

CHAPTER THREE



Adam parked his Dodge Ram behind his stepfather's covered pickup and unfastened his seatbelt. He was relieved to find he had a text from Cassie. She was all right. *Probably just running behind again and didn't want to stop to let me know.* That tendency of Cassie's was something to which he had become accustomed. It would have exasperated him a few months ago, but now he smiled and shook his head.

He walked up the flagstone path under a large maple tree to the base of the porch steps. By the time he reached the front door, it was already opening.

His stepsister, Maddie, stood in the doorway. Her hair was tied back with an unnecessarily wide ribbon, and she wore—of all things—overalls.

"Is that a style choice, or are you about to paint your bedroom for the fifteenth time?" Adam teased her.

Maddie rolled her eyes. "Get in here. Hey, Mom! Some homeless guy showed up. Should I invite him to dinner or give him a buck and send him on his way?"

"What?" Adam's mother appeared as Adam entered the living room. "Oh! You're here. Welcome home." She gave her

son a quick hug and kiss. "Dinner's ready. I just need to finish setting the table. Maddie, give me a hand."

Maddie followed her stepmother's retreat, muttering something about formality.

Adam's stepfather rose from his easy chair and shook Adam's hand. "It's good to see you, Adam."

"You too." Adam had developed a good rapport with Sean over time, though they'd had a few ups and downs early on. To be polite, he asked, "Still rebuilding that outboard motor?"

"Finished it. Probably won't get a chance to take it to the lake until next spring, but it's one project down. Everything good with Cassie?"

"Yeah." No need to elaborate on how she had worried him at the end of her shift.

Maddie breezed back into the room. "Did Mom tell you Josh is blowing his exams because of roleplaying games?"

Before Adam could answer, his mother called, "Come an' get it!"

"Uh, there's a little more to it than that," Sean said, stepping toward the kitchen.

Adam took his place at the dining table across from Maddie, who looked eager to talk more. As soon as Sean had finished praying over the meal, she burst.

"Josh joined a fraternity full of gaming nerds. He spends hours and hours playing with them instead of studying."

"Maddie ..." Mom said in a reproachful tone.

"Well, it's true. You said he could lose his scholarship. If he doesn't do well on his midterms, he'll be on probation."

"Academic probation," Sean put in.

Maddie went on. "He could even get expelled."

This time, Mom sounded upset. "Maddie!" Her eyes were a little misty.

"That's the worst-case scenario," said Sean. "But unfortunately, it's true."

Adam hadn't realized the full gravity of the situation from his

mother's phone call. "He's doing that badly? He's not stupid or anything. What kind of grades is he getting?"

His mom sighed. "He's managing a B in his computer class, but everything else is at a C or below. He has to maintain a B average for the partial scholarship and an A average for the full scholarship." She quickly brushed her cheek. "He didn't even turn in a paper when it was due for his English class."

"He blew it," Maddie summed up.

"You don't have to sound happy about it," Mom said.

"I'm not *happy*, per se, but the worse Josh messes up now, the more I can get away with when I go to college."

Adam knew Maddie was partially kidding. "Sound logic."

She grinned at him.

"All right, kidding aside ..." Sean helped himself to some green beans and passed the dish to Adam. "Josh has been there almost two months, and his scholarship is on the verge of being gone. It seems like he hasn't learned much, and now I'll probably be footing the bill for the time he's wasting. I warned him not to get distracted when we moved him into the dorm ... it seems like that fell on deaf ears. When he's done, he might not even have a decent reputation to fall back on."

"What if he commutes from home?" Adam suggested.

Mom shook her head. "It's too far. He'd have to get up so early, he wouldn't have much time to study before bed. And gas is so expensive these days. It's just a waste of time and gas."

"The dorm is doing him no good," Sean said. "I don't know what to do with him, but if he doesn't turn this semester around, I think he's going to have to take classes by correspondence. I'm not paying for four years of malarky."

Maddie swallowed a bite of food. "Josh couldn't do school online. He'd start playing some game in his 'spare time.'" She flexed the fingers of one hand in the air to signify quotation marks. "Then he'd waste the whole day and say he didn't have time to do his coursework."

Her matter-of-fact tone surprised Adam. He protested, "But he didn't used to be like that."

"Not when you were here. First it was video games, then online games, now roleplaying games. Josh hasn't lived in the real world in years." Maddie shook her head.

With a whimper, Mom put her face in her hands. "I don't know why I didn't see this coming. I didn't want to discourage him from making friends and having fun. It didn't interfere with his grades much before, so I didn't worry about it."

"Surely there's time for him to turn things around before semester finals." Adam reached over to pat her arm, not knowing what else to do.

Sean tried to comfort her. "It's as much my fault as yours, Diane. We'll figure this out."

Sean steered the conversation away from Josh, and Adam followed his lead. He didn't bring up the topic again until Adam was about to leave.

"Keep Josh in your prayers," Sean said as Adam opened the door.

"I will. Tell him to call me if he gets the chance." It wasn't much of an offer, but Adam felt powerless to help in any other way.

"I was thinking maybe you and I could go up to see him in person. Talk some sense into him." Sean eyed him expectantly.

"Sure. I'd be willing, if we can coordinate our schedules."

"Good. I'll let you know."

Adam spent a good part of Saturday morning looking online for local attractions he and Cassie had not yet visited on a date. She had sounded a little tired when they talked on the phone the evening before, so he proposed she use the day to relax, and they would spend time together after church on Sunday. With Josh's situation heavy on his mind, he wanted to do something low-

pressure with Cassie. He came up with a couple of options to suggest to her before fixing himself some lunch and turning his thoughts to picking up groceries for the week.

As he was finishing his meal, his phone buzzed. Expecting it to be Cassie, Adam was surprised to see “Archie” on the screen. His boss rarely called on the weekend.

