gonna go wash up and head over to Paige’s afterward. Wanna come?”

“Nah, I think this is something you should do alone.” He winked at me. “I really like the two of you together. Good luck!” He grinned, jumped in his truck, and took off.

I stared, dumbfounded, as his truck drove away. Clearly, my feelings for her were obvious if Brad had figured it out. I wondered if she might feel something for me too. I hoped she would.

After showering, I made my way to Paige’s house, finally finding myself standing outside her front door with the small tin box of her jewelry in my hands. My heart was pounding, I was so nervous, and I couldn’t understand why when I knew I had nothing to be nervous about. Surely, she would be excited to get her jewelry back.

I rang the doorbell and waited. It felt like forever before the door started to open slowly...

Chapter Twenty-One

PAIGE

When the doorbell rang, it cut sharply through the quiet of the early evening. I was in the kitchen, finishing dinner, and the kids were upstairs working on their homework. I glanced at the clock—who would be stopping by at this time of day?

I walked over to the door, wiping my wet hands on my jeans, and pulled it open. My heart did a little flip when I saw who was standing there. It was Chet, grinning like a kid who'd just found a secret stash of candy.

“Hey, Paige,” he said, his voice shy, warm, and slightly breathless, like he'd been running. “Got a minute?”

I blinked, trying to play it cool, even though my pulse had quickened at the sight of him. “Of course. What's up?”

He was holding something behind his back, and I could see the gleam in his eyes—a mixture of excitement and maybe a little mischief. He shifted slightly, and I caught a glimpse of a dirt-stained tin box peeking out from behind him.

“What's that?” I asked, raising an eyebrow, trying to peek around him.

Chet grinned wider and stepped forward, bringing the box into full view. “I've got a bit of a surprise,” he said, sounding almost giddy. “Mind if I come in?”

I stepped aside, holding the door open, curiosity getting the better of me. “Sure, come on in.”

He walked past me into the living room, and I followed him, my mind racing with possibilities. Chet set the tin box down on the coffee table, and I couldn’t help but notice the dirt and rust clinging to the edges. He looked at me with a playful grin and tapped the lid.

“Remember the jewelry Brad and I borrowed from you... oh, twenty years ago?” he asked, his tone light, but his eyes watching my reaction carefully.

I crossed my arms, solemnness coming over me. “You mean the jewelry you stole from me? The jewelry that the two of you buried and lost?”

Chet laughed nervously, a deep, genuine sound that made my stomach flutter. “Yeah, that’s the stuff. Well, Brad and I went on a little treasure hunt today with an old map I found in my *Treasure Island* book, and...” He lifted the lid of the tin box with a flourish, like a magician revealing his trick. Inside, I saw the familiar glint of gold and silver, wrapped in a faded, dirt-stained bandana.

I gasped, my hands flying to my mouth. “Oh my gosh... is that...?”

“It’s all there,” he said softly, his smile becoming softer, more sincere. “The necklace, the earrings... everything. We found it.”

“I can’t believe you found it,” I whispered, looking up at him. “I’d given up hope decades ago.”

Chet shrugged, but his eyes were shining with excitement. “Honestly, so had I. But then I found this old map, and it led us to the spot where Brad and I buried it... near our old hideout in the woods.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Of course it was in the woods. You two spent most of your summers out there.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, we did. I’m just glad we finally remembered where we hid it. I’ve been feeling like a terrible pirate all these years.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Well, you’re certainly making up for it now. I... I don’t know what to say, Chet. Thank you.”

As I stood there, staring at the familiar jewelry in Chet's hands, my breath caught in my throat. I reached out and gently picked up the gold necklace, the chain delicate and thin, the small pendant gleaming faintly in the light. For a moment, I was transported to another time.

I was seven years old, sitting on my grandmother's floral-patterned couch, my feet not quite touching the floor. The room smelled of lavender and old books, a scent that had always felt like a warm hug. Grandma sat beside me, her hands wrinkled but still so gentle as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small, velvet pouch.

“Paige,” she said softly, her eyes twinkling with that familiar mix of mischief and wisdom. “I have something special for you.”

I leaned in closer, my heart fluttering with curiosity. “What is it, Grandma?”

She smiled, pulling out the gold necklace, the pendant catching the sunlight streaming in through the window. “This belonged to my mother,” she said, her voice warm and full of emotion. “And now, I want you to have it.”

I remembered the way I gasped, my young fingers reaching out tentatively to touch the delicate piece of jewelry. “It’s so pretty,” I whispered, my eyes wide with awe.

Grandma chuckled softly. “It is, isn’t it? But it’s not just about how it looks, Paige. This necklace has been passed down through the women in our family for generations. It’s a symbol of strength, love, and the connection we all share, even when we’re far apart. Whenever you wear it, I want you to remember that you’re never alone. You’re a part of something bigger, something beautiful.”

I remembered the way she gently clasped the necklace around my neck, her fingers soft against my skin. She kissed the top of my head and whispered, “Always know that you are loved, Paige. Always.”

I blinked, and just like that, I was back in my living room, the sound of Chet’s soft breathing bringing me back to the present. I realized I was holding the necklace so tightly my knuckles had turned white. There was a sting in my eyes, and I felt a tear slipping down my cheek before I could stop it.

“Paige?” Chet’s voice was gentle, concerned. “Are you okay?”

I swallowed hard, trying to regain my composure, but the flood of emotions made it difficult. “I’m fine,” I managed, though my voice was thick with tears. “I just... I thought I’d never see this again. Grandma gave this to me to remind me that I am always loved. I had forgotten.”

Chet’s expression softened even more, impossibly soft now, and he took a small step closer, his voice quiet. “I didn’t know it meant so much to you. I’m so sorry for taking it back then... for everything.”

I shook my head, brushing away another tear with the back of my hand. “You didn’t know. We were just kids. But this... this necklace, it was my grandmother’s. She gave it to me just before she passed. It was like... like her way of keeping us connected, even after she was gone.”

I saw a flicker of something deep in his eyes—understanding, maybe. Compassion. “I wish I’d known. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been, losing something that meant so much.”

I nodded, still staring at the necklace, remembering the way it felt around my neck, the way Grandma’s voice sounded so full of love. “It was... it was like losing a piece of her all over again.”

Chet reached out, his hand hovering near mine as if he wanted to touch me but wasn’t quite sure whether I’d allow it. “I’m so glad we found it, Paige. I can’t make up for all those years, but... I hope this brings some comfort.”

I looked up at him, my vision blurred with tears, and managed a small smile. “It does, Chet. More than you know.”

There was a moment of silence, a thick, emotional pause where everything felt both heavy and light at the same time. Then, with a deep breath, I unclasped the necklace and, for the first time in so many years, placed it around my neck. The weight of it was comforting, familiar, like a warm hug from the past.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice steadier now. “Thank you for finding this, for bringing it back to me.”

Chet smiled, a mixture of relief and something else—something warmer, deeper. “I’m just glad I could help, Paige. And... I’m glad it’s back where it belongs.”

I touched the pendant lightly, feeling the cool metal against my skin, and felt a rush of emotions—grief for what I lost, gratitude for what I’d regained, and a strange, fluttering sense of hope for what might still be.

“And maybe...” He hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words. “Maybe

this shows you that I'm not the same kid who stole your jewelry all those years ago."

There was something in his voice, a vulnerability that tugged at my heart. I met his eyes, feeling a strange mix of emotions—gratitude, affection, and something more that I couldn't quite name.

"I think you've more than proved that, Chet," I said softly, setting the other jewelry back in the box. "You've done more than enough."

He smiled, relief washing over his face. "Good. Because I was worried you might still hold a grudge."

I laughed again, the tension melting away. I stepped toward him, inches away, looked up, grabbed his shirt to pull him in close, and gave him a long kiss, smack on his lips. "Well, I might... if you don't stay for dinner. The kids would love to hear all about your pirate adventures."

Chet grinned, wrapped his arms around me, pulling me in closer, and kissed me back. His eyes were bright. "Dinner sounds great. But only if I get to tell them about the time Brad and I tried to dig a tunnel to China."

I rolled my eyes playfully, kissing him again. "Oh, they'd love that. Come on, let's go. I'll set an extra place at the table."

We headed to the kitchen, and I couldn't help but feel a little lighter, a little more at ease. The past felt a bit closer, but in a good way—like a bridge between who we were and who we are now. And as Chet followed me, smiling like he'd just won the lottery, I realized that maybe this was the beginning of something new, something I hadn't even known I was looking for.

Chapter Twenty-Two

CHET

I was standing in the doorway of the hardware store, chatting with Mr. Parker about the garden hose that he swore was “unbreakable,” when I caught a glimpse of Rigs out of the corner of my eye. I was actually really impressed that he hadn’t been much of a bother to me recently, thanks to Hawthorn Hideaway’s help.

Rigs was lurking across the street, trying to blend in with a group of tourists, but his oversized camera and that telltale baseball cap made him stick out like a sore thumb. Seeing him like that made me wonder if he had a life other than mine.

I nodded to Mr. Parker, who gave me a wink. “Looks like our friend is back,” he said in a low voice.

“Yeah,” I muttered, trying to hide my annoyance. “Think he’ll ever figure out how to blend in well enough to get the shot he’s after?”

Mr. Parker grinned. “Not if we’ve got anything to say about it.”

He gave me a little nod, and I followed his gaze to see Mrs. Lawson already stepping into action. She sauntered out of her bakery shop carrying a tray full of fresh donuts. I could see her aiming straight for Rigs. She crossed the street and, with the sweetest smile, offered him a donut.

“Hey there, fella!” she said loudly, drawing everyone’s attention her way, her voice

dripping with small-town hospitality. “Would you like to try one of my famous maple-glazed donuts? They’re fresh out of the oven!”

Rigs, caught off guard, tried to politely decline, but Mrs. Lawson wasn’t having any of it. She practically shoved the tray under his nose, blocking his view of me entirely. “Oh, come on now, just a taste! You won’t regret it!”

Meanwhile, Mr. Ramirez, in his fish-stained white apron, and a few other shop owners were moving into position like a well-coordinated team. I saw Mrs. Carter from the flower shop discreetly setting up a display of flower pots right in front of where Rigs was trying to move. Mr. Ramirez stepped out with a delivery cart, “accidentally” parking it right in front of Rigs’ line of sight.

“Sorry, buddy!” Mr. Ramirez called out, grinning like a fox. “Gotta get these deliveries out, you know how it is!”

Rigs tried to sidestep, but a group of kids on bikes swooped in, riding circles around him, laughing and ringing their bells. Timmy, the ringleader of the group, shouted out, “Hey, mister, wanna race?” He knew exactly what he was doing, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

Rigs tried to move again, frustration evident on his face, but now old Mrs. Jenkins, a good friend of Baba’s, was on the scene, slowly crossing the street with her walker. She was moving at a snail’s pace, and she shot Rigs a cheeky grin. “Oh, am I in your way, dear? I’m just getting to my bridge game. You don’t mind, do you?”

Rigs’ face was getting redder by the minute. He shifted, trying to find another angle, but everywhere he turned, there was another “coincidence” blocking his view. Mr. Thompson, the local handyman, suddenly appeared with a ladder, right in front of where Rigs was aiming his camera.

“Just gotta fix this awning real quick,” Mr. Thompson said loudly, setting the ladder up with exaggerated care. “Safety first, you know!”

By now, I was trying hard not to laugh. It was like a coordinated dance of chaos, everyone doing their part to keep Rigs from getting his prized photo. I spotted April, Paige’s friend from the local newspaper, snapping pictures of Rigs as he flailed about, trying to dodge around the obstacles the townsfolk kept putting in his way. She was grinning like a cat with a mouse, clearly enjoying turning the tables on him.

Rigs finally seemed to reach his breaking point. He darted down a side street, hoping to sneak around, but he didn’t realize he was heading straight into the farmer’s market, which was packed with people that day. Before he knew it, he was surrounded by vendors calling out their wares, shoppers moving in every direction, and, of course, a few strategically placed townspeople who just happened to be in his way at every turn.

Auntie Pam, who got into jam-making in her retirement and had a jam table at the market, spotted him and called out with her loud teacher voice. “Hey, you! Care for a taste of our homemade strawberry preserves? You look like a man who needs a little sweetness in his life!”

Rigs looked like he was about to scream, but he knew better than to cause a scene. Instead, he gritted his teeth, trying to keep his cool, and pushed through the crowd, clearly determined to get his shot. But every time he raised his camera, someone else stepped in front of him, waved a flyer in his face, or started a loud conversation right next to him.

It was like watching a game of Whack-a-Mole, but instead of moles, it was all these good-hearted townsfolk popping up to block his every move. And honestly? It was kind of beautiful.

