

Davenport Series - Prequel

A Girl Can Always
HOPE

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Chapter One

Margaret pulled the straps of her bikini top off her shoulders and lay down on the chaise lounge beside her swimming pool. She smirked as she considered taking her top off. *It wouldn't matter anyway. If someone walked up, they'd think I was one of my brother's buddies lying here catching some rays in a Speedo.*

Once the small shades were in place over her eyes, Margaret drifted off to a near-sleep state. She allowed her mind to drift back to the last day of Spring break. A smile spread across her face at the memory.

Jon Davenport had gone with her family to Panama City. Of course, he went with her brother Reggie, but in a way, that meant he went with her, right? She knew it was dumb to have a crush on her brother's best friend, but she couldn't help it. A three-year difference wasn't that big of a deal. Well, maybe now it might be a little problem.

My mom told me I'm mature for my age, so that has to mean something. Three years isn't so bad. Well, I guess it's more like four. Nothing wrong with having a seventeen-year-old boyfriend.

She thought about it for a moment. Technically, Jon was seventeen, but he'd be eighteen in a few months. *That's okay. I'm mature for my age.* She caught sight of the strap to her top dangling loose. *Well, mature in the places that count.*

Margaret didn't know any fourteen-year-old girls going out with seventeen-year-old or eighteen-year-old boys, but she

could start a new trend. *Is that even legal?* When she reached eighteen, and he was twenty-two, that wouldn't be so bad.

The first thrilling thing that happened on that last day of Spring Break was Jon watching her get out of the pool. Margaret had difficulty letting herself revel in that moment, but she knew Jon was checking her out. He wasn't lusting but just recognizing her finer attributes.

She shivered as she thought about Jon seeing her for the first time as a woman. She wasn't a woman yet, but she was working on it. Margaret had changed a good bit physically, but her feelings for Jon had not changed. Her love deepened as she grew older. She was going to marry Jon Davenport.

The other thing that happened that day was Jon carried her suitcase to the car for her. Margaret relived the moment as if it were happening in real-time. She had been struggling to carry the massive bag down the condo steps when Jon ran up the stairs, smiled at her, and picked up the suitcase. He carried the two-ton valise like it was a feather. She just stood at the top of the stairs with her eyes glued on her muscular hero. He had smiled at her and helped her.

"Hey Margaret," a voice said, waking her from her reverie. "What's up?"

Margaret cringed at hearing her name, but worse than hearing the name she hated most in the world, it was Jon who said it. At least he didn't call her Margaret Alice. She wondered how long he had been standing there looking at her body, covered only by a bright blue bikini.

She hated the way her body looked. Her mom had told her she would probably be a late bloomer, but Margaret figured her season to bloom was about to pass. Her flat-chested torso rested

unceremoniously on her two toothpicks she called legs, and her pale, translucent skin looked as if it had never seen the sun. Then she remembered that it had been days since she had shaved, and her legs must have looked like a small forest.

“Hey, Jon,” Margaret mumbled as she sat up on the chaise lounge. Her bathing suit top almost fell off before she realized she had removed the straps from her shoulders. Though it wouldn’t have been too big of a shocker, she grabbed it just in time. “Just catching some rays, but don’t let my body blind you.”

“Your body is fine,” Jon said, “Uh, I mean, you didn’t blind me.”

“That’s just because you’re wearing sunglasses. What are you doing over here? I thought you went back to Florida for the weekend with your parents.”

“I did, but we came back early. My dad got a call this morning from work, so we had to leave first thing. We had to come back tonight anyway for school tomorrow, so it was no big deal. I got you something.”

“Really? You brought me something from Florida?”

“Sure did.”

“Well? What is it?”

“It’s a surprise. I left it in the car because I didn’t know if you were home. Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Margaret sat mesmerized on the lounge chair. She pulled her jaw up off her lap and closed her mouth before anything nasty flew inside. *The high school jock of Griffin High has bought me a gift?*

It wasn't unusual for Jon to hang around. He and Reggie had been best friends for a long time. He often came to swim in their pool even if Reggie was not at home.

"Here you go," Jon said as Margaret came out of her trance. "It's a shark's tooth necklace."

Margaret looked at the necklace in awe. "It's a real shark's tooth?"

"Yep. Sure is. I got Reggie one and thought you might like to have one too."

"Thanks, Jon. It was sweet of you to think of me. Did you find the shark's tooth while you were scuba diving?"

"You're welcome, and no, I didn't find it. I bought it in a store. Is Reggie around?"

"No. He had to go to the library to work on a term paper. You're welcome to hang around and swim."

I'd love for you to hang around with me.

"I didn't bring my swimsuit. I've got to work on my paper anyway. I'll just head over to the library."

"Okay. I guess I'll see you around. Thanks again for the shark's tooth."

"See ya."

Margaret walked up her back porch steps and wondered if Jon was watching her. She stepped into her house, but before the door closed, she felt resistance on the other side.

"Margaret," Jon said as he pushed the door back open.

"I thought you were leaving."

"Well, I was, or I am, but... Well, I was wondering."

"Wondering about what?"

"I was wondering if you would consider going with me to prom."

“Really? You want me to go to prom with you? What about Melissa?”

She’s the most beautiful girl in the world who happens to be your girlfriend. She looks like a girl, while I look like a board.

“We broke up. Besides that, I’ve always liked you.”

Jon stepped into the house and closed the door behind him. Taking Margaret’s hands, he pulled her close to his body. His eyes were dark pools of hot liquid that momentarily tongue-tied her. She felt the warmth of his body against hers and longed to be kissed by the most popular guy in high school.

“Uh, sure. I’d love to.”

Jon’s smile was beautiful. He leaned down and placed his lips on hers. They were soft, and his breath tasted like...

“Margaret Alice Robertson! What are you doing in there?”

Margaret sat up abruptly in the bathtub at the sound of her mother’s voice. Water sloshed over the side of the tub onto the floor. To her horror, the water faucet was running full blast, and water spilled over the tub’s sides. The side of the tub was like Niagara Falls. She quickly turned off the faucet.

“You’re flooding the hallway. What are you doing? Are you okay?”

“I’m so sorry, Mom. I,” Margaret turned off the water. “I fell asleep in the tub.”

Margaret jumped out of the tub and sent even more water over the bathroom. She grabbed some towels and began mopping up the water.

“Don’t use my good towels,” her mother said through the closed door. “I’ll get some old ones out of the closet.”

Margaret looked at her mother’s new towels lying on the floor in a wet heap. Her mother was going to ground her for the

rest of her life. Fortunately, her towel still sat on the back of the toilet, so she dried off in record time and stepped into her clean clothes.

Twenty minutes later, she sat down on her bed while her mother carried a clothes basket full of wet towels to the laundry room.

