

Chapter 1

Chase Maxfield has been in school with me since kindergarten. He wasn't the kind of kid who got noticed back then, and I can't say things improved over the years. One look at him would lead you to suspect his favorite color was gray—better yet, white. When Chase Maxfield was your lab partner in chemistry, he was likely to have trouble getting you to do something as simple as hand him a beaker. Why? Because you didn't hear him the first time, and you didn't see him the second time—even though he was standing right next to you. If there was a “most likely to go unnoticed” award at Davenport High, Chase would have been the sure vote-getter, and everyone knew it. Until the first day of my senior year, that is, when I saw a transformation that rivaled any “extreme makeover,” televised or not, that the world is likely ever to see.

Jori and I were headed down the main hallway at a slow and easy pace. When the economy tanked and her dad lost his job last spring, the appeal of housing prices in Davenport sent the McAllister family scurrying in our direction with no complaints from my brother Troy or me. This year I was showing up for the first day of school sporting something a whole lot more interesting on my arm than a new watch; I wanted everybody to get a good look at Jori walking the halls with me. Unfortunately, the crowd's attention was already riveted on my younger sibling, a guy who's never known a stranger and who loves the spotlight.

“Ohhhh, Troy!” I heard the cackle of Bunny Fewtajenga's

unmistakable voice. “That was incredible! I mean a complete back flip right here in the hallway—and without a mat—you could have been killed!”

“Or given three weeks detention.” The crowd parted just enough to allow Jori’s sister Julie to make her way over to Troy.

Bunny regarded Julie coolly, then inched closer to Troy and grabbed his left arm with both hands. “Guys like Troy Barrett don’t worry about the rules. At least that’s what I’ve heard. Is it true, Troy?” She leaned into my brother in a vain attempt to become his co-conspirator and loudly whispered into his ear for all to hear, “Cause that’s the rumor, Troy. That you don’t care about rules.”

The crowd had grown larger. Troy, normally so relaxed in a big group, was clearly one nervous boy right now. He had little to fear though because Julie wasn’t the shy type. The kids at Davenport High didn’t know her yet, so they certainly didn’t know that she and Troy had been an item all summer long, but I had a feeling by the way her eyes were targeting Bunny’s that everybody was about to find out. “There is *one* rule that Troy cares a whole lot about. And it’s one of mine,” Julie cautioned.

“Oh, and what’s that?” Bunny countered.

“Don’t touch the merchandise unless you’re sure it’s available.” Julie grabbed Troy’s other arm firmly, and in one fast and unexpected burst of power, Jori’s little sis left Bunny empty-handed. “And in the case of Mr. Barrett here, there’s zero availability.”

A rising “Ooohhhh!” erupted from the crowd. “Catfight!” someone else called, and the girls might have gone at it, too,

had Chase Maxfield not arrived on the scene at precisely that moment.

His hand was on my shoulder, moving me to the side so he could step through, before I did a triple-take. “Excuse me, Jack,” was all he said, and the comment wouldn’t have been such a big deal from anyone else. But Chase Maxfield didn’t move anybody out of the way for anything. He didn’t talk to most people period.

Jori looked at him admiringly, and I felt a twinge of jealousy. “Who’s *that*?” she questioned. It was clear he’d commandeered her attention at least for a minute. More amazing than that, though, was the fact that as soon as he stepped into the center of the group, he effortlessly drew all of the attention away from my brother. And that is something I had never seen happen. Not anytime. Not anywhere. Nobody had ever reigned over Troy . . . until now.

“What’s up guys?” Chase tried to hoist himself onto the window ledge but didn’t make it. On his second attempt he met with some success although it was still a bit awkward; he looked great, but he was clearly struggling to act cool. “The . . . uhhh . . . the bell’s gonna ring soon, right? So are we gonna be good little boys and girls on the first day of school, or are we gonna have some . . . some fun?” The entire speech came out as if a studious egghead was desperately trying to impersonate a rebellious jock.