I leaned back against the hardware store's wall, arms crossed, enjoying the show with Mr. Parker. Rigs was getting more and more frantic, his face flushed, sweat beading on his forehead. I could see the moment he realized he wasn't going to win today. Not against this town. Not against these people.

With a final look of exasperation, defeated, Rigs threw up his hands. He didn't even bother to take one last shot. As Rigs made his way back to his car, I could see the frustration practically radiating off of him. His face was flushed, his movements were jerky, and he was muttering angrily under his breath. I was too far away to hear what he was saying, but I noticed Mrs. Jenkins, who was still nearby with her walker, pause and tilt her head, clearly catching something.

She raised an eyebrow, her expression a mix of curiosity and disapproval, and waited until Rigs was out of earshot before turning and making her way over to me. She moved with surprising speed for someone with a walker, and I straightened up, sensing that she had something to say.

"Chet, dear," she said as she got closer, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "You're not gonna believe what that man just muttered on his way out."

I couldn't help but grin. "Oh, yeah? What did he say?"

Mrs. Jenkins leaned in, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "He said, 'This place is a freakin' circus. I swear, this whole town is in on some big, weird secret.'"

I burst out laughing, the sound echoing down the street. "Really? A big, weird secret?"

Mrs. Jenkins nodded, chuckling herself. "Oh, yes! And then he said, 'I should've stayed in New York. At least there, people mind their own business.'"

I shook my head, still laughing. “Well, he’s not wrong about the circus part. We do know how to put on an entertaining show.”

She patted my arm, her smile widening. “I believe you won’t have to deal with paparazzi for the rest of your stay here. You know, Chet, it just goes to show—we may be a small town, but we protect our own. And anyone who messes with one of us... well, they find out pretty quick they’re up against all of us.”

I felt a rush of warmth at her words, and I nodded. “I’m starting to see that. Thanks, Mrs. Jenkins.”

She winked at me. “Don’t mention it, dear. Just glad we could help send that pest packing.”

As she turned and headed back toward the sidewalk, I watched her go, still smiling. The idea of this town having a “big, weird secret” made me chuckle. Maybe the real secret was just how strong and tight-knit this community was—something that people like Rigs would never understand.

And as I thought about it, I felt even more grateful to be there, surrounded by these people who had welcomed me in, quirks and all. It was the kind of secret I was happy to be a part of.

As Rigs peeled out of town, I heard a cheer go up from the gathered crowd. Mrs. Lawson actually did a little victory dance, and Mr. Parker gave me a thumbs-up from across the street. I couldn’t help but laugh, shaking my head in amazement. These people—they didn’t have to help me, but they did. They chose to.

I felt a rush of gratitude, warmth spreading through me. I had always thought of myself as a loner, someone who didn’t need much from anyone. But today, I realized just how lucky I was to be there, surrounded by people who loved me and had my

back.

April walked over, still grinning. “Looks like you’re officially one of us now, Chet.”

“Yeah,” I said, my smile widening. “I think I might actually like that.”

And as I watched Rigs’ car disappear over the horizon, I felt a sense of peace, like a weight had been lifted. He was gone, and I was still here, in this town that had started to feel more like home than anywhere I had ever been.

Chapter Twenty-Three

PAIGE

I was behind the circulation desk, checking in a stack of newly returned books, when the library door swung open with a burst of energy that made me look up. It was Chet, and he was practically bouncing as he came in, his face lit up with a grin so wide it could have powered the town's Christmas lights.

"Hey, Paige!" he called out, not bothering to keep his voice down in the usual hushed library tones. I couldn't help but smile back; his enthusiasm was infectious.

"Hey, Chet," I replied, a little flustered at seeing him this excited. "What's going on? You look like you just won the lottery."

He laughed, running a hand through his hair. "Better. Much better. Rigs is gone! He packed up and left town this morning!"

The whole library cheered, and I didn't bother shushing anyone because this was a community win. In good spirits, everyone went back to what they were working on.

I felt a rush of relief so strong it almost knocked me off my feet. "Are you serious?"

"Completely serious," he said, nodding. "The whole town banded together today, and I guess he finally realized he wasn't going to get the photos he wanted. Mrs. Jenkins overheard him muttering about how 'this place is a freakin' circus' and that he should've stayed in New York where people mind their own business."

I burst out laughing, unable to help myself. “He really said that?”

Chet nodded, chuckling. “Yep. He was convinced we’re all in on some ‘big, weird secret.’”

I shook my head, still smiling. “Well, maybe we are. Maybe the secret is that we actually care about each other around here.”

His grin softened into something warmer, and he looked at me in that way he did, like he was seeing right into me. “I think you might be right, Paige. And I’m glad I get to be part of it.”

I felt a blush creep up my neck, grateful for the cover of the desk between us. “I’m glad too, Chet. Really.”

There was a pause, a comfortable silence between us that felt charged with something unspoken. He was still leaning against the counter, looking at me with that mix of humor and sincerity that always made my heart do a little flip. Oh, I wanted to kiss him! But I was at work, and I had my professional hat on.

“So,” he said finally, breaking the silence but keeping his tone light, “what’s next on your list for today? Any plans after you finish conquering the world of books?”

I laughed, brushing a strand of hair behind my ear, noticing that I’d been letting my hair down more lately. “Oh, you know, the usual. Processing books, shelving, making sure no one sneaks in and tries to hold a rock concert in the reading room.”

He grinned. “Sounds like a tough job, but I think you’re up to the challenge.”

I bit my lip, feeling that familiar flutter of nerves and excitement. “Well, it helps when I have people who’ve got my back.”

He leaned in a little closer, his voice softening. “Always, Paige. You know that.”

There was a moment where everything felt suspended, like the world was holding its breath. My heart beat a little faster, my palms suddenly clammy. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen next, but there was an energy in the air, something between us that had been building for weeks.

And then, before I could second-guess myself, I heard my own voice. “Do you... maybe want to grab dinner or something? To celebrate?”

He looked right at me and gave me that smile that made my knees go weak. “I would love to celebrate with you with a dinner date.” He winked.

I was so grateful the circulation desk was holding me up!

Then Chet’s grin widened. “But before our special celebration,” I saw a spark of excitement in his eyes. “I think we should throw a party, tonight, for the whole town. I’ve never before been able to shake Rigs or any paparazzi off my tail. My gratitude is greater than I can express in just words.”

The idea was so spontaneous, so wonderfully ridiculous, that I found myself nodding before I even thought about it. “You know, that’s actually not a bad idea. The whole town worked together to get rid of that guy. It seems only fair to celebrate it together.”

Chet clapped his hands together, looking like a kid on Christmas morning. “Alright, then. Let’s make it happen! We can have it right here, in the library!”

I blinked, taken aback. “In the library?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Why not? It’s the perfect spot. You’re always saying

this place is about bringing the community together, right? Let's do it—music, food, the whole thing.”

I glanced around at the rows of books and the reading nooks, imagining them transformed into a lively party space. It was crazy, but the more I thought about it, the more it felt... perfect.

“Alright,” I said, feeling a surge of excitement. “Let's do it. I'll make some calls, and we'll get this thing rolling.”

Chet grinned, pulling out his phone. “I'll spread the word. This is going to be the best party Hawthorn Hideaway has ever seen.”

****Later That Evening...****

The library was buzzing with energy like it had never had before. The quiet rule had been happily lifted for this special occasion. Mr. Thompson and Mr. Parker helped string lights crisscross overhead, giving the place a warm, festive glow. Mrs. Carter brought flowers that filled the library with a lovely scent. Our small local band set up in the children's corner, playing an upbeat tune, and the sound of laughter filled the library. The only thing that still made it feel like a library was the comfortable feeling that anyone belonged here. I loved it!

Tables were piled high by the circulation desk, away from the book stacks, with homemade cookies, cakes, and food from every genre you could imagine. Just glancing at the food, I saw fried chicken, bacon-wrapped hotdogs, baked spaghetti, casserole, lasagna, ham pinwheels, fruit and veggie salads, and so much more. Mrs. Lawson really went all out with her yummy treats. There was something to eat for everyone! Happiness truly was sharing good food with good friends.

People started pouring in—my family, my mom, Brad, Olivia, Lexi, Mr. Saavedra,

Ms. Smith, Mr. Ramirez, Mrs. Jenkins, Timmy and his bike gang, everyone with their families, and so many more. April arrived with her camera, all ready to capture the good news for the local newspaper. Even Sheriff Daniels, in his dress uniform, looked more relaxed than I had ever seen him. The whole town seemed to be there, chatting, laughing, and enjoying themselves.

I couldn't believe how quickly everyone got on board. Within hours of the idea, word had spread like wildfire. People showed up with dishes, decorations, and smiles, as if they had been waiting for an excuse to throw a party all along.

Chet appeared by my side, holding two glasses of lemonade. "Look at this place, Paige," he said, handing me a glass. "It's like a whole new world in here."

I smiled, feeling a rush of pride and happiness. "It is. I've never seen the library like this. It's... perfect. I always imagined something like this but didn't know exactly how to do it, and you helped me pull it off. Thank you."

He raised his glass. "To the best librarian in town, who knows how to throw one heck of a party."

I laughed, clinking my glass against his. "And to the guy who inspired it. Thank you, Chet. This was a brilliant idea."

Just then, Jenny and Brandon ran up, their faces flushed with excitement. "Mom! They're setting up a karaoke machine!"

Jenny squealed. "You have to sing with us!"

I laughed, shaking my head. "Oh, no, I don't think so..."

But Chet jumped in, grinning. "Come on, Paige, you've got to! It's part of the

celebration!”

The kids started chanting, “Sing, sing, sing!” and soon, others joined in, clapping and calling out. I couldn’t help but laugh, feeling a little embarrassed but also exhilarated by the atmosphere.

“Alright, alright,” I said, throwing my hands up in surrender. “But only if Chet sings with me!”

The crowd cheered louder, and Chet’s grin widened. “You’re on,” he said. “But don’t blame me if I clear the room.”

We made our way to the makeshift stage, the room buzzing with anticipation. The music started, and we dove into a cheesy duet that had everyone laughing and clapping along. I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt this free, this alive.

As the song ended, the crowd erupted into applause, and I couldn’t stop smiling. I glanced over at Chet, who looked as happy as I felt, and suddenly I knew—this was where I was supposed to be. Right here, in this moment, surrounded by my community, my friends... and maybe something more.

We stepped out of the karaoke spotlight and let the next singer take the stage. Chet leaned in, his voice warm in my ear. “You’ve got a pretty good voice, Paige.”

I laughed, nudging him with my shoulder. “You’re not so bad yourself, Chet.”

He grinned, pulling me in close. “The night is still young, you know.”

I nodded, feeling a surge of excitement. I did my best to not let my thoughts stray too far from the party. “Yes, it is. I forgot to tell you that Brandon and Jenny were put in charge of a party game. I wonder what they came up with?”

We looked at each other and grinned, knowing we were in for a big treat soon.

The party was in full swing, and the library was buzzing with life. Everywhere I looked, people were chatting, laughing, and dancing. I noticed something going on over by the biography section.

Jenny and Brandon were huddled together, their heads close as they whispered conspiratorially. That look on their faces... I knew it well. It was the same one they got right before they were up to some kind of mischief. I raised an eyebrow, knowing it was going to happen any moment now.

Seconds later, Jenny jumped up and announced loudly, “Everyone! Attention, please!” She stood on a chair, waving her arms dramatically. Brandon was beside her, trying to look serious but failing miserably—he was clearly excited about whatever they had cooked up. I was amazed how much Jenny had come out of her shell this spring with Chet here. Mommy pride swelled in my chest.

The room quieted down, curious about what was going on. Chet looked at me, amused, and I shrugged, just as clueless as everyone else.

Jenny continued, grinning like she had the greatest idea in the world. “We’ve decided that since this is a celebration, and everyone’s here, it’s the perfect time for a dance-off!”

The crowd murmured, a mix of surprise and intrigue. A dance-off? In the library?

Brandon jumped in, clearly delighted. “Yeah! But this isn’t just any dance-off. It’s a freestyle, no-holds-barred, anything-goes dance-off. And the prize is...” He paused for dramatic effect, making sure everyone was hanging on his words. “The grand title of Hawthorn Hideaway’s Ultimate Dance Champion!”

A ripple of laughter and cheers spread through the room, and I couldn't help but grin. Leave it to my kids to create the first-ever Hawthorn Hideaway full-blown dance competition.

Jenny clapped her hands, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "We'll pick people randomly, and you've got to dance for ten seconds to whatever music comes on. No backing out!"

Chet leaned over to me, his voice low and amused. "Your kids are pretty brave, setting up a dance-off in front of all these people."