That fantasy was pretty awesome.

Margaret remembered standing on the back porch nearly an hour earlier while fingering her shark's tooth necklace. Jon did give her a gift, but then he strolled to his car. He waved goodbye like she was his little sister and left for the library. Oh, well. She could dream.

She combed out her straight, brown hair and couldn't imagine anything more unappealing. Her hair looked more like brown strands of twine instead of the beautiful hair on the head of a princess. Her dad called her "Princess," but she knew better. She would never be a princess, and she would never be Mrs. Jon Davenport.

Chapter Two

Margaret got off the bus at the high school on Monday morning and waited in line to get on the bus that would take her to the middle school. It was weird to swap buses, but the principal assured them they'd have a direct route to the west side of town soon.

She couldn't wait to come to Griffin High School next year. She would be in high school at the same time as Jon.

Jon's birthday was in the summer, so his mother had opted to hold him back as a six-year-old and start first grade a year later. Her father had once said the reason Jon was such a superstar athlete was that, technically, he was older than the other kids.

Margaret stared longingly at the high school campus. The buildings were old and run down, but to her, they were beautiful. She watched a couple holding hands as they walked toward the main building. That would be her and Jon next year.

How can I let Jon know that I love him? I need a creative way to do it so he won't think I'm a moron.

She heaved her gym bag onto her shoulder before she stepped aboard the bus. Had she put her clean socks in her bag?

Margaret was the fastest girl in eighth grade, and she partially attributed that to the fact that she always wore clean socks. The number one girl on the varsity team, Julie Simmons, once told Margaret that her good fortune came because of the lucky necklace she wore that her father gave her on her twelfth birthday. Margaret figured that if she found something that worked, she would stick with it. For her, it was clean socks.

She would be running the final meet of the season on Saturday, and she planned to run fast enough to be invited to participate in the state meet with the high school team. To be invited to the state meet, she had to trim two seconds off her personal best of seventy-one seconds in the 400-meter event.

Margaret plopped down in the seat beside her best friend, Diana. Now that was an awesome name – the name of a real princess. Why didn't her parents name her Diana instead of Margaret?

Diana nudged her shoulder. "Hey, girl. You look gorgeous as ever."

"Gorgeous like a rose stem without the flower."

"Girl, you're beautiful and just don't know it."

"Right."

She looked out the window at the water tower that loomed above the school. It stood tall at the edge of the cemetery a few blocks away from the campus, but it was so tall that it looked like it was on the school property. High school seniors had attached a sign to the catwalk around the top of the water tower: "The Class of 1994 Rocks."

It was illegal to climb the water tower, but seniors did it yearly. Climbing the tower must be incredibly scary, not to mention dangerous. No one ever knew who climbed the tower, but every year a senior sign hung proudly sometime before Spring Break. It was sort of the senior rite of passage.

Margaret imagined what it would be like to hang her class sign up in a few years: "The Class of 1998..." *The Class of 1998 does what?* She had a few years to figure it out, and besides that, she would probably never get to be the one who climbed the tower. She wouldn't have the nerve to do it anyway.

Diana punched Margaret's leg. "Hey, did you hear Marie and Scott kissed last night at the baseball game?"

"No way! I thought Marie and Matt were going out."

"Not anymore. I heard someone took Marie and Scott's picture in a liplock. Hot!"

"Stupid is more like it," Margaret offered. "Scott is such a nice guy, and Marie is such a..."

"Slut?"

"Diana! Your mother would wash out your mouth."

"No, she wouldn't. Your mother's the only one who would do something like that. Marie's not really a slut. She's just got, well, you know."

"I know," Margaret agreed. "She could have any boy she wants."

"I figured you would be jealous," Diana suggested.

"I'm not jealous. I'm saving myself for Jon Davenport."

"Girl! You need to get over Jon. He's too old for you. He'd get arrested for even looking at you."

Too late. He's already been looking.

"I know," Margaret said. "A girl can always hope."

"I've got to review my vocab," Diana said as she pulled out her blue spiral notebook.

Margaret leaned her head against the seat and closed her eyes. No matter what anyone said, she loved Jon Davenport, and she would tell him. Before summer, she was somehow going to tell him.

Margaret stepped off the bus and promptly dropped her books.

"Hey, Alice in Wonderland," Barry sneered as he kicked her Algebra book under the bus. "Where's your bunny? If you'd get

your head out of the clouds, you might be able to hold onto your books.”

Margaret tried to ignore the most annoying boy in eighth grade. He acted like he was still in fifth grade. Unfortunately, she had teachers in the past who would call roll by announcing everyone’s first and middle name. The whole school knew that she was Margaret Alice Robertson. Barry was not the first to call her “Alice in Wonderland.” *He’s such an idiot.*

She waited for the bus to pull forward before she picked up her Algebra book. Margaret was glad it had not been under one of the tires.

Thankfully, the morning passed quickly, and Margaret moved toward her favorite period of the day: lunch. She sat down at the table with Diana, and the rest of the lunch gang, Sarah and Lori, soon joined them.

“I saw that dweeb kick your book under the bus this morning,” Sarah sympathized. “By the time I got there to help you, the bus was gone, and you were headed inside the building.”

“Thanks, Sarah,” Margaret smiled. “My mom always says people like Barry have deeper problems than we can imagine. She tells me I should give him grace and space, but I sometimes want to give him a fist in the mouth.”

“Let me know if you’re going to do that,” Lori chimed in, “because I want to have front-row seats.”

“Hey, let me ask you a question,” Margaret said as she prepared to change the subject. “What’s the most romantic way you’ve ever heard of someone proposing to someone else?”

Margaret saw Diana rolling her eyes.

“You mean like asking someone to marry you?” Sarah squeaked.

“Yes, that is what proposing means,” Margaret sighed.

“I once saw an airplane fly by at the beach pulling a ‘Will you marry me?’ sign,” Lori offered.

“Someone popped the question on a jumbotron at a minor league baseball game once,” Sarah remembered. “I also heard of a guy who wrote ‘Will You Marry Me?’ on a huge chocolate chip cookie and had the ring in the middle.”

“You plan on asking someone to marry you?” Diana grinned.

“Yeah, why do you want to know that?” Sarah wondered.

“Uh...I just saw something on T.V. about it the other night. That’s all.”

“Right,” Diana teased. “I think you want to ask a certain someone to marry you.”

“Who?” Sarah and Lori said in unison.

“No one!” Margaret insisted.

“Well, if I were going to announce my undying love,” Lori suggested, “I’d write it big somewhere so the whole world could see it.”

“I think I’d do the real skywriting thing,” Sarah simpered. “You know...with the airplane and smoke and all that.”