“Chase?” Bunny was the first to find her voice. I suspected most of the crowd was trying to remember his name, but Bunny made it her business to know everybody. Those who did recognize Chase, like me, were trying to reconcile an irreconcilable transformation. “Chase Maxfield?” Bunny was going to do the

work for us—clarify if what we were seeing could possibly be real.

A dazzling smile made from perfectly white teeth marched out of his mouth, took a bite out of the crowd, and hung on tight. He looked like he had left Mt. Olympus a few minutes before arriving at school. “Hey, Bunny! Yeah, it’s me, Chase.”

She began stammering. “But you . . . you . . . you’re just so . . .”

“Ripped!” somebody yelled. And it was true. Somehow, beanpole Chase suddenly had muscle. A lot of muscle. And that wasn’t the only difference. His hair was dyed or streaked—something that looked movie-star cool. A survey of his clothes broadcast the message that he now spoke fluent Abercrombie whereas before it had been more of a cross-dialect: Target and Wal-Mart.

Seconds after Chase confirmed his identity, the crowd became toddlers, each waiting for a turn on Santa’s lap, and Troy was suddenly scoring a “0” on the High School Hottie register for the first time in his life. He couldn’t take it. “Hey! Anybody want to hear about the time I . . .”

“They have other things to occupy their thoughts right now,” Julie said with a concerned glance toward both Chase and the crowd. “Besides, Mr. Barrett, you and I need to have a little chat about *Bunny*.”

“Bunny? Bunny who?” he questioned innocently.

Julie’s eyes flashed.

“Ohhhhh, *that* Bunny! Oh, well, you see Jules, she was . . . uhhh . . . she . . . she was president of the student body when she was in middle school, and uhhh, and then she was freshman class president last year. How about that?” He clapped his hands as

though he'd just thought of some terrific news that Julie was sure to love. "I bet she's going to run for president of the sophomore class this year at Davenport High! I think she's into politics, Jules. Don't you think?"

Julie's face was Mt. Rushmore. She didn't even blink.

Troy danced nervously from one foot to the other and continued babbling. "She's just . . . well, I'll tell you about Bunny, she's sort of . . . You know what's really funny, and I'm sure you're gonna find this quite humorous, Jules . . ."

Julie had her hand on her hip, one eyebrow arched, waiting for him to create a coherent sentence. "Troy! She's clearly after you."

He interrupted her. "Jules, she's just trying to get to know the student body!"

"Well, *yours* is one student body with which she's going to be a little less familiar than she might like," was Julie's clipped response. She marched him off in the opposite direction, but I saw her glance back one more time. Her eyes met Chase's, and suddenly it seemed that time stopped. They studied each other, and in that moment, I became certain they knew each other very well, which seemed incredibly unlikely. The McAllisters hadn't been in town that long. Neither of the sisters would have had any reason to know anyone at Davenport High well at all, so Chase's metamorphosis from toad to prince shouldn't have even registered with Julie. So why did I see a look in her eyes that reflected disappointment? She shook her head almost imperceptibly from side to side and turned quickly away from him.

I was so attuned to the two of them that I didn't see or hear anything else. I could feel Jori's faint tugging on my arm, but I tuned her out.

There was something unnatural going on here. Chase's new Hercules-come-to-life exterior was completely incompatible with his socially awkward interior. It was as if he'd become a different person on the outside but the inner-geek remained untouched. More than anything, it was the look I saw in his eyes when they met Julie's that troubled me. It wasn't jealousy or even anger. No, it was fear. And it struck me, though I couldn't be absolutely sure, that he wasn't so much afraid *for* Julie, as he was afraid *of* her.

My grandmother rounded the access road to Sunny Days Retirement Home on two wheels and at what I was sure had to be twenty miles an hour over the speed limit. I kept quiet, though. I had learned a long time ago to stop lecturing her about safety or speeding.

"Jack, sports cars are made for adventure," she had told me one afternoon when I tried to point out the perils of drag racing. She had been trying to goad some college boys, who had handily beaten her in a race already, into giving her a chance to redeem herself. Her little red sports car and the two competing cars were resting comfortably at the park while the racing teams lounged on some picnic tables. "Come on fellas! Best two out of three—whadayasay?"