I chuckled. "Brave or reckless. Maybe a bit of both. But they sure know how to get a crowd going."

Before I could say more, Jenny pointed at the first "contestant"—none other than Sheriff Daniels. The crowd erupted into applause and laughter as the usually stern-faced sheriff looked around, a bit bewildered but clearly amused.

"Come on, Sheriff!" Jenny cheered. "Show us your moves!"

He shook his head, but he was smiling. "Alright, alright. But don't say I didn't warn you—I haven't danced since the '80s."

The music kicked in—a classic rock tune with a heavy beat—and to everyone's surprise, Sheriff Daniels broke out into a surprisingly decent moonwalk, complete with some dramatic air-guitar moves. Hidden talent we all didn't know about! The crowd went wild, cheering and clapping.

Next up was Mrs. Lawson, who was surprisingly nimble for her age and threw in a few twists and turns, followed by Mr. Parker, who gave a goofy but enthusiastic rendition of some kind of interpretive dance that involved a lot of spinning and

waving his arms.

The laughter was contagious, and soon everyone was chanting and cheering as each person took their turn. When Chet got called up, he gave me a mock look of horror before grinning and jumping into a goofy version of the robot dance, which only made the crowd cheer louder. I was pretty sure that was his touchdown dance that he always did. I didn't think he knew how to do anything else.

I was laughing so hard by now that my sides hurt, watching the usually calm and collected Chet loosen up and play along. And then, of course, it was my turn. Jenny and Brandon gave me pleading looks, and the crowd started chanting my name, so I had no choice but to jump in.

The music changed to a funky disco beat, and I did my best attempt at a disco point while shaking my hips like a Tahitian girl. I knew I looked ridiculous, but I was laughing, the kids were laughing, and Chet was clapping and cheering like I was on stage at a sold-out concert. I knew everyone was enjoying seeing their reserved librarian step out of her box for once and let down her hair. So I literally took the bobby pins out of my bun and shook my hair down as I danced. The cheers got louder. It felt amazing.

By the end of the dance-off, everyone was breathless and grinning, the room filled with applause and joy. Jenny and Brandon huddled together for a “deliberation,” and finally, they announced the winner—the one and only Sheriff Daniels, who took a dramatic bow and pretended to wipe away a tear, thanking everyone for their support.

The room burst into laughter, and Jenny shouted, “Congratulations, Sheriff! You're the Ultimate Dance Champion of Hawthorn Hideaway!” She handed him a cardboard trophy enhanced with duct tape and the name of the competition clearly written on it.

Sheriff Daniels proudly took his trophy, bowing to his supportive, cheering crowd.

“This trophy will get an upgrade and be passed on next year! Everyone better start practicing their dance moves. You have one year!”

The cheering was almost deafening, and I loved that there was so much joy in one place. My heart felt like it wanted to burst.

Chet came over and nudged me with his shoulder, then put his left arm around me. “Your kids really know how to throw a party.”

I smiled, watching Jenny and Brandon high-five each other, both of them clearly thrilled with how things turned out. “Yeah,” I said, feeling a warm glow in my chest. “They really do.”

And as I looked around at all the happy faces, I realized that this party was exactly what we all needed—an excuse to come together, to laugh, to let loose, and to just enjoy the wonderful, quirky spirit of this town.

Chapter Twenty-Four

CHET

The library was a hive of activity, buzzing with laughter, music, and the hum of excited conversations. Everywhere I looked, people were smiling, singing, dancing, and just letting loose in a way I hadn't seen since I got here. The tables were piled high with plates of cookies, homemade pies, and enough food to feed a small army. The whole place smelled like a mix of delicious food, baked goods, and that familiar, comforting scent of old books.

I caught sight of Paige laughing with a few of her friends by the drinks table, her face lit up in a way that made my heart skip a beat. This was her idea—a spontaneous, “Let’s celebrate!” which had turned into this amazing celebration, and I couldn’t have been happier to see it all come together.

I thought the dance-off was the highlight of the night. The kids somehow managed to convince even the most reserved folks to join in, and before long, we had Sheriff Daniels moonwalking and Mrs. Lawson doing a surprisingly graceful cha-cha.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had laughed this hard.

And then, of course, when it was my turn, I gave Paige a mock look of horror, but I knew there was no getting out of it. The music kicked in—a funky beat with a bit too much bass—and I dove into my best attempt at the robot. It was ridiculous, but everyone was cheering and laughing, and for once, I didn’t feel the usual pressure to be “on” or perfect. I just felt... free.

I took a sip of my cream soda, feeling a deep sense of gratitude. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

As the dance-off wrapped up, with Sheriff Daniels somehow winning the title of “Ultimate Dance Champion,” I was still chuckling with Paige when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Mrs. Jenkins looking at me with a knowing smile. “You should say a few words, Chet,” she said, giving me a gentle nudge toward the front of the room.

I nodded, realizing that she was right. I owed these people so much more than just a dance. I took a deep breath, stepped forward, and cleared my throat. “Hey, everyone!” I called out, raising a hand. The room quieted down, someone handed me the karaoke mic, and all eyes turned to me. I felt a mix of nerves and excitement—odd for someone who had been in front of thousands, but this felt... different. More personal.

“I just wanted to say a quick thank you,” I started, looking around at all the familiar faces. “When I came back to Hawthorn Hideaway, I didn’t really know what to expect. I thought I’d be here for a bit, lay low, and then head back to the usual madness of my life.”

There was a ripple of laughter in the room, and I smiled, feeling the room’s energy.

“But you all,” I continued, “you didn’t just let me blend in quietly. You welcomed me like I’d always been here, like I belonged. And that’s something I haven’t felt in a long time.”

I saw Paige watching me from across the room, and our eyes met for a moment. I felt a warmth in my chest, knowing that she had been such a big part of why I felt this way.

“And the way everyone came together to help me out with Rigs... I mean, you turned

this town into a fortress,” I said, grinning. “You showed him exactly what happens when you mess with Hawthorn Hideaway. He’s gone now, packed up and left, and it’s all thanks to every single one of you.”

There was a cheer from the crowd, people clapping and whooping, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “But more than that,” I continued, my tone turning a bit more serious, “you showed me what it means to be part of a community. To belong to something bigger than just yourself. I’ve traveled to a lot of places, met a lot of people, but I’ve never met people like you anywhere else. You’ve reminded me what home should feel like.”

There was a pause, a moment of quiet, and I felt the weight of what I was saying settle in. I looked around at all the faces—Mrs. Jenkins, Mr. Saavedra, Ms. Smith, Mrs. Lawson, Mr. Parker, April, Mr. Ramirez, Jenny and Brandon beaming up at me, and of course, Paige, whose smile made my heart feel like it was swelling in my chest.

“So, I just wanted to say thank you,” I finished, my voice full of sincerity. “To all of you, for making me feel like I belong, and for throwing the best party this library has ever seen. And for proving that this place is the best town in the world.”

I raised my can of cream soda, and everyone raised their drinks, echoing my words, “To Hawthorn Hideaway!”

The room erupted in applause and cheers, and I took a step back, feeling a wave of emotion that I hadn’t expected. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Paige, her eyes bright with laughter and something softer.

“That was a great speech,” she said, looking up at me, her voice just above a whisper.

I grinned, putting my arm around her. “Thanks. I meant every word.”

She smiled back, and for a moment, we were just standing there, surrounded by the noise and celebration, but it felt like it was just the two of us. “You’ve got a way with words,” she added, teasing slightly.

“Just speaking from the heart,” I said, and I meant it.

Before I could think too much about it, Mrs. Lawson shouted from the back, “Alright, Chet! Now that you’re done with the speech, how about a dance with the lady who inspired all this?”

The crowd cheered, egging me on, and I glanced at Paige, who was laughing and a little embarrassed, but also clearly delighted.

I extended my hand, grinning. “What do you say, Paige? One more dance for the road?”

She took my hand, her smile matching mine. “How can I say no to that?”

As the slow, soft tune began to play, I could feel the energy in the room shift, like the whole party was holding its breath, watching us. I took Paige’s hand in mine, feeling the delicate weight of it, and placed my other hand gently on her waist. She stepped in close, closer than I had expected, and suddenly it was like the rest of the world faded into a blur around us.

We started to move, swaying slowly to the rhythm of the music. For a second, I was afraid I’d step on her toes or mess this up somehow, but Paige was a natural. She moved with a kind of grace that I had never noticed before, her body flowing in perfect time with mine. I found myself relaxing, letting the music guide us, my thumb lightly brushing the back of her hand.

“You’re a good dancer,” she said softly, a small smile playing at the corners of her

lips.

I chuckled, “Thanks to my grandmother and mom, I’ve had a lot of practice. Just not usually in libraries.”

She laughed, a soft, musical sound that sent a shiver down my spine. “Well, I think Grandma would be proud of what kind of dancer you’ve become. The library has definitely never seen this much excitement.”

“I’m glad,” I said quietly, meeting her eyes. “I’ve never seen you smile this much.”

Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she looked down for a moment, then back up at me, her eyes softening. “Well, you’ve been giving me a lot of reasons to smile lately.”

There was something in her voice, a hint of vulnerability, and it made my heart thump harder. I swallowed, trying to keep my own nerves in check. “I’m glad to hear that. Because... you make me feel like I belong here, Paige. Like I’ve finally found a place that feels like my forever home.”

She looked up at me, her eyes searching mine, and I saw something flicker there—surprise, maybe, and then a soft warmth. “You do belong here, Chet. More than you know.”

She laughed, and the sound was soft, like music itself, something that filled the space between us. I felt a pull in my chest, a quiet magnetism I couldn’t ignore. I let myself get lost in the moment, in the feel of her hand in mine, the warmth radiating between us.

As we moved, I gently twirled her, watching as she spun, her hair catching the light, her laughter ringing out, bright and free. I pulled her back in, her body moving effortlessly with mine, and I was struck by how natural this felt. How right.

Our eyes met, and there was a look in hers—a mix of surprise, wonder, and something deeper, something that made my heart race a little faster. I felt the music slow, the beat steady and soft, and I decided to take a chance.

Without thinking too much about it, I stepped back slightly, giving her a quick spin, and then, with a little grin, I guided her into a gentle dip.

For a split second, I worried she'd lose her balance, but Paige surprised me. She moved with me, her body leaning back gracefully, her hair falling over her shoulder like a curtain. Her eyes were wide, her face lit up with a mixture of delight and maybe a bit of nervousness, but she trusted me to hold her steady.

I felt her grip tighten on my hand, and I leaned in just a bit closer, our faces just inches apart. There was a moment, a beat, where I could feel her breath against my skin, and everything else seemed to disappear. The music, the room, the crowd—it all faded into the background.

I held her there for a second longer than necessary, savoring the moment, the closeness, the way she looked up at me with a softness I hadn't seen before. I couldn't help but smile, my heart pounding in my chest, knowing that right then, this was exactly where I wanted to be.

Then, slowly, I pulled her back up, steadying her on her feet. She was still smiling, her cheeks flushed, her eyes bright with a kind of happiness that made my own smile widen. The crowd around us erupted in applause, but all I could focus on was her—how she was looking at me like she was seeing me for the first time.

“That was... unexpected,” she breathed, still a little breathless from the dance, or maybe just from me.

I chuckled, my hand still resting on her waist. “I like to keep things interesting.”

She laughed, a genuine, warm sound that sent a shiver through me. “Well, you certainly succeeded.”

We stood there for a moment, the applause and cheers ringing in our ears, but all I felt was her. Paige. Close, smiling, and somehow more beautiful than I had ever seen her.

I realized, as the music faded and we were still standing there, that I didn’t want to let her go. I didn’t want this moment to end.

And then, just as I was about to speak, we were interrupted by a commotion near the back of the room. I turned to see Brandon and Jenny, arm in arm, spinning each other around in a goofy dance, clearly trying to mimic what Paige and I had done, but with a lot more flailing and dramatic flourishes.

Everyone started laughing, and Paige shook her head, her eyes full of affection for her kids. “Oh no, here they go,” she said, chuckling.

I grinned, watching them with amusement. “They’re quite the little performers.”

Jenny twirled Brandon around, nearly colliding into a bookshelf, and Brandon caught himself just in time, striking a ridiculous pose. The crowd cheered and laughed, clapping along with the music.

Paige turned back to me, still smiling. “They’re always like this. Full of energy, but usually in public, they’re shyer. It’s fun to see them so comfortable with the whole town in the room.”

“I love it. I really love your kids. They’re great kids. Knowing who their mom is explains everything.”

There was a moment where our smiles softened, and I felt that pull again, that quiet magnetism that had been building between us.