“I think I’d just write the guy a note,” Diana said slyly. “That’s a lot simpler and just as effective. You could even tell him. You know, with your own words.”

The bell rang, and all the students began hurrying toward the lunchroom doors.

“I’ll see you guys after school,” Sarah yelled above the crowd's noise.

“I won’t be around,” Margaret reminded them. “I’ve got track.”

“Oh yeah,” Lori said. “Good luck at the meet Saturday.”

“Thanks. I’ve got a few days, and I’m somehow going to shave a few seconds off my personal best on the 400.”

Later that night, Margaret lay still in her bed thinking about Jon. How could she tell him of her love? She opened her eyes instantly as an image flashed across her mind. She knew what to do.

Chapter Three

Margaret's feet hit the floor before her alarm rang. She began her typical morning stretching routine. She sat with her legs spread and slowly stretched her muscles and tendons until she could touch her right knee with her nose. She then switched to the other side.

After fifteen minutes of stretching, she concluded her light workout with fifty crunches and twenty-five pullups on the bar her father placed on her door frame. She'd be the total athlete if it killed her; one day, she'd win first place at state. Who knows? She might even get a track scholarship to the University of Georgia.

After showering and dressing, she pulled out the cigar box from her top dresser drawer. She counted out the cash and discovered she had nearly fifty dollars.

She had worked hard to earn that money by babysitting the Morganthaller twins. Mrs. Morganthaller should pay her twice the amount because those boys were certified brats. She stuffed the bills into her pocket just as her mother called her to breakfast.

"Mom, why can't I just eat a banana on the way to school?"

"Honey, you know breakfast is the most important meal of your day. Besides, it may be the only time we spend together as a family today."

"We've got dinner tonight," Margaret insisted.

“No, we don’t. Your dad has a meeting, and Liz has to work tonight. Besides that, she’s trying to finish a school project that will take her about every waking second.”

“I figured she’d be out with David again. You know they’re talking about getting married.”

“I know, dear, but she promised me she would wait until she graduated from college.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath, Mom. She’s got it bad.”

“I know. We’ll see. Go ahead, and fix your plate. Your father will be here in just a minute.”

Breakfast went by quickly, and Margaret was glad her dad seemed preoccupied. She had a lot on her mind, too. The night before, she’d worked out exactly what she wanted to do to declare her love to Jon. Margaret had not figured out how to get to Kmart to purchase the materials she would need without her mother knowing.

“Mom, I need to go by the library after practice today.”

Margaret hated lying to her mother. Her parents taught her there was nothing more valuable than your word. She could remember more than once when her father prattled on about the lack of honesty in America.

“They’re all liars,” he had once said about the presidential candidates. “I’m not sure you can trust any politicians. It’s setting a bad precedent for our country. Liar and politician have become synonyms.”

“Oh? Well, I guess I can drop you off at the library and come back for you when you’re done,” Margaret’s mother offered.

“Diana needs to go too, and she said she would pick me up from practice.”

“All right. As long as Mrs. Reed doesn’t mind.”

“She doesn’t,” Margaret mumbled as she dropped a spoonful of butter onto her grits.

“Margaret,” her mother scolded, “you know it’s not good to eat that much butter.”

Margaret hoped her mother would never find out about her deviation. It wasn’t really a lie, was it? Maybe she was being a little reckless with the truth, but Margaret knew her mom would understand if she knew all the facts.

If everything worked right, no one would know that she did the deed. Maybe Jon would know, but no one else. Of course, Diana would figure it out, but Margaret knew she would keep her mouth closed.

Wasn’t there someone in the Bible who went to hell for lying? Maybe it wasn’t just for lying, but I heard my preacher say God hates lying. Does that mean He hates liars? Surely not.

“Don’t eat yet, Margaret. We haven’t said grace.”

Within seconds, her plan was in place, except Margaret’s prayer would have to be more than just saying grace. She would need a lot of grace, come to think of it. She could get a ride to Kmart from one of the girls on her team, and then she could walk home.

She had already visualized the project in detail and knew she would need six bed sheets and paint for cloth. She hoped fifty dollars would take care of it.

Margaret spent the day drawing up miniature versions of her plan instead of paying attention in class.

“Margaret Alice?” Mrs. Loveless said right in the middle of explaining an Algebra problem.

Regarding names, Mrs. Loveless was in a category all her own. Margaret had often thought if her name were Loveless, she would change it. Poor thing. The only problem was she did lack in the love department. She was one of the meanest teachers in eighth grade.

On top of Margaret having a bad name, Mrs. Loveless had to announce Margaret's horrible moniker to the whole class again. This experience settled it for Margaret. She was going to change her name to something other than Margaret Alice Robertson.

"Yes, Ma'am?" Margaret said as she slipped her doodling under her Algebra book and dipped her head.

"Is there something you're working on that you would like to share with the class?"

"No, Ma'am."

"How about coming to the board and working the next problem out for the class?"

Fortunately, Margaret made it through the rest of the day without another incident. Track practice went great, and her friend, Jennifer, agreed to drop her off at Kmart. The good thing was that Margaret's mother didn't know Jennifer's mom, so there was a greater probability that no information would get back to her parents.

After her family was sound asleep, Margaret slipped out of bed and hand-stitched the sheets together. Her sign would be three sheets wide and two sheets tall. At the last minute, she remembered her dad hanging a banner for the youth bake sale at church. He had cut little slits in the sign so the wind would go right through the material and not blow it over. Margaret found her father's box cutter in the barn and added little slices across what would be her masterpiece.

She looked long and hard at her final practice run on a regular piece of paper. Should she do it? *Should I use his full last name? I'm good with the "I love you" part, but should I say, "I love you, Jon Davenport?" What if my sign makes him mad? I've got to do it, but it's too late tonight. I'll have to paint the sign tomorrow night and hang it up Thursday.*

Margaret crawled back into bed. She should have been exhausted, but her mind was so full. She finally drifted off to sleep and dreamed about hanging from a rope on the side of Stone Mountain. It was funny that hanging in front of a granite face cliff in her dream seemed as normal as brushing her teeth. She was chiseling out a message on the side of the mountain for the whole world to read: "I love you, Jon Davenport."

As Margaret lay in bed the following morning, she remembered her dream. Even in her dream, she declared her love for the best-looking guy in Spalding County. A sign on the water tower wasn't exactly Stone Mountain, but it would have to do.

Chapter Four

“You know, Margaret,” Coach Allen said as Margaret dropped to the ground to go through her cooling down routine, “I believe you're going to do it Saturday.”

“Do what, Coach?” Margaret asked though she knew just what he meant. She wanted to hear her coach say it.

“You're going to beat your personal best on Saturday. You'll run in the state meet in two weeks with the high school team.”