"Gram!" I had pleaded with her. "They won fair and square. Let it go. How about we ratchet the excitement level down a few notches and grab some ice cream?"

"Look, Jack," she had fussed with my windblown hair, "at my age, you never know how many adventures you have left—so

I'm determined to create my own. As long as you don't get in the way—you're welcome to come along. Start dragging me down, though, and I'll have to dump you."

I decided it might not be the best image for an up-and-coming high school senior to be dumped by his own grandmother, so from that day forward I began tightening my seat belt and biting my tongue. I assume our tongues are intended to last a lifetime, but driving with Gram is convincing me that I'll be looking at a tongue transplant by the time I'm twenty-five. She peeled into the parking lot of Sunny Days and skidded diagonally to a stop near the front doors. I winced. The tongue would be bleeding from this one. "You head on in, Jackie-boy, and see if the troops are getting organized for the Road Rally! I'm going to check in with some of the drivers who are here early, and then I'll join you," she said casually.

"Got it, Speed Racer!" I exited the car just before she put the wheels in motion again to find a legitimate parking spot. Anyone who'd ever met my grandmother would have to agree that she was one of the unrecognized wonders of the modern world. At seventy-three, she acted more like seventeen; her hearing aid was the only telltale sign of her age. She had loads of cash from a business empire she and my grandpa Amos built together, so she certainly didn't need to work. Yet here I was, entering a retirement home that she and her best friend, Florence Petrillo, had purchased so they could appoint themselves co-social activities directors. Gram and Florence treated it like a real job, and three days a week come rain or shine, one of them showed up for what could be nothing less than a two-hour extravaganza for the residents.

The decision to purchase Sunny Days had come about earlier in the year when two of Gram and Florence's longtime friends, the Emmerstine brothers, moved into the retirement home. Within a week Gram had heard nothing but complaints from "the boys," as she called them. When you're Gram's friend and you're unhappy, she takes action. She had decided to investigate and presented the results of her research to Troy and me over dinner.

"Boys, Sunny Days Retirement Home is a dud when it comes to action. Dear God in heaven, they had Waldo and Wendell making 'apple people' in a craft class today. Why these are vivacious young men with a lot of living left in them—and they're being treated like kindergarteners!"

Troy poured honey onto two hot dogs he'd just nuked in the microwave, took a bite from each dog, and started to talk while chewing, but Gram shot him a warning look. He swallowed in the nick of time and then quickly attempted to make his point. "Gram, Waldo Emmerstine's in a wheelchair, and he's gotta be close to eighty or something. I'm not sure 'vivacious' is really the best descriptor."

"Troy Barrett! Have you ever seen that man get around? Why he can do things with a wheelchair most people couldn't dream of accomplishing with two legs. Now he and his brother Wendell are absolutely right about that place. It's dullsville. Florence and I went over their yesterday to check things out for ourselves."

"Oh?" I grinned. "So you two are speaking again?" Florence Petrillo may be my grandmother's best friend, but Troy and I think of her as Gram's friendly enemy. Truth be told they couldn't live without one another, but their insatiable competitive streak leads to some pretty serious fireworks now and then. The week prior,

neither would speak to the other because they'd both shown up to local tryouts for a national reality show without telling the other. Neither of them made it past the first round of auditions, but each was incensed that her "best friend" had kept it all a secret. Gram had stomped into the living room that afternoon in an absolute rage. "That Florence Petrillo is a no-good, two-faced, back-stabbing old crow! I don't know why I was ever friends with that woman!"

Troy and I remained calm. We were accustomed to these bimonthly rants about Florence, but we were careful not to let Gram know how humorous we found them. We also knew that Florence's granddaughters, Mia and Tia, were likely listening to a similar eruption from their own grandmother.

"You are friends with her because you have *been* friends with her ever since she beat up the third-grade boy who pushed you off the swing when you were a little first grader," I pointed out. We'd heard the story a hundred times. Over the years, Gram's version of this great tale of heroism had placed Florence firmly in the same category as various highly regarded U.S. generals and presidents as well as several movie stars and Olympic athletes.