But before I could say anything else, the music changed to an upbeat tune, and Brandon and Jenny came rushing over, grabbing both of us by the hands.

“Come on, Mommy! Chet! Dance with us!” Jenny shouted, pulling us into the center of the room.

I laughed, feeling the joyful chaos return, and we were suddenly spinning around, caught up in the kids’ wild dance moves. Paige was laughing, her face lit up with pure joy, and I realized that this, right here—this mix of fun, laughter, and connection—was what I had been searching for.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted between us in that dance. Something real. Something worth holding onto. I wanted to tell her more, to say what had been on my mind, but I didn’t want to rush it. Not here, not now.

And as the night continued, I couldn’t stop thinking about how right it felt to hold her close, to spin her around and feel her laughter against my chest. I couldn’t stop wondering what it would be like to have more moments like this. Moments that were just ours. I knew one thing for sure: whatever happened next, I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

Chapter Twenty-Five

PAIGE

Leaning against the kitchen counter with a cup of chamomile lavender tea in my hands that I had barely touched, I pondered the day. The party was over, the kids were getting ready for bed, and the house was finally quiet. The faint sounds of crickets outside were the only noise, and for a moment, I just stood there, letting the calm settle around me.

But my mind wasn't calm. It raced, filled with thoughts of the night, of Chet's smile, the way he held me close, the warmth in his eyes when we danced, like I was the only person in the room. The way he made me feel... like I mattered in a way I hadn't felt in years. I could still hear the softness in his voice when he thanked everyone, when he looked right into my eyes and spoke like he was saying something just for me.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself, yet I felt a pang of panic. What was I doing? I was a mom, juggling work, raising two kids on my own, trying to hold everything together... and he was Chet Bennett, a famous professional football player. Charming, smart, talented, funny, sweet Chet, who could have his pick of anyone, who was used to a fast-paced life that was worlds apart from this little town.

I sighed, shaking my head. No, it was better to keep things simple. But even as I thought it, I knew I was fighting a losing battle. There was a part of me that was already hooked, already imagining *what if*.

I took another deep breath, running a hand through my hair, and forced myself to

think logically. *This is just a phase*, I told myself. *It's the excitement of the party, the rush of adrenaline. It doesn't mean anything. You're just caught up in the moment. It's not practical. You don't have time for this. For him.*

But even as I thought it, I knew I was lying to myself. I couldn't ignore the way he made me feel, the way he made my kids laugh, the way he looked at me like I was the most important person in the world. But that was the problem, wasn't it? He made me feel special, and that was terrifying.

I shook my head, trying to banish the thought. *You've been on your own for years, Paige. You've managed just fine. Don't complicate things.*

I was still lost in thought when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned to see Jenny and Brandon standing in the doorway, their eyes wide and curious. They had clearly sensed something, picked up on my distracted mood.

"Hey, you two," I said, trying to sound cheerful. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

Jenny walked over, a sly grin on her face. "We were just coming to say goodnight, but you look like you're thinking about something serious."

Brandon nodded, always quick to catch on. "Yeah, like something's on your mind. Is everything okay, Mom?"

"Just thinking about the party and how great it was."

Jenny agreed, her eyes wide and sparkling. "That really was the best party Hawthorn Hideaway has ever had!"

Brandon nodded eagerly, his grin stretching from ear to ear. "Yeah! And the dance-off was awesome! Chet was so much fun. Don't you think, Mom?"

I smiled, my heart warming at their enthusiasm. "I'm glad you guys had so much fun. A huge part of all the fun was because of the two of you," I said softly, trying to steer the conversation away from the direction I knew it was going. "I am so blessed to be your mother."

But Jenny wasn't letting me off the hook that easily. She gave me a sly look, her eyes narrowing just slightly. "Mommy, something else is on your mind. What is it?"

I laughed lightly, trying to brush it off. "I'm fine, just a bit tired from the party. It was a lot of fun, but it was a long day."

Jenny didn't buy it for a second. She tilted her head, her grin widening. "Or maybe... you're thinking about Chet?"

I felt a blush creeping up my neck, and I rolled my eyes playfully. "Oh, come on, guys. It was just a party, and yes, I danced with Chet, but that's all."

Brandon exchanged a look with Jenny, and they both moved closer, clearly not ready to drop the subject. "But you like him, right, Mommy?" Jenny asked, her tone softer now. "We saw how you were looking at each other. You guys looked really happy together."

Brandon nodded vigorously. "Yeah, it was like you two were meant to be together! You were smiling so much, Mom. I was really little when I last remember you smiling like that. I love seeing you that happy."

I felt my cheeks flush, a little shocked by that comment. Brandon remembered me happy and in love with his father. I had forgotten what that felt like. I tried to laugh it off. "Oh, come on, you two. It was just a dance. We were all having fun, that's all."

Jenny wasn't buying it. She stepped closer, her face earnest. "Mommy, you like him,

don't you? I mean, really like him."

I swallowed, caught off guard by her directness. I set down my cup of tea and leaned back against the counter, feeling cornered in the best possible way. "It's not that simple, sweetie. I... I do like him, Chet's... he's great, but it's complicated. He's got his own life, and I've got mine. We're in different worlds, and he has a different kind of life. A life that doesn't really fit with ours."

Brandon frowned a little, looking confused. "But why does that matter? He's here now, right? And he's always around, spending time with us. Doesn't that mean he wants to be part of our world?"

I blinked, taken aback by his insight. "Maybe... but honey, it's just temporary. His career and life aren't in Hawthorn Hideaway. He'll have to leave again to fulfill his work contracts. Long-distance relationships are hard, and in my opinion, impossible."

Jenny stepped closer, her expression earnest. "Mommy, everyone makes choices. But if you don't give it a chance, how will you ever know?"

I sighed, feeling the weight of their words settle on my shoulders. "I just... I don't want to get hurt. And I don't want you two to get hurt, either. We've been on our own for so long, and it's been okay."

Brandon shrugged. "But what if it could be better than okay?"

Jenny nodded, her eyes softening. "Mommy, we love Chet. He's fun, and he makes you happy. We see it. And he really cares about you."

I felt a lump forming in my throat. "It's not that simple, sweetheart. Relationships can be... tricky. And I don't want to make things harder for you two. You're my priority."

Jenny stepped even closer, reaching for my hand. “Mommy, you’re our priority too. We just want you to be happy. And we know Chet makes you happy.”

My heart squeezed painfully in my chest. I looked down at my kids, both of them watching me with such open, hopeful expressions. How could I explain that I was scared? That I had built a wall around my heart for so long, and I was terrified of what it meant to let someone in again?

I felt my heart twist, torn between fear and hope. “I know, but... what if it’s just a crush, or just the excitement of him being here? What if it doesn’t last?”

Jenny looked at me, her expression more mature than I was ready for. “And what if it does, Mommy? What if it lasts and it’s amazing? Don’t you want to find out?”

I swallowed hard, feeling the tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. “I am happy,” I said, but my voice was wavering, even to my own ears. “I just don’t want to mess things up. I just... I don’t want to make a mistake.”

Brandon tilted his head, reached out and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tight, his brows furrowing. “Sometimes mistakes are good, Mom. They help you figure out what’s right. And we think Chet’s the right man for you.”

I blinked, surprised by his wisdom. I realized that maybe they were right. Maybe I was just scared of what was new, of what felt so big and unknown.

Jenny squeezed my other hand, her eyes pleading, her voice filled with quiet determination. “Just give it a chance, Mommy. Please. For you. For us. You deserve to be happy.”

I sighed, feeling the fight draining out of me, replaced by something softer, something more hopeful. I looked at my kids—these two incredible little humans

who were so much wiser than I had ever realized—and I felt a shift in my heart. Maybe they were right. Maybe I had been so focused on protecting myself and them that I had forgotten what it felt like to really live.

I nodded slowly, my voice barely a whisper. “Okay. I’ll think about it. I promise.”

The kids both cheered, throwing their arms around me in a tight hug. I closed my eyes, feeling their warmth, their love, and for the first time, I let myself imagine what it would be like to take that leap, to see where this thing with Chet could go.

As I held my kids close, I found myself smiling through the tears that had been threatening to fall, feeling a flicker of excitement, of hope in the pit of my stomach that maybe... just maybe... they were onto something. Something new, something beautiful. Maybe, just maybe, they were right.

Chapter Twenty-Six

CHET

I was coming up the path from my early morning jog, still feeling the cool breeze on my skin, the rhythm of my heartbeat steady and strong. The sun was just starting to rise over Hawthorn Hideaway, casting long, golden shadows across the ground, and I felt a quiet sense of peace settle over me. That morning jog had become my favorite part of the day—a chance to clear my mind and take in the beauty of the little town.

But as I rounded the corner to my grandparents' house, I was surprised to see two young figures standing on the porch, practically bouncing on their toes. It took me a second to realize it was Jenny and Brandon, both of them looking like they had been up for hours.

“Hey, you two!” I called out, a smile spreading across my face. “What are you doing here so early? Shouldn’t you be getting ready for school?”

Jenny waved excitedly. “We’ve been waiting for you! We have an idea! And, NO school on Saturdays!” She started laughing at me.

Brandon nodded, looking just as enthusiastic. “A really good idea!”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh yeah? What kind of idea?”

They glanced at each other, clearly bursting with excitement, before Jenny blurted out, “We think you should take Mommy on a special date night!”

I stopped short, surprised by their directness. “A date night?” I repeated, trying to hide my grin. She did owe me a date. “You mean, like... a real date?”

Brandon rolled his eyes, like I was the one being slow. “Yes! A real date, with dinner and fun stuff. You know, to make her feel special and show how much you like her! We all know you like our mom more than just friends.”

I chuckled, feeling a warmth spread in my chest. “Alright, I’m listening. What do you have in mind?”

Jenny stepped forward, her face serious, as if she was about to reveal the plan for a top-secret mission. “We were thinking... you could surprise her with something really nice. Something that shows you care about her. Like... a fancy dinner! At sunset!”

“That’s very specific, at sunset, but did we have a day in mind?”

“TONIGHT!” they both laughed and shouted at me.

Then Jenny looked around, making sure no one else was listening, lowering her voice like she was about to reveal a top-secret mission. “We think you should take Mommy out for a real fancy dinner! Like a real, grown-up date, with candles and music and everything.”

I grinned, liking the sound of it already. “A fancy dinner, huh? And where exactly am I supposed to find a fancy restaurant around here? This is a pretty small town, you know.”

Brandon grinned, clearly prepared for this question. “We know! That’s the fun part. We can make one ourselves! You could set it up in a cool place, like the gazebo in the park, or even in the town square. We could help decorate it with candles and

flowers and stuff. Make it feel like a real restaurant!”

Jenny nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Yeah, and we could ask Mrs. Jenkins to help with the food. She makes the best lasagna in the world. Did you know she used to run the town diner? Mrs. Lawson can help with dessert and garlic bread. And Mr. Parker could bring over some of those extra fancy string lights he’s always talking about.”

I chuckled, genuinely impressed by their creativity. “You two have really thought this through, haven’t you?”

They nodded, looking pleased with themselves. “We just want it to be special,” Jenny said earnestly. “Mommy doesn’t get to go on fancy dates. She’s always taking care of us, and we want her to feel like a queen for a night.”

My heart melted a little at that. They really did care about their mom, and they wanted this to be perfect for her. “Alright,” I said slowly, a grin spreading across my face. “I’m in. A fancy dinner, right here in town. Let’s make it happen.”

The kids cheered, and we all huddled together on the porch steps to start planning.

“We could set it up in the town square,” Brandon suggested. “It’s got that big oak tree, and the fairy lights would look awesome there.”

Jenny added, “And we could ask April to take pictures! Fancy restaurants have photographers to make the day memorable, right? She’d love to help. Maybe she could write up a special story about the date too! If Mommy agrees... I think April could convince her.”

I nodded, considering their ideas. “Alright, so we’ve got a location and a photographer. Yes, some restaurants have photographers. What about music?”

Jenny's face lit up. "Did you know that Mr. Thompson plays the violin? I bet he'd do it. He's always talking about how he misses playing for an audience. Oh, this is so exciting!" Jenny was bouncing around with excitement.

I laughed. "Okay, violin it is. So many hidden talents in this amazing little town! And what about the decorations?"

Brandon jumped in, "We could get flowers from Mrs. Carter's shop. She loves Mom and would totally help out. Maybe some white roses and sunflowers. Mom loves sunflowers. She says they are happy flowers."

I nodded, feeling the excitement build. "Sounds like a plan. And for food, we'll talk to Mrs. Jenkins about the lasagna and Mrs. Larson about the garlic bread. And maybe she can make chocolate truffles or something like that for dessert?"

Jenny clapped her hands together. "Yes! Perfect! Mommy loves those."