“I hope so,” Margaret beamed. “There's very little I'd like to do more.”

“Well, you ran great today. I'm not sure I've ever seen your form any better.”

“Thanks, Coach. I'm going to give it my best.”

Although Margaret wanted to hang around to enjoy her coach's praise, she needed to get home. She lied to her mom once again about a school assignment so she could skip church. It wouldn't be the first time she had to stay home alone and miss Wednesday night youth group, but this would be the first time she did it without a legitimate reason.

It is a legitimate reason, you idiot. If you're going to marry Jon, you've got to let him know. God will forgive me for skipping out one time. He knows it's for a good cause.

Hopefully, her youth pastor would be as understanding as God. If not, he would just have to get over it. Sometimes, a girl just had to do what a girl had to do.

As soon as her mother's minivan was out of the driveway, Margaret spread the sheets she had sewn together the previous

night. Lying on the floor of her garage, the sheets looked huge, but she knew the height of the water tower would dwarf her sign. She pulled out all the samples she'd drawn on notebook paper throughout the day. *Which one should I do? What will Jon think about this anyway?*

She started to paint the sign several times but stopped short of putting paint on the sheets because she feared she was making a wrong choice. She finally decided which version of the sign she would paint, but just before getting started, she saw headlights from a vehicle coming down the street.

Is church over already?

She quickly folded the sheets and hurried into the house before her mother opened the garage door. She just had time to hide the sheets under her bed and boot up her computer before her mother tapped on the door to her bedroom.

“How did it go, Margaret? Did you get a lot done?”

“Well, I’ve had a few things hold me up, but I think I’m working through it.”

“What homework did you say you had to do?”

“Uh, it’s English—diagramming sentences.”

That’s not exactly a lie, is it? I was diagramming a sentence.

“Oh. That is important,” her mother agreed.

“You can say that again. Hopefully, I’ll get it just right.”

“Pastor Mark missed you tonight, but he said he understands how demanding school can be this time of year. I hope you’re not going to be up too late. Being well-rested for Saturday will be very important too, and not getting enough sleep tonight won’t help you.”

“Thanks, Mom. I shouldn’t be up too late.”

“Okay, Sweetheart. I love you. I’m thankful to have a daughter who takes her school work seriously.”

“Uh...thanks, Mom. I love you too.”

Once Margaret knew her parents were asleep, she eased to the kitchen's back door. She planned to lay the sewn-together sheets on the floor of the garage to paint the sign, but her mother parked the van in the way. Instead, she went outside to the back patio and laid the sheets on the concrete.

She had struggled with what to say on the sign, and now was the moment of truth. Whatever she painted on those sheets could determine her destiny. If it was the wrong message, she might become a nun. She didn’t know if Baptist girls could become nuns, but she figured there was a first time for everything. She suddenly had an idea that she knew would work.

Once she’d painted the sign, Margaret went to the back wall of the house and managed to tie up the sheets against the brick. She had to use her dad’s sixteen-foot ladder and two coils of rope to keep the sign off the ground. She just hoped she had not made any noise that would wake up anyone in her family.

She left the sign hanging up on the back of the house and hoped no one would walk outside in the backyard before it dried. Thankfully, the roof overhang would protect it from the night’s dew. The paint was for cloth and was supposed to be fast drying. She could pull it down first thing in the morning.

“You sure look out of it,” Diana observed as Margaret dropped into the bus seat.

“Yeah. Last night was rough. Parties, clubbing, and late-night homework.”

“Something tells me you’re pulling my leg. I can’t quite see you out clubbing.”

“There’s a party animal caged inside me,” Margaret grinned. “You might be surprised at what I can do.”

“I’m sure,” Diana laughed. “Would you mind looking over my Algebra homework?”

“Algebra homework? What Algebra homework?”

“Don’t tell me you slept through Mrs. Loveless’ assignment.”

“Oh no. I’m dead. I am sooo dead.”

“Don’t freak out, Margaret. I’ll help you. We can get it done by the time we get to school. You can just copy mine.”

“I can’t copy yours, Diana. That’s not right. Thanks, though.”

“Suit yourself. You better get busy.”

By the time Margaret finished her day at school, she had turned in about half of a page of Algebra homework, lost her favorite, four-colored pen, dropped the back to her right earring into the toilet, and spilled her milk at lunch. She laced up her running shoes and reflected on her disastrous day.

I guess I could have gotten my earring clip out of the toilet, but...No way. I did the right thing. At least we had pizza for lunch. Now, all I have to do is work hard at track practice today, go home to do my homework, and wait for my parents to sleep.

“Okay, ladies,” Coach Grubbs announced as the middle school girls’ team gathered beside the track. “I want you to stretch good. We’re going to work hard today on some strength training. I know that most people think runners are supposed to be lean. That’s true, in part, but lean doesn’t mean weak. You need to be a running machine that’s packed with solid muscle.

You'll also find that you can avoid injuries that could end your season or even your career when you're in top form."

A soft moan erupted from the girls. Margaret looked at the girl she considered her strongest competitor for the number one spot on the team. Jenny was already as lean and strong as almost any boy in eighth grade. Margaret had managed to beat Jenny in the last two track meets, which made Margaret the number one middle-distance runner in the whole county. Jenny had a smug look on her face. *She is such a snoot. There's no way on God's earth she's going to beat me Saturday. That race is all mine.*

"Today, I'm going to teach you how to do Bulgarian split squats."

Did he just say Bulgarian something? I know what squats are, and I hate them. Bulgarian?

By the end of practice, Margaret was exhausted. The Bulgarian Split Squat was now her most hated exercise. The coach also introduced them to planks before they ran wind sprints until Margaret thought she would pass out. She didn't mind working her body hard, though. She was determined to do whatever was necessary to win her spot on the varsity track team.

I wonder if it's possible to get the attention of a UGA scout as an eighth grader?

Before starting her homework, Margaret soaked in a hot bath for almost thirty minutes. She even added more hot water twice. By 9:00, she had finished her homework and called downstairs to tell her mother she was going to bed.

Her mother entered the room and placed her hand on Margaret's forehead. "Are you not feeling well, Dear?"

“I’m fine, Mom. Track was pretty tough today. I’m wiped out.”

“Did you finish your homework?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I didn’t have much. I figured I should go to bed early.”

“Good idea – especially considering you were up late last night doing homework. Saturday’s meet is going to be pretty demanding. I’ll see you in the morning. Good night.”

“Good night, Mom.”