Since he had worked for Archie Reuben longer than most of the current employees and they had a good working relationship, Adam called his boss by his first name. “Hey, Archie. What’s up?”

“Hi. I went to the office to do some paperwork this morning—I do that most Saturdays ...”

“Right.”

“Well, I found the door forced open.”

“What?” The idea of someone breaking into a sanitation service office seemed bizarre.

“They got the petty cash but didn’t do much damage. I called the cops, and they think it’s probably kids. My jar of licorice is missing, so they’re probably right, but who knows? It can be replaced, of course, but the jar was a souvenir from my wife. Oh, they also messed up my personnel file. Stuff put back in alphabetical order—I keep my personnel records in chronological order.”

“That’s weird. Why would a burglar rearrange your file drawer?” Adam didn’t mention that his boss’s preferred filing style was also weird.

“The officer who was here said I should warn my employees, just in case. You know, it could be someone’s ex looking for their current address or something.”

Fortunately, Adam didn’t have any ex-girlfriends who would do something so extreme, but until they knew who had broken in, it was better to err on the safe side.

“I’ve looked through it,” Archie added, “but I can’t be certain nobody’s file is missing, especially the older ones.”

“You want me to help alert everyone?”

“Yes, please. I’ll call our old-timers, and you contact everyone hired after you started dispatching. Sound good?”

“Works for me. Let me know if there are any new developments.”

“You bet I will. And I’ll have a better lock on that door by Monday.”

“All right. I’ll see you then.”

Adam shook his head as he opened his phone’s contact list. Sometimes everything happened at once, and it seemed like this was going to be one of those times. He hoped it wouldn’t be as intense as when he had first started dating Cassie, and she had discovered a body in her dumpster. That had been one of the most stressful periods of his life. This could have been a lot worse. The licorice jar and the petty cash—no more than fifty dollars, if he remembered right—didn’t worry him too much. But maybe he should brush up on his karate.

He decided to call Cassie first with Archie’s news and was relieved to hear she wasn’t immediately concerned.

“I don’t have any abusive ex-boyfriends,” she assured him. “Just a pretty great current one.”

Adam smiled. “I’m glad to hear it. Hey, while I have you on the phone, how do you feel about a casual lunch and poking around shops downtown after church tomorrow?”

“Sounds perfect. I was thinking I’d rather do something laid-back.”

“Good, I thought the same.”

“Everything okay with you?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Adam decided to confide his stepbrother’s situation to her. She was all sympathy. “I might be going up to the school with Sean—my stepdad—to try to talk some sense into him.”

“Sounds like he might need it. He doesn’t go home on the weekends?”

“Well, he didn’t this week. I’m not sure how often he does.”

“I’ll pray for you.”

“Thank you.”

Adam’s tight shoulders relaxed. Cassie had that effect on him. Things were a little rough and unpredictable right now, but they were bound to work out sooner or later. “We need to remember how easy it is to form bad habits and how hard it is to break them.”

A pang of guilt niggled at Cassie. How could she respond to Adam’s concerns about gaming addiction when she was about to visit a gamers’ haven? She had kept her responses vague to avoid lying to him, but it didn’t feel good.

Jenna emerged from her room, where she had been poring over sample flower arrangement photos while she ate a sandwich for lunch. “Did you eat?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Still want to check out Wizard’s Brew?”

Cassie had already resigned herself to the feeling of sneakiness. There was no point in backing out now. “Yup.”

“All right, let’s go. I need to get out of the apartment for a while.” Jenna grabbed her purse and keys.

As she parked in front of the café, Jenna said, “I don’t normally go to gatherings of the chronically online ... For some of them, places like this are the only real-world socialization they get. But I really like playing the games. They’re challenging, and you never know when you’ll meet a new friend.”

“I just hope one of them knows our mysterious symbol.” Cassie thought the quest would be fun if she weren’t feeling guilty over what Adam had said.

When they entered the café, the dim interior punctuated by a few glowing screens at some of the tables put Cassie in mind of

the cantina scene from *Star Wars*. Even the ambient music had an authentic medieval sound to it: a harp accompanied by a woodwind instrument.

“Welcome to Wizard’s Brew,” called a voice from the back of the café.

As they moved toward the counter, Cassie made out the form of the speaker. He was a man who looked like he was in his late thirties, with a neatly trimmed goatee and hair just long enough to look rebellious.

“Ah, the tavern keeper,” Jenna said in a low voice.

“Tavern keeper?” Cassie asked.

Jenna nodded with a smile. “A common stock character for adventure games.” They’d reached the counter, and she faced the man. “Thank you. Do you have a special today?”

“Candy apple cauldron,” was the quick reply. “It’s an apple-flavored hot chocolate.”

“Ooh ...” Cassie hadn’t expected to be tempted this quickly by something at the café.

“Or if you want coffee, our mystic macchiato is very popular. It’s spiced caramel flavor.”

“Now I want both.”

“It’s easy to check out all your options if you download the app.” The man pointed to a stylishly decorated chalkboard with instructions written in what could be described only as chalk calligraphy.

Jenna immediately opened the app store on her phone and held it so Cassie could see the description. “Sounds great for introverts. You can order and pay straight from the app without having to talk to anyone.”

“Yup. I’m Max—the manager—so if you have any questions, just ask me. I’d like to say I’m ‘Miracle Max,’ but my employees would probably say ‘Mad Max’ is more accurate.”

Cassie laughed. “Thanks.”

Jenna glanced back at the rest of the café. “Let’s go ahead

and get one of each of those drinks, and we can taste each other's." She leaned closer to Cassie so she could say too quietly for Max to overhear, "Then we'll have a fortifying elixir to fuel our quest for knowledge."

Cassie held back a giggle. "Let's do it."