I couldn't help but smile, feeling the joy radiating off these two kids. "Alright, team, we've got our plan. Now, we just need to make it happen. Think you're up for the challenge? Get this all done by 5 p.m. tonight?"

They both nodded enthusiastically. "Yes!" they shouted in unison.

I laughed, loving how involved they were. "Great," I said, giving them each a high-five. "I'll start making some calls and pulling everything together. You two keep this under wraps, okay? We want it to be a surprise."

Jenny nodded eagerly. "Right! We'll keep it a secret! Pinky promise. Mommy won't know a thing."

She held out her pinky, and I hooked mine around hers, sealing the pact. Brandon

followed suit, and we were all locked in. “Pinky promise,” I said, feeling a rush of excitement. “Now, let’s make sure we do this right.”

As we talked, I realized how much this meant to them—to see their mom happy, to feel like they were part of something special. And it meant more to me than I expected to be the one to make it happen.

When we had our plan set, Jenny and Brandon gave me a quick hug, their faces beaming with excitement. “Thanks, Chet,” Jenny said, her voice soft. “We know Mommy will love it.”

I smiled, feeling my heart swell with a mixture of anticipation and hope. “I hope so,” I said. “Because she deserves the best.”

As they headed back home, I stood there on the porch, watching them go. I couldn’t help but feel a surge of excitement and a sense of purpose I hadn’t felt in a long time. I was nervous, sure. But more than that, I was excited.

Because this wasn’t just any date. This was a chance to show Paige that she was special, that she deserved to be cherished. And I couldn’t wait to see the look on her face when she realized just how much I cared. With the whole town involved, I knew it was going to be a night to remember.

I started making mental notes of what I needed to do, who I needed to talk to. The gazebo in the park would be a great backup, but I liked the idea of the town square, under the big oak tree with all those twinkling lights. I could already picture Paige’s face when she saw it, when she realized that all of this was for her.

And as I headed inside to shower and start my day, I couldn’t help but feel that familiar flutter in my chest. This might be one of the most important dates of my life, and I was going to make sure it was perfect. Not just for Paige, but for the kids too.

For all of us.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

PAIGE

For a family of three, why did we have so many socks and so many mismatched pairs? This really should have been one of the top wonders of the world. Jenny and Brandon came bounding down the stairs, their faces filled with a kind of barely-contained excitement that immediately made me suspicious. They had been whispering to each other all morning, and now they were standing in front of me with big, innocent smiles plastered across their faces.

“Hey, Mommy!” Jenny chirped, her voice a little too cheerful. “Guess what?”

I raised an eyebrow, still holding a pair of socks in my hand. “What’s going on, you two? You’ve got that look in your eyes like you’re up to no good.”

Brandon stepped forward, trying to look casual, but I could see the sparkle in his eyes. “Well, we were just talking to Aunty April on the phone...”

April had been my best friend since we were three years old, and I knew she was always up to something. “Oh, were you now?” I asked, folding the socks slowly. “And what does Aunty April have to say?”

Jenny jumped in, nodding eagerly. “She said she needs you to come down to the town square tonight. For... um... a photo shoot!”

I blinked, surprised. “A photo shoot? Ha! April needs me for that? Why?”

Brandon nodded quickly, backing up Jenny's story. "Yeah, it's for her new article in the newspaper! She's doing this whole thing about, uh, 'Strong Women of Hawthorn Hideaway,' and she really wants you to be in it. She said it's super important, and she needs a few pictures of you looking all... fancy."

I narrowed my eyes, sensing something was up, but they both looked so earnest. "Why me?" I asked, trying to figure out where this was going. "There are plenty of strong women in town."

Jenny quickly nodded. "But, Mommy, you're her best friend! And she said you've done so much for the community, especially with the library and all. She wants you to be the centerpiece of the article."

Brandon added, "Yeah, and she said you have to look really nice. Like, dress up-nice."

I put down the laundry, crossing my arms. "Dress up-nice? For a photo shoot? This sounds a little suspicious..."

Jenny put on her best pleading face. "Please, Mommy? It's really important to Aunty April. And she said she wants it to be a surprise for everyone, so you can't tell anyone."

I felt a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. "So, let me get this straight: Aunty April wants me to dress up, come to the town square, and have my picture taken... for a surprise article?"

Brandon nodded eagerly, "Exactly!"

I shook my head, laughing softly. "You two are terrible liars, you know that?"

They both looked a little taken aback but didn't give up. "It's true!" Jenny insisted. "And Aunt April said there will be a lot of people there, so you have to look your best."

I raised an eyebrow. "A lot of people?"

Jenny quickly nodded. "Yeah! And she even said she'll take you out for dinner afterward, as a thank you."

I couldn't help but chuckle at the sheer determination in their eyes. "Alright, alright," I said, playing along. "I guess if Aunt April says it's important, I'd better go. But this had better not be some prank."

Brandon grinned. "No prank, we promise! And we'll help you pick out what to wear!"

I laughed, shaking my head. "Fine, you two. Go find me something nice, then."

As they rushed off to my closet, I couldn't help but feel a mix of amusement and curiosity. I knew there was more to this story, but they seemed so excited, and honestly, it had been a while since I'd had an excuse to dress up. Whatever they were up to, I supposed it couldn't hurt to go along with it... for now.

Suddenly, my phone started going off. It was April's tone, and I was fascinated that she was calling at this very moment. Now I would really find out what was going on.

"Hello, my beautiful friend!"

April started laughing right away. "I knew you wouldn't believe the kids, so I figured I'd better call you."

“Seriously, April, what in the world? A photo shoot? Me?! You know I never liked being the center of attention and hate taking pictures. And I have to get dressed up? You know I don’t do that kind of stuff. I’m more of a plain Jane kind of gal.”

“I know. I know. So here’s what’s going on. Your loving, brilliant kids wanted to do something special for you. After last night’s amazing town party in the library, they wanted me to spotlight you for the strong woman that you are. I told them it was a great idea, so we brainstormed a few ideas together.”

“Oh, April, you know I don’t need any kind of special attention or recognition.”

“I know that too, Paige, but the library needs more special attention and recognition. The library is, and should always be, the heart of our town. A safe space, a place everyone can go to when they need a little help in any way. I think many of us saw that last night.”

“I agree.”

“So I have an idea to help our library, and you are the go-to person. To make the article stand out more, I need you to show up a little differently, just one time. I want you looking fabulous for these photos, alright?”

I frowned, still not entirely convinced. “Hair and makeup? April, this is starting to feel a bit much for a little photo shoot for the newspaper...”

“Trust me, Paige,” she cut in, her voice softening just a little. “It’s important. And you deserve to feel special. Besides, when was the last time you did something just for you?”

I hesitated, her words hitting closer to home than I’d like to admit. “I... I guess it has been a while.”

“Exactly,” she said with a confident tone. “So let me pamper you a little. We’ll make a night of it!”

“Ugh. Oh, okay, for the library. You need to come over and help me with my hair and makeup stuff. You know I have no interest in those kinds of things. The kids are choosing my outfit.”

“Of course, Paige, I’ll help you with your hair and makeup. I’ll come at 4 pm, and we’ll make you movie-star gorgeous.”

“Just to let you know, April, I am not looking forward to this, but I still love you and am very grateful for you.”

“I know, Paige. I love you too.” We hung up.

I shook my head, wondering what in the world I had gotten into.

****Later That Evening...****

I was standing in front of the mirror, still fiddling with the dress Jenny and Brandon had picked out for me—a simple but elegant navy number I’d had tucked away in the back of my closet for years. It felt strange to be dressed up like this, but kind of nice too. I hadn’t done this in a long time, and I had to admit, it felt good to look a little fancy, but I was still half-tempted to just change back into my usual tights and a big comfy top. I smoothed down the fabric, feeling a mix of nerves and curiosity bubble up inside me.

Before I could overthink it, there was a knock at the door, and I heard the kids shout from the hallway. “Mommy! Aunty April is here!”

I took a deep breath, setting down my doubts for a moment. Maybe this was one of

April's crazy schemes... or maybe, just maybe, she was right. Maybe I did deserve a night that was a little special.

I walked to the door, opening it to find April standing there with a big grin, her arms full of hair tools and makeup bags. "Ready to be fabulous?" she asked, winking.

I rolled my eyes but couldn't help smiling back. "Alright, let's do this," I said, feeling a flicker of excitement despite myself. "Make me look like the star you seem to think I am."

April winked again. "That I know you are!"

We headed up the stairs to my room, the kids trailing behind us, whispering and giggling. As April set up her little beauty station, I couldn't shake the feeling that something big was coming... something that might just change everything.

An hour later, I was standing in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection, and for a moment, I couldn't believe it was me looking back. April had finished my hair and makeup, and I was... stunned.

My hair was styled in loose waves that framed my face, softer and more elegant than I had ever bothered with. My makeup was subtle but perfect, with just a hint of color on my cheeks and lips, my eyes a little brighter, a little more defined. I didn't know how she did it, but April had been able to enhance all of my best features and dull down my imperfections. There was a glow to my skin that I didn't even know I could have. I looked... different. Naturally beautiful. More confident.

I blinked, taking in the whole picture—the dress, the hair, the makeup—and I barely recognized myself. I looked like a woman who had somewhere important to be, someone who knew how to turn heads. Someone who deserved to feel beautiful and humbly knew it.

A flutter of nerves tugged at my stomach. It had been so long since I felt like that—since I had felt this version of myself. I had been the mom, the librarian, the one who held everything together, blending in with the wallpaper. But now, standing there, I felt... like I could be more. Like maybe I deserved to be.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Part of me wanted to hide, to throw on a sweater and pull my hair back up in a bun. But another part of me, a quieter, braver part, whispered that it was okay to feel this way. That it was okay to want to feel beautiful, to feel special, especially for this one night.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I barely noticed Jenny and Brandon creeping up behind me, their eyes wide as they took in the transformation.

“Wow, Mommy,” Jenny breathed, her voice full of awe. “You look... like a princess!”

Brandon nodded vigorously, his mouth hanging open a little. “Yeah, you look awesome! Like, really fancy but still you.”

I laughed, feeling my cheeks warm. “Thanks, guys. But this is a bit much, don't you think? I mean, it's just a photo shoot...”

Jenny shook her head, her eyes sparkling. “No way, Mommy! You look perfect. Aunty April did an amazing job!”

April beamed from where she was standing, clearly pleased with her handiwork. “See, I told you I had this. You look stunning, Paige. Like you just stepped off a magazine cover. You've always been a beautiful lady, you just didn't want to see it. I really didn't do much at all.”

I shook my head, feeling a mix of embarrassment and gratitude. “I don't know... it

just feels so different. I'm not used to all this."

Brandon grinned and stepped closer, grabbing my hand. "That's the point, Mom! You're always doing stuff for everyone else. It's time you do something for you."

Jenny nodded eagerly, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Yeah, Mommy. You deserve this. You deserve to feel beautiful."

I felt a lump forming in my throat, touched by their sincerity. "Thanks, you two. I guess I just... I haven't done this in a long time. I forgot what it felt like."

April came up beside me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Well, maybe it's time to remember," she said softly. "You are beautiful, Paige. Inside and out. You always have been. And tonight, you get to show the world what we all see every day."

I swallowed, blinking back the tears that were threatening to spill over. I gave her a small smile, feeling a wave of gratitude for my best friend, for my kids, for everyone who believed in me more than I believed in myself.

"Alright," I whispered, taking a deep breath and straightening my shoulders. "Let's do this."

Jenny and Brandon cheered, clapping their hands, and April gave me an encouraging nod. "That's the spirit!" she said, beaming. "Now, get ready to knock 'em dead."

I looked at myself one last time in the mirror, and for the first time in a long time, I let myself feel proud. Proud of who I was, of where I had been, and of whatever was coming next.

And maybe, just maybe, I was ready to find out what that was.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

CHET

I stood in the middle of the town square, looking around at everything we had set up, and I had to admit—it was pretty perfect. The big oak tree towered overhead, its branches spread wide like arms embracing the whole scene. Tiny string lights were draped through the leaves, twinkling like stars against the darkening sky. It had this magical feel, like something out of a movie, and I couldn't help but smile.

The town square had been transformed. Mrs. Jenkins and Mrs. Lawson had outdone themselves with the food—steaming hot lasagna, garlic bread, and a fresh Caesar salad ready to be plated nearby and served by our dashing waiters, Brandon and Jenny, who would be arriving just before their mom.

Mr. Parker had come through with the string lights. He recruited Mr. Thompson to help him hang them, and now they hung in loops from the oak tree, casting a golden light over everything. The lights twinkled gently, and the whole scene felt cozy and intimate, like the perfect little hideaway for two.