“I love you, Sweetheart.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

As soon as her mom left the room, Margaret slipped into her black sweatpants. She shuffled through her cedar chest to find her black hoodie her mom had stored for the following winter. After setting the alarm clock on her watch for 1:00 a.m., she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Five

Margaret slipped outside into the night air and zipped her black jacket. A drop of water plopped on her head from the wet roof. It had rained while she slept, and now the ground seemed clean and fresh. She quietly eased her bike from under the overhang on the side of the house. Cinching the backpack belt tight around her waist, she slipped into the night like a wraith.

Before going to bed, Margaret had carefully folded the sign and placed it inside her school backpack. She also thought of getting four Mason jars and filling them with sand. It occurred to her that the wind could blow the sign around the railing of the water tower and make it unreadable. The sand-filled jars should provide the weight needed to hold the sign in place.

I can't believe I'm going through with this. No one in school will even guess it was me. I'm the least likely to try to pull off a stunt like the one I'm about to do. Hopefully, I won't break my neck.

Riding across town to the high school didn't take long, but just as she was about to take a left on Poplar Street to go down the back side of the school, Margaret saw the tail lights of a police car. Hoping the policeman hadn't seen her, she slammed on her brakes and paused behind a light pole. Thankfully, he turned left on the east side of the high school and disappeared.

Margaret pedaled down Poplar and paused at the gate to the football field. The only people who ever went through that hallowed gate were football players. She had stood at the main entrance to the stadium on more than one occasion and watched

Jon enter the field with the other players. After leaning her bike against the fence, she walked to the gate and found it unlocked. She imagined herself holding Jon's hand while walking toward the field together.

Suddenly, in her imagination, Jon was no longer in his football uniform, and she was no longer in black sweats and a hoodie. She was in a white wedding dress covered with lace and flowers, and Jon was wearing a sharp-looking black tuxedo. *Here Comes the Bride* played, and everyone in the bleachers stood in her honor. It crossed her mind that her father was supposed to walk her down the aisle, but Margaret dismissed the idea, not wanting to mess up the moment.

They walked down the steps to the football field, where all the bridesmaids and groomsmen stood waiting for them. Diana was her maid of honor, and Lori arranged the long train of her dress. Pastor Mark stood nearby with a big smile as she and Jon turned to look at him.

Sarah began to sing *The Marriage Prayer*, and Margaret looked up to see her mother sitting on the first bleacher. Her mom was crying, and Margaret's father tried to console her. He gave Margaret a thumbs up and mouthed, "I love you."

"We've gathered here today to join together these two, Margaret Alice Robertson and Jon Fitzgerald Davenport, as husband and wife," Pastor Mark bellowed.

Did he have to say Margaret Alice? Fitzgerald? Is Jon's middle name Fitzgerald?

"Do you take Margaret to be your lawfully wedded wife? To have and to hold from this day forward? For better, for worse? For richer, for poorer? In sickness and in health? To love and to cherish until you are parted by death?"

Jon looked lovingly into Margaret's eyes and smiled his beautiful smile. "I do."

"Margaret, Do you take Jon to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold from this day forward? For better, for worse? For richer, for poorer? In sickness and in health? To love and to cherish until you are parted by death?"

"I do."

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. Jon, you may kiss your bride."

Jon placed his hands on Margaret's hips and paused while looking into her eyes. "I love you so much," he whispered.

Tears rolled down Margaret's cheeks as he pulled her toward him. The stirring of the crowd hushed, and cameras flashed as Jon lowered his head to kiss his bride. Margaret saw his eyes close because everyone knew you didn't kiss with your eyes open. His lips were almost on hers.

Margaret's fantasy abruptly ended as headlights lit the road outside the gate. She quickly closed herself inside and leaned against the vines that covered the tall, chain-link fence.

She held her breath and said a prayer. "God, I know what I'm doing looks bad, but you know it's not. Please keep that person in the car from seeing my bike."

Would God hear her prayer in light of what she was doing? Surely He would.

As soon as the street was dark again, Margaret hurried to her bike. She pedaled past the athletic building toward the monstrous water tower that soared above the tree tops at the edge of the city cemetery. She hid her bicycle in a small clump of trees and moved stealthily toward the tower's base.

Margaret looked up at the large tank that rested on ten strong, metal legs. Crisscrossing metal rods connected each leg, and a ladder started up the side of one of the legs, with the bottom rung being about twenty feet off the ground. She followed the ladder up with her eyes to the catwalk that encircled the tank.

So, people have to get up to the catwalk to do whatever they do up there. How do they get to the ladder? I suppose they bring another ladder along. Too bad I didn't think of that. Right, like I could have just strapped one to my bike.

Though Margaret had already scoped out the tower from the high school campus' perspective, she walked back from the tower a bit to look up at her destination one more time.

Someone had painted the word *Griffin* in large letters, but it was centered more for people looking at it from Taylor Street. For her sign to be centered when a high school student looked at it, she would need to place the left corner at about the second *i*.

Now, she just needed to figure out how to get to the bottom of the ladder. She hoped against hope that someone had stashed a ladder in the bushes nearby, but no such luck.

Margaret walked back and ran her hand along the metal rod that went up from the base of one of the supports at an angle. About ten feet off the ground, it crossed another rod that had started at the bottom of a different support. She followed the rod up with her eyes and saw it tied into the support near the ladder's base.

I suppose I could somehow crawl up this rod to the ladder. What am I thinking? I'll break my neck. There is no way I can climb up that little metal rod. Now, wait a minute! I've come too far to quit now. Besides that, seniors do this every year. Maybe

they bring a ladder, or not. They may climb up this rod to the ladder; if they can do it, I can do it better.

Thinking she could shimmy up the rod, Margaret straddled it while both feet rested on the ground. She lifted her feet a little and immediately fell to the ground. To her relief, no rocks greeted her when she fell, but the fall hurt her shoulder a little.

Okay, so the shimmy thing won't work. I'll just have to do a little hand-over-hand up the rod. I can see tomorrow's newspaper headlines: "Margaret Alice Robertson dies while climbing tower to declare her love." Margaret, don't be stupid. You can do this.

Placing her hands on the rod, Margaret walked forward until she had to stand on her tiptoes to continue holding on. She tentatively reached up the rod a little higher, which meant her feet had to come off the ground. A thought crossed her mind, and Margaret let go of the rod. Once firmly on the ground again, she rechecked her backpack to ensure everything was in place.

The last thing I want to do is get up on top and discover I left something at home. Oh no. I only have three jars of sand. What happened to the fourth one? I'll just have to make do with three.

She made sure the belt was snug around her body and removed all of the slack from the shoulder straps. Determined to finish the task, she grabbed hold of the rod again and began climbing. It was a challenge, but she was in the best physical shape of her life.

When she got to where the other rod crossed, she looked down past her dangling feet to the ground.

Why are you looking down, you idiot? Keep your eyes on where you're going. Getting past this junction will be a little more complicated than I had imagined.