Troy chimed in. "You are friends with her because she was the matron of honor at your wedding, because she was in the waiting room while your son was born, and because she never left your side for the sixteen days Grandpa was dying in the hospital."

My turn. "You are friends with her because you have vacationed all over the world together, because you share each other's clothes, and because your cell numbers are only a digit apart."

Gram had plopped into her favorite chair. "Well, she *did* leave the hospital once when Amos was dying. You probably didn't

know that, but she did. And don't you ever let her tell you any different. She left me there. Alone. My supposed best friend."

Troy and I looked at each other and repeated the words in unison to a story we had heard often but which Gram continued to insist she had likely never told us. It was always the same story but depending on the status of the friendship, the blueberry scones that made an appearance at the story's end were either incredibly delicious or absolutely tasteless. Troy nodded at me, and we began. "Florence left the hospital for two hours and eleven minutes. You remember because you were watching the clock. She drove to three different grocery stores to find the rarest of ingredients so she could follow a recipe that your sister, Favorite Aunt Millie, got from a Sherpa with whom she and her faithful dog, Mr. Whizzer, were exploring in the eastern Himalayas. Florence then carefully followed the recipe to the letter to make your favorite blueberry scones and serve them to you in the hospital while they were still warm." I don't know about Troy, but I always felt the need to say "Amen" whenever we completed this particular recitation.

"Those scones were dry as dirt," Gram proclaimed, "I hardly touched them!" Troy and I had debated for years whether we should ask about the likelihood of a Sherpa making blueberry scones but decided to leave well enough alone. Favorite Aunt Millie's tendency to stretch the truth gave her stories zest, and we'd been told countless times by Gram that her sister abhorred stories lacking such an essential component. Besides, Gram assured us, "I'd never get Millie to admit it happened any other way, and you both know it."

The falling out with Florence had been seven days ago, so

apparently they had patched things up and not told us, which was the way these things usually happened. “Well, of course, we’re speaking again. Florence apologized.” Troy and I both cocked our heads toward her and waited. “. . . and I might have mentioned that I was sorry, too. Anyway, that’s all in the past. Florence had the ingenious idea that we pretend one of us was a potential client for Sunny Days and the other was just her friend coming along to listen and take notes.”

“And *who* played the part of the ‘potential client’ for a retirement home?” Troy looked at me with a mischievous smile.

“Well, Florence, naturally.”

“Reeeeeeaaally?” I didn’t buy it. “Florence just agreed right off the bat that she would pretend to be the one who was interested in moving into the retirement home?”

Gram fluffed her hair, which is always an indication that she’s not telling the entire truth. Her sister isn’t the only one with a habit of adjusting the facts. “Well, Jack, Florence can’t help the fact that she looks so much older than me. It only made sense that it would be her.”

I stared her down without saying a word.

“We flipped for it, and she lost, okay? But the point is that we spent three and a half hours there, and while most of what we were told was the absolute truth—jived with everything Waldo and Wendell said about the place—the spiel about activities wasn’t grounded in an ounce of reality. Engaging outings—that’s what they call trips to the pharmacy and the mall. And ‘Music Night’! Do you know what they call ‘Music Night’? It’s people picking a title from a hymnal, and everyone singing off key with no accompaniment.”

Troy hopped up from the table and cartwheeled into a handspring. “Hey, speaking of hymnals, do you guys know what’s really funny? You put the words ‘under the bed’ after the title of a hymn during church and try not to laugh during the sermon. It’s a stitch! Seriously. Like *Whispering Hope* . . . under the bed, or *Nearer My God to Thee* . . . under the bed! He doubled over in laughter. I love that one!”

“Troy,” Gram sounded exasperated, “I taught you that three years ago when we had that new minister—the one who always ran the church service over by thirty minutes.” She looked away dreamily for just a moment. “He sure was *cute*. Too bad he married that boring organ player, Franny HoHum.”