A small path had been lined with tea lights, leading from where Paige would enter to the table, guiding her right to me. I took a deep breath, looking over the final touches, and I felt a strange mix of nerves and excitement buzzing in my chest.

Mr. Thompson had cleaned up and was already in place with his violin, tuning it over by the left side of the table. He caught my eye and gave me a thumbs-up, and I nodded back, grateful for his enthusiasm. He was wearing a slightly frayed tuxedo

jacket he had dug out of his closet, but it added to the charm of it all. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself. This small town may not have had an upscale restaurant, but we sure knew how to make things special.

And then, there was the table itself. Just one small, round table for two, set right under the oak tree, surrounded by flowers and fairy lights. On the table was a white lace tablecloth, a beautiful low vase with sunflowers and white roses from Mrs. Carter's shop, like Jenny had suggested, and the vase was surrounded by tiny candles in little glasses. It really did look like a table from a five-star restaurant. I had adjusted the chairs a few times, trying to get them just right, fidgeting really because I was starting to get nervous. It felt like a real date now, something you'd see in one of those romance movies that Paige liked. I just hoped she liked it as much in reality.

April rushed up to me, "Hi, Chet! Wow, everything looks amazing!" She looked around, surveying the area. "It's beautiful! Paige is going to love this! Great job! We just finished our photo shoot at the library. Paige will be here in a little bit. She wanted to freshen up a little before her outdoor shoot next." She winked at me. "I've got to take pictures of this amazing setup! This may be the first of many more romantic dinners of Hawthorn Hideaway!"

She started snapping pictures of the setup, clearly loving the romantic vibe. She winked at me again when she noticed I was watching, mouthing, "You got this!" and I felt a little surge of confidence.

I glanced around, taking it all in—the soft music from Mr. Thompson's violin, the warm glow of the lights, the delicious smell of lasagna in the air. It was everything I had wanted it to be: simple, beautiful, and full of little touches that showed I cared.

But underneath all that excitement, there was a nervous energy I couldn't quite shake. This was it. This was my chance to show Paige how much she meant to me, how much I wanted to be part of her life. I wanted her to feel special, to know that I saw

her—not just as a mom or a librarian, but as a woman who deserved all the beauty and joy the world had to offer.

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling my heart pick up a little speed. What if she thought it was too much? Too over-the-top? I wasn't exactly a guy who knew how to do "grand gestures," but this was different. She was different.

Just then, I heard footsteps approaching, and I looked up to see Jenny and Brandon running toward me, their faces lit up with excitement. They were practically glowing, thrilled to see everything in place.

"Chet!" Jenny exclaimed, her voice a whisper even though there was no reason to be quiet. "It looks amazing!"

Brandon nodded, his eyes wide. "Yeah! Mom's going to love this. She's going to be so surprised!"

I felt a knot in my stomach loosen just a little at their excitement. If they believed it was perfect, then maybe it was. "You think so?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

Jenny grinned, nodding eagerly. "Definitely. You did a great job. This is like... the best date setup ever."

Brandon clapped me on the back, grinning. "Yeah, Mom's gonna feel like a queen."

I smiled, taking a deep breath, feeling my nerves start to settle. "Alright. Thanks, guys. You did an awesome job too. I couldn't have done this without you."

They both beamed, clearly proud of their part in the plan. "She'll be here soon," Jenny said, glancing down the road. "We better go hide after we learn how to do our

job.”

They ran to talk with the ladies next. They were such great kids. I smiled, watching them jump into action. Then I watched them scurry off to hide behind a bush, giggling quietly, and I was left alone again, standing under the twinkling lights, waiting for Paige.

Standing under the oak tree, I glanced at my watch, feeling the anticipation build as I watched the last few strands of pink and orange from the sunset fade into the night sky. The soft glow from the string lights overhead cast a warm, golden light over the table, the flowers, the candles... everything was ready. Perfect. But my heart was pounding like I was about to step onto the field for a championship game.

I caught myself pacing a little, trying to calm my nerves. I had faced a hundred different situations in my life, but none of them had made me feel quite like this—this mix of excitement and fear. I was ready for Paige to arrive, but I was also terrified of what she would think. Would she like all of this? Would she understand what I was trying to say without me having to actually say it?

And then, I heard her footsteps. Soft at first, then a little louder as she got closer. I turned, and there she was, walking up the path lined with tea lights, her steps slow and careful, her eyes wide with surprise and wonder.

And for a second, I forgot how to breathe. I straightened my tie and then my suit coat.

She looked... incredible. More than that, she looked stunning. Her hair was loose in soft waves, catching the light, and her dress—navy blue, simple but elegant—fit her perfectly, like it was made just for her. Her eyes were bright, wide with surprise and a little bit of awe, and there was a hint of a smile playing on her lips, like she wasn't quite sure what to make of all this.

For a moment, I just stood there, frozen, completely at a loss for words. She had always been beautiful, but tonight, she looked... different. She looked radiant. Like the most incredible woman I had ever seen. And it was hitting me all at once—just how much I cared about her, how much I wanted this night to be perfect.

I realized I was staring, and she started to look a little nervous, shifting slightly on her feet. “Chet?” she said, her voice soft, a little uncertain. “Are you okay?”

I blinked, snapping out of it, and suddenly my brain kicked into gear. I needed to say something. Anything. But all that came out was, “Uh... wow.”

She raised an eyebrow, a small smile tugging at her lips. “Wow?”

I nodded, feeling like a complete idiot. “Yeah... wow. I mean... you look... wow.”

She started to laugh, a soft, genuine sound that made my chest tighten in the best way. “For an intellectual, that’s all you’ve got? ‘Wow’?”

I glanced at the others keeping out of sight, watching my amazing conversation unraveling and seeing them shaking their heads, struggling to keep their laughter in.

I chuckled, rubbing the back of my neck, trying to play it cool but knowing I was failing miserably. “I mean... yeah. I guess I’m not really good with words right now. You look... more than wow. You look... breathtaking.”

She laughed again, a little louder this time, and I saw the tension in her shoulders ease a bit. “Breathtaking? That’s better. At least it’s more than one syllable.”

I grinned, feeling my nerves melt away at the sound of her laughter. “Okay, fair. I’ll try to use more syllables. How about... astonishingly gorgeous?”

She blushed, and I could see the anxiety in her face start to fade, replaced by a softer, more relaxed expression. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

I shrugged, stepping closer, feeling more like myself now. “Yeah, I’ve been told. But you make it hard to think straight.”

She shook her head, smiling, and I could see she was fighting back another laugh. “Alright, Chet, I get it. But seriously, thank you. This is... this is all so beautiful. I don’t know what to say.”

I took her hand, feeling the warmth of her skin against mine, and gave her a reassuring smile. “You don’t have to say anything. Just enjoy it. Tonight is all about you, Paige.”

She looked at me, her eyes softening, and for the first time since she arrived, I saw the nervousness completely disappear. She squeezed my hand, a small, genuine smile spreading across her face. “Thank you,” she whispered, her voice steady. “For all of this. It’s perfect.”

I grinned, feeling a wave of relief and happiness wash over me. “Good,” I said, leading her toward the table. “Because I’ve been practicing saying ‘wow’ all night, and I was hoping you’d like it.”

She laughed again, a bright, genuine laugh, and I felt a flutter of something warm in my chest. As we reached the table, I pulled out her chair with a little flourish, and she took a seat, still smiling.

And just like that, the nervousness, the fear, the worry—they were all gone. Replaced by the sound of her laughter, the sight of her smile, and the feeling that maybe, just maybe, tonight was going to be everything I had hoped it would be.

“Chet...” she breathed out, her voice a mixture of awe and confusion. “What is all this?”

I smiled, feeling my nerves melt away at the sight of her. “This,” I said, as I took a seat in my chair, “is a special date night. Just for you. You did owe me a date, remember?”

Her eyes welled up just a little, and she looked around at the setup—the lights, the table, the flowers—and then back at me, a soft smile spreading across her lips. “Yes, that’s right. We did say we would go on a date, just us, but you did all this... for me?”

I nodded, my heart pounding in my chest. “Yes,” I said softly. “For you. Because you deserve it, Paige, more than anyone I know. But I didn’t do this on my own, this was actually Brandon and Jenny’s idea. Then we got a bunch of willing friends to help and, of course, April figured out how to get you here and keep it all a surprise.”

Her smile widened, and I could see the happiness in her eyes, the emotion she was trying, and failing, to keep in check. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered. “Thank you.”

I offered her my hand, feeling my own smile grow. “Shall we let this date begin?”

She took my hand, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I was the man I was supposed to be.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

PAIGE

I felt like I had stepped into a dream. The soft glow of the lights guided me toward the big oak tree in the center of the town square, and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. It was all so unexpected, so beautiful... and so unlike anything I had ever experienced.

When I first saw the lights twinkling from a distance, I thought maybe it was some kind of event in town. But when I got closer, I realized it was for me. For us.

Seated, I really took a look around, taking in the scene and all the little details—the table set for two under the old oak tree, the string lights draped like stars, my favorite happy flowers on the table—and my heart swelled. It was more than I ever imagined. It was thoughtful and sweet, and it was so Chet. “Thank you,” I whispered, feeling my voice get slightly steadier than before. “For all of this. I love it.”

He grinned. “I’m so glad. I was so worried you would think I was too over the top.”

Feeling a smile spread across my face, I finally noticed them—Jenny and Brandon, peeking out from behind a nearby bush, dressed up in their church clothes, big grins on their faces. April and my kids had gotten me good! The idea of a family photo shoot, attached to my photo shoot, was brilliant. It made sense since April claimed she needed pics of me, which was a great reason for the kids to get dressed up too without me getting overly suspicious.

They stepped out, looking like miniature waiters with makeshift aprons tied around their waists. They looked stiff and formal, totally playing their role well. I loved it! My kids looked so charming, the best-looking kids I'd ever seen, but of course, I was biased.

"Good evening, madam and sir!" Jenny said in an exaggerated, formal voice. "Welcome to our Hawthorn Hideaway Five Star Restaurant. I'll be your server tonight."

Brandon bowed dramatically. "And I'm your assistant server. Can I offer you some water or sparkling cider to start?"

I couldn't help but burst into laughter, my hand flying to my mouth. "Oh, my goodness, you two... you're adorable."

Chet chuckled, playing along. "Well, I think I'll have the sparkling cider, please, Assistant Server."

Jenny nodded, grinning ear to ear. "Excellent choice, sir. And for you, madam?"

I smiled, shaking my head at their antics. "I'll have the same, thank you."

They rushed off to a small table nearby, where I saw they had set up a little station with the food and drinks. I turned back to Chet, my heart swelling with affection for my kids and this man who put all of this together.

"How did you manage to rope them into this?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He leaned in closer, his voice low and playful. "Oh, they volunteered. Insisted, actually. This was all their idea. They wanted to make sure everything was perfect for you."

I felt a lump in my throat, a mix of gratitude and love that made my heart ache in the best way. “Well, they’re doing an amazing job,” I said softly, my voice a little choked. “And so are you.”

He reached across the table, taking my hand in his again. “I just wanted you to have a night where you felt special. Because you are, Paige. You’re so very special. I don’t think you hear that enough.”

Before I could respond, Mr. Thompson started playing a soft melody on his violin, and I felt the emotion catch in my throat again. The music was gentle and sweet, wrapping around us like a warm hug. I looked at Chet, feeling a tear threaten to spill over, and he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

The kids came back, carrying glasses of sparkling cider with exaggerated seriousness, and set them down in front of us with a little flourish. “Enjoy your drinks, madam and sir!” Brandon said, and then they scurried off to prepare the first course.

I took a sip of the cider, feeling the bubbles tickle my nose, and I couldn’t help but smile. “This is... amazing, Chet,” I whispered. “No one has ever done something like this for me before.”

He looked at me with that warm, sincere expression that made my heart flutter. “I’m just glad you’re here, Paige. I wanted you to feel appreciated and to know how much you mean to all of us... especially me.”

My breath caught at his words, and I felt my cheeks warm again. I glanced down, trying to collect myself, but when I looked up, he was still watching me, his eyes filled with something deep and genuine.

Just then, Jenny came with two small salad plates. Proudly, she explained, “Our special salad for tonight is our deluxe Caesar salad.” She added in a whisper to me,

“Brandon and I made this! Mrs. Jenkins taught us so we can make it at home too!”

“Oh, Jenny, that’s wonderful! It looks delicious.” We both thanked her and started on our salad.

“Did I ever tell you how I attempted to impress my high school coach by faking a British accent?”

“A British accent?” I asked, incredulous. “Why in the world would you do that?”