Margaret pulled her legs up around the rod and inched upward. She made it past the junction of the two rods and moved further up toward the ladder.

She eventually made it up to where the rod joined the support leg to the tank. The ladder was just to her left, and it wasn't too difficult to get her feet on the bottom rung. The scary part was letting go of the rod, but she managed to get one hand on the side of the ladder before releasing the rod with her other hand.

She paused on the bottom rung with quivering arms. *I cannot believe I just did that. The rest of this is going to be a piece of cake.*

By the time Margaret got to the catwalk, adrenaline coursed through her body. She could climb Mt. Everest. She stood with her hands on the railing and looked out over the city's lights.

This tower must be the tallest place in the city. I can almost see my house. Well, maybe not quite. I can see McDonald's and—oh my. That police car has its lights on.

Margaret lay still on the catwalk, watching the police car speed through town and blew out a sigh of relief when it turned north on Hill Street.

With her back against the tank, Margaret pulled the sign out of her backpack. She unscrewed the lids of the Mason jars and carefully placed one corner of the sign over the top of the jar. She screwed the lid back on before testing her setup. Everything held just fine, and the sand provided plenty of weight to keep the sign still. She put the other two jars in place and tied a small nylon cord around the top two corners.

After removing the senior's sign, she tied her sign just a little to the right. *Whoever hung the senior sign didn't even*

worry about centering it. How lame. She slowly lowered her sign into place.

Placing her hands on the railing, she tried to look down at her masterpiece. Her head began to swim as she looked down to the ground. Margaret started trembling as she realized she had to somehow get down the tower.

Chapter Six

Margaret strapped her pack tightly on her back and then remembered her finishing touch was in the front pocket. Dropping the pack on the catwalk again, she reached into the front pocket for the combination lock.

When Margaret inspected the tower a few days earlier, she noticed the catwalk covered the opening at the top of the ladder. That meant there was a hinged doorway, and she knew there had to be a way she could lock the trap door. Using a lock would keep the seniors from returning to the tower to remove her sign.

Once the lock was in place, Margaret immediately climbed the ladder. When she got to the bottom rung, she held onto the ladder with her left hand while reaching around the main support with her right. She wrapped her fingers around the metal rod and knew this was the most dangerous part of climbing down. There would be a moment when she would only be holding on with one hand. She'd likely fall to her death if she somehow missed the rod with her other hand.

She took a deep breath and let go of the ladder. She had a fleeting thought of what a trapeze artist must feel like as her left hand wrapped securely around the rod. Just as she had imagined, her body swung back and forth about twenty feet off the ground. Once her body stopped swinging, she wrapped her ankles around the bar and began inching down the rod.

Passing the cross point of the two rods, Margaret saw headlights coming down the road. She knew if the police caught her on the tower, she would be in deep trouble. She'd have a

criminal record. She'd never be a track star at the University of Georgia. Her mother wouldn't let her get her driver's license until she was thirty.

She let her feet dangle and looked down. Her feet couldn't be more than five or six feet from the ground – maybe a little more. She thought for a moment about her uncle talking about skydiving.

Drop, hit, and roll. I just need to remember to roll.

She let go of the rod and felt momentarily suspended in the air. Because of the darkness, she misjudged how close she was to the ground, and her ankle twisted in pain as she collided with the earth.

She lay wincing in pain as the policeman turned again on the school's east side to make his way back to Taylor Street.

I think I broke my ankle. Ohhh, this hurts so bad.

Tears began to spill down her cheek as she lay helplessly on the ground. She wondered if her bone was sticking out through her skin. How was she going to explain this to her parents?

Okay, cry baby. You can't lay here until sunrise. You've got to get home.

Margaret sat up in the dirt and tried to inspect her ankle. It was throbbing in pain, but there didn't appear to be a bone sticking out through her flesh. Standing up, she discovered that though she couldn't put her whole weight on her right foot, hopping on the other foot was an option.

She got to her bike and pedaled away by pushing down hard with her left foot. She stopped in front of the high school and turned to admire her work. It was perfect. She had changed her mind so many times as she tried to come up with the best announcement, but now as she thought about her strategy, her

message was going to be just right. The only thing now was that she had to be at school today. She only needed to make it to the high school bus stop.

Two hours after Margaret crawled back into bed, her alarm rang. She felt like a steamroller had run over her. The ride home had not been too difficult, and the closer she got to home, the more she could use her right foot. Margaret had hoped it wouldn't be a big deal, but pain shot up her leg as she tried to move her foot. She threw the covers back and turned on the bedside lamp. Her ankle was swollen a little, but it wasn't too bad. Maybe she just needed to walk on it a little.

She managed to get into the shower without falling over. The hot water felt good running down her body as she leaned against the tile wall. Somehow, she had to work out the soreness before she saw her mother. How could she explain this? Her mother had seen her just before she went to bed the night before.

Someone pounded on the bathroom door.

“Margaret,” her mother’s strained voice was unmistakable. “Liz’s car has broken down, and I’ve got to pick her up. Of course, this had to happen on the day your father has an important meeting. I put your lunch on the counter. I’m sure you’ll be long gone by the time I get home. Have a good day, Sweetheart.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Well, I suppose that solves one problem, but surely my ankle will be okay.

Margaret toweled off and inspected her ankle. It was indeed swollen and a little purple. What was she going to do? She still could hardly stand putting her weight on her right foot.

Oh no. What about track? I'll be okay by this afternoon. It's nothing serious, I'm sure.

After hopping around her room to get dressed, she had an idea. Reggie had broken his foot once playing soccer and had to get crutches. Margaret remembered seeing those crutches in his closet just a few weeks ago. She hopped down the hall to her older brother's room and found the crutches at the back of his closet. It was good that Reggie left early each morning to work out with some of his soccer friends. After readjusting them, the crutches worked perfectly. The crutches would at least help her get around the house until it was time for school. By then, her foot should at least be good enough for walking.

Forty-five minutes later, Margaret stood on the sidewalk at Griffin High School, staring at her sign and leaning on her brother's crutches. She smiled as she read the sign for the entire world to see: "The Class of 1995 RULES!!" The juniors were going to freak out, and the seniors would be ticked. No one would suspect an eighth grader would put up a sign for Jon's junior class.

She was most proud of the message in the corner: "I love you, JD." The message for Jon was a little small, but hopefully, he could make it out. Margaret hoped that while Jon would know that the "JD" stood for Jon Davenport, no one else would figure it out. Two days earlier, she had thought she was making it big enough, but unfortunately, Jon might have to strain to make it out. He would get the message. She was sure of it.

"Oh, Margaret. What's up with the crutches?"