“*Hodrum* not HoHum. I’ve corrected you on that before, Gram.” When Gram gets something in her head one way—good luck changing it. “And she was not boring. She was very nice. She just wasn’t all that fast at the keyboard.”

“Seeing as how people were falling asleep at weddings during the bridal march, Jack, I’d say ‘slow at the keys’ is an understatement. The focus of our conversation, though, is on the fact that Sunny Days is not a hotbed of senior activity, and Florence and I are seeing to it that things get changed.”

“And just how, o’ great and wise grandmother, do the two of you intend to do that?” I queried in a mystical voice.

“Oh, we’re buying the place: fifty-fifty. She owns one half, and I own the other. By the end of the week, the deal will be all sewn up, and then we’re appointing ourselves co-social activities directors. We’ll plan events for the residents together, and then one of us will actually do the implementation work every other month. It’ll be wild!”

“Cool!” Troy was unruffled as usual.

“GRAM! You’re just going to BUY a retirement home because you don’t like the hymn-sing on ‘Music Night’?” I probably shouldn’t have been as surprised as I was.

“Now, Jack Edward Barrett, don’t you take that tone with me. I will not have my friends condescended to like they’re a couple of drooling toddlers. Waldo and Wendell and all of the other people at Sunny Days are full to the brim with life. When Florence and I take over, these people aren’t going to know what hit them.”

And she had been right. In a matter of months, Gram and Florence Petrillo had turned Sunny Days into the place to be among retirees from cities as far as ninety miles outside of town. There was a waiting list of people who wanted to get in, and the local television stations and newspapers regaled in weekly tellings of the unique “goings-on” at Davenport’s most exciting retirement facility.

I walked up the paver brick path of Sunny Days and glanced at the large number of flowers someone had probably planted back in early May. I wondered how many other high school seniors would be spending the late afternoon of their first day of school at a retirement home. This, though, was my legacy. Gram insisted on community service well beyond the high school’s requirements, which should have ended halfway through the sophomore year for me. I began my stint at Sunny Days in June, so the staff and residents pretty much knew me by now. How was it, I thought as I mindlessly signed in at the reception desk, that I was here with the AARP crowd, and Troy was browning in a lifeguard chair at the city pool? I took some comfort in the fact that he’d be serving up some hash early on

Saturday morning at the downtown shelter while I'd be sleeping in until ten.

My wage-earning endeavors were confined to Saturday afternoons shelving books at the library and to my meager lawn-care/snow-removal business with Mrs. Petrillo as my only customer—that is when she and Gram weren't fighting. It had become an understanding between Florence and me that I was fired whenever Gram made her mad, but that I would be immediately rehired when they made up. I lost track of the number of times the two of them were fighting just before payday. Collecting a paycheck from a seventy-five-year-old who refuses to come to the door because she's mad at a woman you're related to is a unique skill—one I clearly do not possess.

As I made my way into the community room, which opened into a large dining area, I heard the familiar voices of Gram's biggest fans, the Emmerstine brothers.

"She's a comin'! She's a comin' I tell ya! I see Jack!" Waldo Emmerstine's wheelchair nearly popped a wheelie as he prepared to leave the dining hall.

"She won't be here for another twenty minutes, you old fool!" Waldo's brother, Wendell, picked up the false teeth lying on the tray beside his half-finished apple tart and popped them into his mouth. "And when she does get here, it'll be *my* good company she'll be seeking." Wendell smoothed back his nearly full head of snow-white hair and carefully rose from the table.

Waldo wheeled over to his brother. "Well, if she ain't a-goin' to be here for another twenty minutes, then what are you in such a confounded rush about? Worried, maybe, that she's gonna accept my marriage proposal, ain't ya?"

Wendell looked slyly at his brother and grinned. Before any of the other residents knew what to say or do, the two elderly men began moving with surprising speed toward the community room, and I stepped back to keep from becoming road kill. They had no more than settled in and begun to quarrel again when Gram's voice stopped them.