He grinned, leaning in as if he was about to share a deep secret. “I thought it’d make me sound sophisticated, like I’d been traveling or something. Figured it would give me an edge over the other guys.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “And did it?”

He shook his head, laughing too. “Nope. The coach thought I’d lost my mind. He benched me for a week. Told me to ‘drop the Sherlock Holmes act.’”

I burst into laughter, the image of a teenage Chet wandering around the football field saying “jolly good pass, mate” too hilarious to handle. “Oh my goodness, that’s priceless!”

He chuckled, his eyes twinkling. “Yeah, I haven’t tried a British accent since. I think I scarred myself for life.”

I laughed so hard my sides started to hurt, and I realized how much I needed this—just to laugh, to let go of everything weighing on me, even if just for a moment. I felt like I was reconnecting with a part of myself I’d forgotten.

Before Chet started on another story, Jenny came over with two plates of lasagna,

carefully balancing them with a big grin. “Your main course, fresh from Mrs. Jenkins’s kitchen!” she announced proudly.

Brandon followed with a basket of garlic bread, holding it up like it was a prized treasure. “And the finest garlic bread in all of Hawthorn Hideaway!”

Chet and I both laughed, thanking them for their service, and they scampered off, whispering excitedly to each other. Chet moved on to another story, this time about a charity dunk tank gone horribly wrong. I could see the amusement dancing in his eyes as he set the scene. “So there I was, thinking I was going to be the hero of the day, sitting up there on the platform, waving like a king... and then, bam! Some kid barely tapped the target, and the platform gave way.”

I was already giggling, picturing him flailing around. “Oh no, did you fall in?”

He nodded, his grin widening. “Fell in like a sack of potatoes. I came up sputtering, and then—bam again! The platform swung back and hit me right in the head. The whole crowd lost it.”

I gasped, laughing, imagining the whole ridiculous scene. “Oh, Chet! That sounds painful yet like something out of a cartoon!”

He laughed too. “Tell me about it. And the worst part? The local newspaper photographer caught the exact moment I went down, mid-flail. The picture ended up on the front page.”

I was clutching my stomach now, laughing so hard I could barely breathe. “Oh, that’s fantastic. I would have loved to see that picture!”

He winked at me. “Maybe I’ll show you one day. But I warn you—it’s not my most flattering angle.”

I couldn't stop giggling. "Captain Splash... I think I'm going to start calling you that from now on."

His grin widened. "Hey, if it makes you smile, I'll take it."

He kept going, telling me story after story, each one more ridiculous than the last. There was the time he tried to impress a girl by juggling pineapples at a market ("Turns out, pineapples are heavier than they look. I dropped one on my foot and spent the rest of the day limping."), and the time he accidentally wore two different shoes to a big event ("I was so nervous, I didn't even notice until someone pointed it out during a speech.").

Every story had me laughing harder, tears streaming down my face. I could feel the tension in my shoulders easing, my heart feeling lighter with every joke, every shared memory.

I hadn't realized how much I missed this—just having fun, being silly, letting myself be in the moment. Chet's stories were ridiculous, but they were also endearing, showing a side of him that was genuine and playful, a side that I found myself drawn to.

I leaned forward, still smiling, my heart feeling fuller than it had in a long time. "You've got quite the collection of embarrassing stories, Chet."

He shrugged, still grinning. "I've lived a colorful life. But you know, I wouldn't change any of it. Every mistake, every ridiculous moment... they've all led me here, to this night, with you."

My heart skipped a beat at his words, and I felt a warmth spread through my chest. "Well," I said softly, "I'm glad they did. Because I haven't laughed this much in... I don't even know how long."

He smiled, and there was something softer, more serious in his eyes now. “That’s all I wanted,” he said, his voice low and sincere. “To make you laugh, to see you smile like this.”

I felt a blush creeping up my neck, but I couldn’t look away. I had been guarded for so long, but with Chet, it felt... easy. Natural. Like maybe, just maybe, I didn’t have to hold back.

I shook my head, still grinning. “Well, mission accomplished, Captain Splash.”

I felt like I had laughed myself into a happy daze. The air was warm, the lights were glowing, and my cheeks ached from smiling so much. I hadn’t felt this carefree in years, and I didn’t want this feeling to end.

But just as I thought that, Jenny and Brandon appeared again, this time with two small plates, each holding a perfectly arranged dessert. They walked over with all the seriousness of professional waiters, holding the plates up high like they were carrying precious treasures.

Jenny set a plate in front of me with a little flourish. “For you, madam,” she said, trying to keep a straight face.

Brandon did the same for Chet, bowing a little as he placed the plate down. “And for you, sir. Tonight’s dessert special is... chocolate mousse with a twist! A super special from Mrs. Lawson’s kitchen.”

Chet and I exchanged amused glances, and I looked down at the dessert. It was a delicate chocolate mousse, topped with whipped cream and a few fresh raspberries. But there was a little surprise on the side: a small piece of what looked like homemade caramel candy, wrapped in a tiny bow.

“What’s the twist?” I asked, grinning up at them.

Jenny giggled. “The twist is... the secret ingredient in the mousse! It’s Mrs. Lawson’s famous dark chocolate with a hint of chili powder!”

Chet raised an eyebrow, looking impressed. “Chili powder? Fancy! I like it.”

Brandon nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, we thought you might! It’s supposed to be spicy and sweet. And we added the caramel because... well, who doesn’t love caramel?”

I couldn’t help but laugh, my heart swelling with love for my kids and their creativity. “You two did all this?”

Jenny nodded proudly. “We helped Mrs. Lawson with the mousse, and she let us make the caramel. It’s a special recipe.”

I smiled, touched by their effort. “Well, I can’t wait to try it.”

Chet picked up his spoon, looking at me with a playful glint in his eye. “Shall we?”

I nodded, scooping up a bit of the mousse, noticing the rich, dark chocolate glistening in the light. I took a small bite, and the flavor exploded in my mouth—a perfect blend of smooth chocolate with a surprising hint of warmth from the chili. The sweetness was just right, and there was a subtle kick at the end that made me grin.

“Mmm,” I murmured, savoring the taste. “This is... delicious. The chili is such a nice surprise!”

Chet nodded, taking a bite of his own. “Wow,” he said, a little surprised. “That’s amazing. Sweet, with just the right amount of spice. You two did an awesome job.”

Jenny and Brandon beamed with pride, and I felt a swell of gratitude for this moment, for the effort everyone had put into making tonight so special.

“And the caramel?” Chet asked, picking up the little piece wrapped in the tiny bow. “Shall we try it?”

I nodded, unwrapping my piece and taking a small bite. The caramel was buttery and rich, with a hint of sea salt that made it melt in my mouth. It was simple, but it was perfect—exactly what I didn’t know I needed to end the meal.

“Oh, that’s heavenly,” I said, closing my eyes for a moment to enjoy it. “I didn’t know you two were such talented chefs.”

Brandon laughed. “We had a good teacher!”

Jenny nodded. “And it was fun. We wanted you to have the best dessert ever.”

I smiled at them, my heart full. “Well, you succeeded. This is perfect.”

Chet leaned over, a grin on his face. “You know, Paige, I think we’ve got a couple of future dessert moguls on our hands here.”

I laughed, feeling warm and content. “I think you’re right. Maybe we’ll start a family bakery.”

The kids laughed, and I felt a warmth in my chest, like everything had fallen perfectly into place.

“Mom, we are going to clean up then head home. I will make sure Jenny gets ready for bed. Please enjoy your special night with Chet. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mommy! It’s ok if you and Chet kiss after we are gone. I love seeing you two together.”

Brandon swatted at Jenny as they scurried away. “You aren’t supposed to say stuff like that to adults!”

Chet and I cracked up laughing at my silly kids. My heart felt so full. I could never find enough words to express how much I loved my kids. They really were the best, and I was so blessed.

As we finished the dessert, Chet stood and offered me his hand, a playful look in his eyes. “Now, how about that dance?”

I took his hand, feeling a spark of excitement in my chest. “I’d love to. Dancing with you has become one of my favorite things to do,” I said softly. He smiled back at me with that gentle look in his eyes.

We moved under the lights, with the taste of chocolate and caramel lingering on my lips, I knew I was exactly where I wanted to be—dancing, laughing, and living in that beautiful moment with Chet. More than that, he was looking at me like I was the only person there, like the night was as special for him as it was for me. It had been so long since I felt like that—so seen, so cared for.

As Chet pulled me close, the melody from Mr. Thompson’s violin filled the air, and I suddenly recognized the tune.

It was **La Vie en Rose**.

The notes drifted softly through the night air, delicate and sweet, and instantly, a wave of emotion washed over me. My breath caught in my throat, and I felt a tightness in my chest. I knew this song. I knew it so well that every note felt like a

thread pulling on my heart, unraveling memories I had kept tucked away for so long.

It was my parents' song.

I was immediately back to when I was a little girl, watching my parents dance in our living room. My dad would put this song on the old record player, scratchy and warm, and he'd pull my mom close, swaying with her as if they were the only two people in the world. I remembered the way they would look at each other—like nothing else mattered, like they had all the time in the world. A love I had always wanted for myself.

My mom would hum along, her head resting on his shoulder, her eyes closed, a soft smile on her lips. They would dance slowly, moving in perfect sync, and I would watch from the corner, hiding behind a chair, giggling as I saw them lost in their own little world. It was their special thing, a moment just for them, where they found peace in each other's arms, even when life was hard.

I hadn't heard this song in years. Not since my dad passed. I never let myself play it, afraid it would hurt me or my mom too much, afraid it would bring back memories I wasn't ready to face.

But now, there it was, floating through the night air like a whisper, wrapping around me with all its bittersweet beauty. I could feel tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, my throat tightening with the weight of it all.

Chet noticed immediately, his hand tightening around mine. "Hey," he whispered, concern in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

I nodded, but I couldn't speak just yet. I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, the tears would spill over. I looked up at him, trying to steady my breath, and he waited, patient and kind, giving me a moment to find my voice.

“It’s just... this song,” I finally managed, my voice barely a whisper. “It’s... it’s my parents’ song. They used to dance to it all the time. They were so in love. I haven’t heard it in so long... since my dad’s passing.”

His expression softened, and he stepped closer, his eyes filled with understanding. “I’m sorry, Paige. I didn’t know...”

I shook my head quickly, trying to smile through the tears. “No, it’s okay. It’s... it’s a beautiful memory. I just... I wasn’t expecting it.”

He nodded, his thumb brushing gently over the back of my hand, grounding me. “Do you want to sit down, take a break?”

I shook my head again, feeling a tear escape down my cheek. “No,” I whispered. “I want to dance.”

He smiled, pulling me closer, his arms wrapping around me gently, yet firmly. “Then let’s dance,” he said softly.

I leaned into him, resting my head against his chest, letting the melody wash over me. The tears came, soft and slow, but they didn’t feel painful this time. They felt like a release, like I was letting go of something I had been holding onto for too long.

As we swayed to the music, I felt Chet’s hand on my back, steady and warm, and I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into the moment. I felt safe, comforted... and for the first time in a long time, I felt a sense of peace.

The song played on, and I imagined my parents dancing in their living room, smiling and happy, wrapped in each other’s arms. I could almost hear my mom’s soft hum, see the twinkle in my dad’s eye. And I realized, with a bittersweet ache, that they would have loved this... loved that I was there, feeling this way, letting someone in

again.

As the final notes of the song faded into the night, I could feel his breath on my cheek, his hand firm but gentle on my back, his thumb tracing small circles that sent a shiver down my spine. My head rested against his chest, and I could hear the steady beat of his heart, matching the rhythm of my own. I felt safe there, in his arms, like nothing in the world could touch us. I pulled back slightly, looking up at Chet. His eyes were gentle, his expression full of understanding, and I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “For this. For everything.”

He smiled, brushing a tear from my cheek. “You don’t have to thank me, Paige,” he murmured. “I’m just glad you’re here.”

I realized just then that our magical night would have to end eventually. I started to feel a bit of panic settling in.

Chet seemed to feel it too. He pulled back just slightly, enough to look down into my eyes. There was something serious in his gaze, something that made my heart race a little faster.

“Paige,” he said softly, his voice low and sincere, “I know we’ve joked a lot tonight, and I’ve told you more embarrassing stories than I probably should have... but there’s something I need to say. Something real.”

I felt a flutter of nervousness in my stomach, but I nodded, my eyes never leaving his. “Okay,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “I’m listening.”

He took a deep breath, his hand still resting on my waist, keeping me close. “I’ve been thinking a lot, about you, about us, about everything. And I realized tonight...

that I don't want to keep pretending like this is just casual or that it doesn't mean anything. Because it does, Paige. It means a lot. You mean a lot."