Margaret jumped at the sound of Diana's voice. She was usually on the middle school-bound bus before Margaret arrived

at the high school, but evidently, her friend's bus was running behind.

Just as Margaret opened her mouth to answer, a high school senior cheerleader gasped, "I can't believe someone had the nerve to do that. Who would have done it?"

Margaret's plan came back into her mind. She leaned toward the cheerleader and answered, "I heard that Jon Davenport did it."

"Jon Davenport? You've got to be kidding."

"That's just what I heard."

"HELLO!" Diana enunciated each letter. "Earth to Margaret. What did you do to yourself?"

Margaret heard the cheerleader tell someone else that Jon Davenport put the sign up on the water tower.

"It's a long story. I sort of twisted my ankle."

"Sort of? I'm not sure how you can sort of twist your ankle."

"Okay." Tears were beginning to roll down Margaret's cheeks. "I twisted my ankle. Does that make you happy?"

"No. It doesn't make me happy. I'm sorry, Margaret. It must hurt real bad."

"Yes, it hurts, and I haven't told my mom yet."

"Your mom doesn't know? Why not?"

"Remember? I said it was a long story, so don't ask."

"Okay. I won't ask. What about the track meet tomorrow?"

Margaret's trickle of tears turned into all-out crying. "I don't know." Margaret sniffed loudly. "I just don't know. Maybe it will be better by this afternoon."

Margaret turned to hop on the bus. The bus driver had stepped into the building for a minute, and Margaret wanted to be in place before he came back. When she placed her foot up

on the first step, she lost her balance and fell out of the bus door. Her bad ankle caught most of her weight, and Margaret screamed in pain. Her body slammed against the ground, and her head banged hard onto the concrete sidewalk.

“Margaret!” Diana shrieked as she ran toward her friend. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not. Oh, my head, my ankle. I need my mother.”

Tears streamed down Margaret’s face. The back of her head felt like it was going to explode.

An unmistakable voice came from the crowd. “Margaret?” She had heard it many times and even more in her dreams.

“Let me help you up,” Jon said as he picked Margaret up in his arms and held her against his chest.

Margaret wrapped her arms around his neck and was both embarrassed and elated. Her ankle throbbed painfully with every beat of her heart, and her head felt woozy. If she hadn’t broken her ankle when she dropped from the water tower, it had to be broken now. Jon walked to a metal, green and gold bench that sat in the grass just past the sidewalk. With great tenderness, he sat her down gently on the bench. To Margaret’s relief, the crowd had dissipated, and only Jon and Diana stood beside her.

“What happened?” Jon asked as he inspected the back of Margaret’s head.

“I..I fell down my steps this morning,” Margaret lied. “It was stupid, but I thought my ankle was just a little twisted and would get better. Like a clumsy idiot, I fell again while trying to get on the bus.”

Jon’s hands moved through her hair as he checked to ensure she wasn’t bleeding. She couldn’t decide if his touch was that of a boyfriend or a surgeon. Margaret’s stomach flipped, and

shivers ran down her spine as she embraced the moment so she would never forget it. Somehow Margaret could momentarily ignore the pain as she reveled in Jon's tender touch.

"There's a knot coming up on the back of your head. You hit the ground hard."

"I'll go call her mother," Diana said as she picked up her backpack.

"My mother's not home. She went to help Liz with her car or something."

"I'll take you home," Jon said, "and maybe your mother will be back by then. I've got Speech class first period, and we had a test yesterday. It won't matter for me to skip it."

Jon looked back at the street as the bus driver started the engine. "You better hurry and catch your bus, uh...what's your name?"

"I'm Diana," she gushed. "Yeah. I better go. I'll call you Margaret."

Chapter Seven

Jon sat Margaret down gently on the couch in the family room of her quiet house. She hoped it had not crept him out when she laid her head on his shoulder while he carried her inside. He didn't seem to notice. It was the natural thing to do. He held her in his arms as if she weighed no more than a piece of paper out of his spiral notebook.

"Let me take off your shoe and look at your ankle," Jon offered.

Without waiting for permission, he unlaced her shoe and pulled off her sock. Chill bumps ran up Margaret's body as his hands pushed her pants leg up so he could inspect her ankle.

I hope my foot doesn't stink. He slid his hands up my leg. How embarrassing. I think I can see the hair on my leg. He's going to think I'm a gorilla. I promise I will never skip a day shaving for the rest of my life.

He inspected her ankle. "I don't know if it's broken or not. It is pretty swollen and bruised. I'll get some ice."

Jon returned with some ice in a large plastic bag. He knelt beside the couch, propped up Margaret's foot on a pillow, and carefully wrapped the bag of ice around her swollen ankle.

"That should do it for now," he said with a smile. "I'll stay with you until your mother comes home."

Margaret winced as she readjusted her body a little. "You don't have to stay. It could be a long time."

"No. I insist. Do you want me to get you something to drink or eat?"

“No thanks. I’m fine. You sure are sweet to help me.”

“If I had a sister, and she fell at school, I do not doubt Reggie would do the same thing.”

Margaret doubted that Reggie could ever be so gentle and kind. He would probably just stand on the sidewalk and laugh at someone who fell. It would never cross his mind to help. Jon found another pillow and placed it behind Margaret’s back.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks, Jon. Did you notice the sign on the tower?”

“I saw it a little before you fell. Everyone was talking about it. I can’t believe someone did it. It sounds like something Tony Steele would do, but he swears he didn’t. He and I walked onto campus together from the parking lot. I couldn’t make out the words in the corner, though.”

Margaret cringed. “Uh, yeah. I was trying to read them when I fell.”

“The letter *I* was prominent, but I’ll have to look at it closely to get the rest of it. I think I have my dad’s binoculars in my car. I’ll use those if I have to. I’ll let you know. No junior has ever done anything like that. It took some nerve.”

“It did take nerve. I mean, it must have.”

“I’m sorry you’re going to miss your track meet tomorrow,” Jon consoled.

“I’ll be okay, I’m sure,” Margaret insisted.

“Margaret. Your ankle is swollen. I hate to tell you, but you won’t run for a little while.”

“No, that can’t happen. I’m supposed to qualify to run in the state meet with the varsity team tomorrow.” Margaret started to cry again. *I am such a baby.* “This can’t be happening.”

Jon knelt beside her as tears spilled down her cheeks. He eventually reached out, pulled Margaret against his chest, and wrapped his arms around her.

“You’ll have other opportunities,” Jon whispered. “You’re the best eighth-grade runner in Spalding County history. You can set all kinds of records next year as a freshman.”

“I’m not the best,” Margaret said as she could hear Jon’s heart beating. She was sure that hers was beating at twice its average pace.