"Now, if you handsome young men are going to be arguing all afternoon, I'll have to ask you to leave!" Her eyes sparkled as she greeted the brothers each with a warm embrace and a kiss on the cheek. Then, she knelt beside the wheelchair, settled the oversized tote she called her makeup bag on the floor, and removed a wrapped package from it. "When I saw these on the Home Shopping Network, I just knew you had to have a set, Waldo. Happy Birthday!"

Waldo looked up at his brother with a cocky smirk. "Why, Katy-gal, the only present I want from you is an 'I do' in a church, lickety-split!" He spoke with lighthearted affection as he unwrapped the gift.

"Old fool," muttered Wendell under his breath. "Kathryn wouldn't marry you if you was the last . . ." Gram shot him a warning look that effectively silenced his grumbling just as his brother lifted the lid of the box. Waldo looked suspiciously at the slender handles and what looked like cut stone pieces attached to them with leather straps.

"They're tomahawks!" Gram said with delight. "Three different sizes, too! The target is on back order for another few weeks, but I thought we could start practicing on one of those beat-up old closet doors in the activity room after the Road Rally today! You have to keep those arm muscles strong, Waldo. You know what the doctor said."

Howard Breen, assistant director of Sunny Days, rushed over just as Gram was discussing her gift. He took one look at the weapons in Waldo Emmerstine's lap, and the color began to drain from his face as it did almost every time Gram arrived at the home. Howard was generally at odds with Gram and Florence over safety issues. I pitied the man. He had been assistant director for fifteen years, and the fallout of any disaster would be his. He'd had a perfect record until the Dynamic Duo bought the place and turned his world and his safety record upside down.

No one had been irreparably injured, and Gram was always quick to point that out. However, that was of little comfort to a man in Howard's position. I sometimes wondered why they didn't fire him, but I think both Gram and Florence knew that he was really good at his job. He just wasn't adjusting to them as quickly as they'd hoped. Seeing as how I had known them all of my life and I was still adjusting to them, I felt a strange kinship with Howard.

"Mrs. Barrett! This is highly irregular. I know that you mean well, but tomahawks are most definitely not included on our residents' list of approved assets." He reached for the package in Waldo's lap, "Mr. Emmerstine, I'll just take these out of your way and—ohhh—I just remembered! Sara," he called to one of his staff. "Sara, do you have Mr. Emmerstine's gift from us?" Sara quickly arrived as if she'd been cued in advance and presented a small wrapped package, which Waldo greedily tore into.

"Yeeehaaawww! This is one exciting birthday," he hollered removing an egg-shaped piece of plastic from the box. "What in tarnation . . . ?" Waldo fussed for a moment until Wendell reached over his shoulder and pulled the two pieces of plastic

apart to reveal a light brown egg-shaped piece of Silly Putty. I shuddered to think what Gram was going to say when she realized that the staff's birthday gift for Waldo amounted to a predecessor of Play-Doh. Wendell handed the gift back to Waldo who looked quizzically at it for a moment and then said, "Well, candy's always good, Howard, candy's always good!" And before anyone could stop him, Waldo scooped up the putty and popped it into his mouth.

"WALDO!" Gram screamed.

"MR. EMMERSTINE!" Sara and Howard stammered along with me.

But Waldo's mouthful had gone in too quickly and immediately began to cause trouble. He had somehow managed to get at least a portion of it lodged in his throat within seconds, and he began wheezing and gasping in no time.

"CALL 911!" Howard's voice rang out dramatically toward the main office, and, still holding Gram's gift box, he knelt down in front of Waldo. "Mr. Emmerstine, hang on! Hang on, now. Help is on the way."

Wendell did not appear to be the least bit flustered by his brother's dilemma. He took two steps toward a sofa table and picked up one of the infamous Sunny Days hymnals, then stepped back into his previous position behind his brother. "Old fool!" was all he said as he raised the hymnal with both hands and used it to unceremoniously slap his brother on the back with considerable force.

"Fffffffhthhhhtttt!"

A large chunk of saliva-covered putty rocketed out of Waldo's mouth and landed in Howard Breen's hair! Nobody moved.