I felt my heart swell in my chest, my breath catching in my throat. "Chet, I..."

He shook his head gently, his smile soft. "Let me finish, okay?"

I nodded, a small smile tugging at my lips. "Okay."

He took another breath, his eyes never leaving mine. "I've spent a long time trying to figure out what I want, what makes me happy. And tonight... tonight, I realized that what makes me happy is being here, with you. I don't want anyone else, Paige. I don't want to be anywhere else. I want you. Just you."

I felt tears prickling at the corners of my eyes, a mix of joy and relief flooding through me. "Chet... are you saying...?"

He nodded, his hand moving up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing away a tear that I hadn't even realized had fallen. "Yeah," he said softly. "I'm saying I want to be with you. Just you. I want to be your one and only, if you'll let me."

I felt my heart skip a beat, a rush of emotion so strong it almost knocked me off my feet. I had been so guarded, so afraid to let anyone in, but with Chet, it felt different. It felt... right.

I took a deep breath, my hand reaching up to cover his on my cheek. "Chet," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion, "I've been scared. Scared of letting someone in, scared of what that might mean... but with you, I don't feel scared anymore. I feel... safe. And happy. And alive in a way I haven't felt in so long."

His eyes softened, and he leaned in just a bit closer. "So, what are you saying,

Paige?”

I smiled, feeling the tears finally spill over, but they were happy tears. “I’m saying... I want that too. I want you to be my one and only. I want to be with you, Chet. No one else.”

A huge grin spread across his face, and he let out a breath like he had been holding it in for days. “You mean it?”

I nodded, laughing softly through the tears. “I mean it.”

He pulled me closer, wrapping me in a tight hug, and I felt like I could melt right there in his arms. “You’ve just made me the happiest man in the world, Paige,” he murmured into my hair, his voice thick with emotion.

I pulled back slightly, just enough to look up at him, my heart full to bursting. “You’ve made me pretty happy too,” I said softly, and before I could overthink it, I leaned up and pressed my lips to his.

The kiss was soft at first, tentative, but then he deepened it, his hand moving to the back of my neck, pulling me closer. I could feel everything in that kiss—every laugh, every joke, every shared moment—and it was like everything fell into place.

When we finally pulled back, we were both smiling, breathless, and I felt a lightness in my chest, a weight I didn’t even realize I was carrying lifting off me.

“So,” he said, his forehead resting against mine, “what now?”

I laughed, a bright, free sound that filled the night air. “Now, we see where this takes us,” I whispered. “Together.”

He nodded, his smile soft and full of promise. “Together.”

And as we stood there, under the twinkling lights, with the night sky stretching above us, I knew that whatever came next, we would face it hand in hand. Together. For the first time in a long time, I felt complete.

CHET

It had been about six months since that magical night under the oak tree, and things had changed in ways I never could have imagined. The season was in full swing, and I was back on the road, moving from city to city, playing game after game. But somehow, despite the grueling schedule, the endless travel, and the noise of the crowd, everything felt different.

Better.

It wasn't like the long-distance thing was easy. It wasn't. Being away from Paige and the kids was harder than I ever thought it would be. I missed them every single day—the way Paige's laughter brightened my mood no matter how tough the game had been, the way Jenny and Brandon's faces lit up when they saw me on a video call. I missed the simple things, like sitting with them at the kitchen table, eating one of Paige's homemade meals, or hugging and cuddling up for movie night in the living room.

But we made it work. Because we both wanted this, wanted us, more than anything.

I glanced at my phone, sitting on the bench beside me, waiting for the next few moments before practice started. I pulled it up, scrolling through our latest messages, my heart warming at the sight of Paige's last text:

Just watched your interview—looking good, Captain Splash ??. Call me after practice. We miss you.

I grinned, remembering the way she teased me about that story. I swore she'd never let me live that down. And I loved it. I loved the way she always brought lightness to my day, even when we were miles apart.

We had a routine by then. Every morning, I sent her a good-morning text, something to make her smile—sometimes a joke, sometimes a quote, sometimes just a simple “I love you.” And every night, we talked, no matter how late it was or how tired I was. I called her when I was on the bus, at the airport, or grabbing lunch between meetings. And she always answered, no matter how busy she was at the library or with the kids.

The video calls were my favorite. I got to see her face, the way her eyes lit up when she talked about her day, the way her smile crinkled at the corners when she laughed at one of my stories. I got to see Jenny and Brandon popping in and out—Jenny showing me her latest drawings or telling me about her school projects, or hearing about Brandon's first experiences playing football in high school. It had taken a lot of talking and convincing to get Paige on board, but it had been worth it. Brandon was loving football and really succeeding at it. It felt like I was still there with them, even if it was just through a screen.

We had even set up a little “date night” routine. Once a week, we picked a time, and I ordered food for both of us from our favorite places—me from whatever city I was in, her from the local diner in Hawthorn Hideaway. We sat down in front of our screens, ate together, and talked, just like we would have if we had been sitting at that little table under the oak tree.

And on the weekends and special holidays, whenever I got the chance, I flew back home, even if it was just for a day. I had gotten pretty good at navigating airport terminals and catching red-eye flights, all for a few precious hours with them. It was worth every bit of exhaustion to see Paige standing there at the airport, waiting for me with that smile that made everything feel right. I had even been able to be at some of Brandon's games. It had been such an awesome experience all around.

Paige was amazing, really. She had been my rock through all of this—always understanding, always supportive, never making me feel guilty for being away. She kept everything grounded, kept us connected. She was patient with me, with my schedule, with all the chaos that came with my job. And I was grateful every single day for how lucky I was to have her.

That day, I was in another city, another stadium, and the day's schedule was packed with meetings, practice, and media obligations. But all I could think about was the weekend when I'd finally get to see her again. I had two days off between games, and I was heading straight back to Hawthorn Hideaway.

I had already booked the flight and had a surprise planned—dinner at that little Italian restaurant she loved, and maybe, if I could pull it off, a moonlit walk by the lake afterward. I wanted to make every moment count because I knew how precious our time together was.

The guys on the team gave me a hard time about it sometimes. They joked about me being whipped, about how I was always on the phone with my “librarian girlfriend.” But they saw the way I smiled when her name popped up on my screen, the way my mood changed when I heard her voice. They knew, even if they didn't say it out loud, that she had become my anchor, my home base. And I thought they got it.

I pulled up my calendar, counting down the hours until I could see her again. It wasn't easy, balancing all of this—my career, the travel, the distance—but somehow, with Paige, it didn't feel like a sacrifice. It felt like a choice, a choice I made every day, gladly, because she was worth it.

I knew it was still new, that we were still figuring things out. But I also knew that I had never felt this sure about anything in my life. Paige and I were in this together. We made each other better, stronger. And every time I looked at her, every time I heard her laugh, I knew I'd do anything to keep that smile on her face.

My phone buzzed again, and I saw a new message from her:

Don't forget to take care of yourself. I love you, Captain Splash.

I grinned, feeling that familiar warmth spread through me. I typed back quickly:

I love you too, Paige, my beautiful librarian. Can't wait to see you this weekend. Until then, you're stuck with my terrible jokes over text. ??

She replied almost instantly:

I wouldn't have it any other way.

And as I headed out to the field for practice, I felt lighter, knowing that no matter where I went, no matter how far apart we were, I had her with me—her love, her laughter, her faith in us.

We were making it work. One day at a time, one call at a time, one laugh at a time. And I knew that whatever the future held, we were ready to face it together, hand in hand, no matter the distance.

PAIGE

It had been just about a year since that magical night under the oak tree, and if anyone had told me back then that I'd be planning a wedding now, I would have laughed and told them they were crazy. But there I was, standing in the middle of my living room, surrounded by swatches of fabric, color samples, and pages torn from wedding magazines, feeling a mixture of excitement, nerves, and pure, unfiltered happiness.

Jenny and Brandon were sprawled out on the floor with me, flipping through pages and pointing out things they liked. It was a warm, sunny afternoon, and the light streaming in through the windows made everything feel golden and perfect. My heart felt so full it was about to burst.

Chet was on his way back from a game; he had texted earlier to say his flight had landed on time and he'd be home soon. Home. I smiled at the word. It was amazing how quickly he had become such an integral part of my life—of our lives. It felt like he had been there forever, like he had always belonged here, with us.

“Mommy!” Jenny exclaimed, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Look at this! What do you think about these flowers for the tables?”

I glanced at the picture she was pointing to—a gorgeous arrangement of white roses, sunflowers, and greenery. My heart skipped a beat. “Oh, Jenny, that's perfect,” I said, feeling tears prickling at my eyes. “You know how much I love sunflowers.”

She beamed, pleased with herself. “I knew you would. And Chet loves roses because of his Baba, right?”

I nodded, my smile widening. “He does. You two are going to be the best wedding planners ever.”

Brandon grinned from beside her. “I’m in charge of the music,” he declared proudly. “No boring stuff. It’s going to be fun—dancing, and good songs, and maybe even a little bit of karaoke.”

I laughed, my heart swelling with love for my kids. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, Brandon.”

He gave me a thumbs-up and then went back to his list of potential songs. I couldn’t help but smile, watching them so engaged and excited. They had been so supportive, so wonderful through all of this. When Chet had proposed a few months ago, right there under the old oak tree, with his hands shaking just a little, they had been the first ones to jump up and shout, “Yes!” before I could even get the words out myself.

It hadn’t been a flashy proposal; it was simple, heartfelt, and full of love—exactly like Chet. And exactly what I had wanted.

Now, as I looked around at the mess of wedding plans and the happy faces of my children, I felt a sense of peace settle over me. This was real. This was happening. I was getting married to the man I loved, the man who had brought so much light and laughter back into my life.

A knock on the door pulled me from my thoughts, and my heart did a little flip. “That must be him,” I said, standing up quickly and heading for the door, my pulse quickening with excitement.

I opened the door, and there he was, standing on the front step, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, a tired but happy grin on his face. “Hey,” he said, his voice warm and full of that familiar softness I had come to adore. “Miss me?”

I laughed, stepping forward to wrap my arms around him. “Always,” I whispered into his chest, feeling his arms tighten around me.

He pulled back just enough to look into my eyes, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. “How’s the wedding planning going?” he asked, glancing over my shoulder at the chaos inside.

“Good,” I said, laughing. “A bit overwhelming, but good. The kids are helping a lot.”

“Good,” he said, smiling. “I can’t wait to hear what they’ve come up with.”

I pulled him inside, and he was immediately swarmed by Jenny and Brandon, who both started excitedly telling him about their ideas. I watched as he listened, nodding and smiling, his hand never leaving mine, and I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me. This was my family. This was my future.

****Eight Months After the Honeymoon...****

I never thought I’d be there again—feeling the flutter of tiny kicks inside me, my hand resting on my swollen belly, a mix of nerves and excitement coursing through me. But there I was, sitting on the couch with a cup of herbal tea, feeling that familiar, wonderful anticipation of what was to come.

We were expecting a boy. Our boy.

I smiled to myself, rubbing my belly gently. We had found out a few months ago, and Chet had been over the moon. I remembered the way his face had lit up when the doctor told us—it was like he’d just won the biggest game of his life. He had immediately started talking about teaching our son how to throw a football, how to be a good man, how to love fiercely and laugh often.

Jenny and Brandon had been just as excited. They had been busy picking out baby

names, arguing over who would get to be the favorite older sibling, and insisting on decorating the nursery themselves. It had been chaotic, but it was a beautiful chaos, one filled with so much love and joy that it was hard to believe it was real sometimes.

Chet walked into the room, fresh from a morning jog, a smile spreading across his face when he saw me. “Hey, you,” he said softly, coming over to sit beside me.

“Hey,” I said, leaning into his side. “Did you have a good run?”

He nodded, his arm wrapping around me. “Yeah, but I couldn’t wait to get back to you. And our little guy,” he added, placing his hand on my belly.

I smiled, feeling the warmth of his hand, the strength and gentleness in his touch. “He’s been kicking up a storm,” I said, laughing. “I think he already wants to be on the field with you.”

Chet laughed, his eyes lighting up. “That’s my boy. Already getting in some practice.”

I laughed too, feeling that familiar swell of happiness. “I love you, you know that?”

He looked at me, his expression softening. “I love you too, Paige. More than anything.”

I rested my head on his shoulder, feeling peace settle over me. Soon we would be welcoming our son into the world. It was a lot, but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. I knew there would be challenges, and there would be tough days, but we were in this together.

We had built something beautiful, something strong, something I never thought I’d find again. And as I sat there, with Chet beside me and our future growing inside me, I knew that whatever came next, we would face it with love, laughter, and a whole lot

of joy.

And I couldn't wait for all of it.