Then, Gram knelt down for just a moment, took the box with the tomahawks from Howard's hands, stood again, and placed it back into Waldo's lap.

She tugged at her tight-fitting sweater anxiously and appeared to be searching for words. Finally, she said, "You are quite right, Howard. They were not on the residents' list of approved assets . . . until about ten minutes ago." She held out her Blackberry. "I sent Florence a text on my way in, and . . . oh, lookee here, Howard!" She knelt on the floor beside him again and showed him her Blackberry. See right there under T? Tomahawks as clear as day. Mind you, it's not correctly alphabetized, but I'll handle that later. Florence is getting older, you know, and spelling's always the first thing to go."

"Whooo, boy! I'm gonna have me some fun with these!" cried Waldo, and he looked right at Howard Breen as he said, "Don't mess with me, Howie, or I'll scalp ya! Heh! Heh! Heh!"

The rest of the afternoon was smooth sailing as we assisted the Sunny Days residents in a highly spirited road rally and returned on time with no casualties—much to Howard's amazement. As the residents were seated for dinner, Gram began mapping out plans on an easel for a massive Twister marathon, and the audience cheered. My cell vibrated, and I saw that it was Troy.

"So, what's up, Sun God? You calling to rub it in?" I teased.

"Jack, how fast can you get to the pool?" His voice was intense.

"I'm with Gram, Troy. That ought to answer the fast question, except she's laying out some of her future plans with the crowd here. I'm not sure how soon she'll be done. What's got you all hot and bothered anyway, Mr. Lifeguard? They run out of suntan

oil?” I wanted to hear the edge come out of his voice. No luck.

“Jack, get in the car. Now. Tell Gram you need to run an errand or tell her the truth for all I care, but I need you to get over here.”

I could feel my frustration growing exponentially. “Troy, it’d be kind of hard to tell her the truth since you haven’t shared with me just exactly what that might be! What’s going on? You haven’t sounded like this since . . .” I didn’t want to go there. I didn’t want to think about how our lives had been turned upside down a year ago. How we had lost our mother—and our father, too, depending on how you looked at it.

“Jack, Chase Maxfield is here . . . at the pool. He’s been doing incredible stuff all afternoon off the boards and . . .”

I relaxed. “Let me give you some advice, Little Bro. You are not always gonna be the number one ticket in town. It’s a good thing for you to take a back seat for once and . . .”

“Jack, would you *listen*? That’s not it, okay. That’s not the issue. The stuff he’s doin’ is flippin’ unbelievable!”

“So, maybe his folks paid for a coach or maybe . . .”

“There was no coach, Jack. C’mon, Man! We’re talking about Chase. When we left school for summer break, he could have blown away in a strong breeze, and now he’s ready for the Olympic diving team? What coach does that in twelve weeks? He’s drawn a huge crowd of interested bystanders, Jack, and one of them looks *scary* familiar. You get my meaning?”

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and my gut tightened. I didn’t want to have this conversation. I had my nice normal life back, and I wanted to keep it that way. “I don’t know, Troy. Okay, I’ll admit it’s a little freaky, but Chase Maxfield is not the first person to ever . . .”

“I saw him, Jack.”

I nearly dropped the phone. The room was spinning. Why? Because my brother’s voice was deadly scary, and because without him saying another word, I knew exactly who he meant.

“Jack, are you there? Did you hear me? I said I *saw* him. He was watching Chase. I know it’s not possible, but I know who I saw, and I’m right, Jack. I know I’m right.”

My mouth was so dry I didn’t think I could speak, but my hoarse voice finally muttered a few words of explanation that I knew he wouldn’t buy. “Troy . . . you’ve been in the sun all afternoon. The mind. You know, your mind can play . . .”

“Jack, would you get over here?” I’d only heard his voice sound this desperate once before. A year ago. I closed my eyes and leaned against a pillar for support. “I saw him, Jack. He was here. Today. For just a minute . . . and then he was gone. Jack, Mr. Eden’s alive.”