“You’re also humble, and I like that. You’re the best, and everyone knows it. I have no doubt you will one day be a college track star – maybe even run in the Olympics. I’ll be able to tell everyone you are my friend.”

I’m your friend? Since I’m a girl and your friend, does that make me your girlfriend?

“Jon?” a voice came from the door leading to the kitchen.

“Oh, hi, Mrs. Robertson. Margaret fell at school and hurt herself. She said you left to help Liz, so I brought her home. She’s pretty upset.”

“Oh Margaret!” her mother gasped. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Margaret could feel the tears starting to come again. *I am such an ugly crier. Stop crying.*

“She fell out the bus's door onto the sidewalk,” Jon offered. “She hit her head pretty hard, and her ankle looks bad.”

Mrs. Robertson knelt to look at Margaret’s ankle. “Oh, Sweetheart. You may have broken your ankle. We need to get to the hospital. Jon, thank you so much for taking care of Margaret. You were so thoughtful to take the time to help her.”

“No problem, Mrs. Robertson. I guess I’ll get back to school. Do you want me to carry Margaret to the car?”

“If you don’t mind. That would be very helpful.”

Jon picked Margaret up again while her mother grabbed the bag of ice. He carried her to the minivan and got her into the back seat without much trouble. Reaching in from the driver’s door, Mrs. Robertson handed Jon the bag of ice and put a pillow behind Margaret’s back.

“Thanks for taking care of me, Jon,” Margaret smiled.

“You’re welcome. I’ll check on you later. Do you want me to get someone to get your homework assignments? I could probably stop by your school and leave a message for...what’s her name?”

“Diana. Thanks, but I think I’d rather have an excuse not to do my homework this weekend.”

“Yeah,” Jon grinned. “Good move. See ya later.”

Jon closed the minivan's side door, and Margaret watched him walk to his car. She kept her eyes on him while her mother started the van and backed out of the garage.

Margaret closed her eyes to relive the good parts of the last hour. She could smell Jon on her. *Is that like his aftershave lotion? I’m sure he shaves.*

Today could turn out okay. Jon wasn’t a doctor, and maybe her ankle would be fine by tomorrow morning. Perhaps it was worth missing the track meet to be carried in Jon’s arms twice, no, three times. He had to be the most caring boy she had ever met. It also helped that he was gorgeous.

Later that evening, Margaret sat propped up on the couch as her mother served her dinner. The rest of the family brought their dinner plates into the family room because her mother and

father always insisted the family eat together as often as possible.

“You won’t believe what happened,” Reggie said with a mouthful of creamed potatoes. “A junior hung a sign up on the water tower for their class, and everyone says it was Jon.”

“No way,” Liz exclaimed. “You’ve got to be kidding. I can’t imagine Jon doing that. Well, maybe I can.”

Margaret tried to look uninterested.

“What does the sign say?” her dad asked.

Reggie reached for his tea glass. “It says *The Class of 1995 Rules*. He was mimicing our sign, “*The Class of 1994 Rocks.*”

“That took some guts to do that,” Liz added. “No one has ever messed with the senior sign before. I can’t imagine climbing that tower.”

“I can’t imagine Jon doing something like that,” Mrs. Robertson said. “He is such a nice young man.”

Reggie choked. “He is a nice guy, Mom, but nice guys have fun too.”

“True enough,” Mrs. Robertson agreed.

Reggie looked at Margaret. “So what’s up with your foot, Squirt?”

“The doctor said I sprained it real bad. It’s not broken.”

“Wow. How in the world did you fall out of the bus door?” Liz asked.

“I was looking at the sign on the tower while stepping through the door. I lost my balance.”

Margaret hoped she wouldn’t have to lie about how she hurt her ankle, and so far, everyone took for granted the fall out of the bus caused the injury. Diana and Jon were the only ones who would think to point out that she was already on crutches before

the falling episode. Diana, for sure, wouldn't even be around to say anything, and she hoped Jon wouldn't mention it.

"Well," Reggie offered, "I did a few klutzy things in middle school too. Remember that time I ran into a tree, Dad?"

Everyone laughed as Reggie reminded them of his experience of colliding with the tree in the front yard while playing football.

"I guess that ends your track season," Liz stated when the laughter died.

"I guess it does," Margaret said somberly.

"You've got next season," her dad reminded her. "For that matter, I do not doubt the university will offer you a scholarship, so you've got a lot of seasons to go."

"I hope so," Margaret mumbled. "I was hoping to be the first eighth grader to ever run on the varsity team."

"I know you're disappointed, Honey," her mom conceded, "but accidents happen. I've found that somehow there's always a reason for everything."

Yeah, and the reason this time is that I had to drop from the tower so I wouldn't get arrested.

"Your mom is right," her father agreed. "Good always seems to come from every circumstance if we look for it."

"Well," Liz interrupted, "if Sunday School is over, I have some more work to do on my English Lit project. Sorry to end the family session so soon."

"Do you always have to be so sarcastic," Reggie complained.

"Reggie!" Mrs. Robertson interjected. "Thanks for taking the time to eat with us, Liz. I know college is demanding, and you're not often in town to be at a family dinner."

“It has been nice to all be present for dinner,” Mr. Robertson agreed. “Good luck with your homework, Sweetie.”

Liz gathered up her empty plate and headed for the kitchen. Stopping at the kitchen door, Liz turned back toward the table. “Thanks for dinner, mom. Glad your leg’s not broken, Margaret.”

“You’re welcome, Honey.”

“Do you need my crutches, squirt?” Reggie wondered.

“I already borrowed them,” Margaret confessed. “Hope that was okay.”

“No problem. Glad someone can get some use out of those old crutches. I’m not planning on using them ever again. I decided not to have another accident until I’m 93.”

“Let’s hope you don’t,” Mrs. Robertson smiled.

Reggie held his hand out to Margaret. “Why don’t I help Crip up the stairs?”

“Thanks, Reg,” Margaret smiled as she gave him her hand.

Reggie ignored her hand and picked her up off the couch.

“REGGIE!” Margaret squealed. “I can walk.”

“That’s okay,” Reggie insisted. “Save your energy for getting better. You’re going to run in the Olympics one of these days.”

Reggie was nicer than ever to her, and Margaret liked it. He carried her up the stairs to her bed and promised to bring her his crutches later. She had left them downstairs in the family room.

“Jon was sweet to me today,” Margaret confessed.

“Yeah. I heard. He’s a pretty nice guy.”

“Sure is.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have a crush on him, would you?”

“Reggie! He’s too old for me.”

“I don’t know. Give it a few years, and it could work.”

“I don’t know if I’d want to marry someone who climbs water towers,” Margaret teased. “Thanks for carrying me up the stairs.”

“Any time, squirt.”

Chapter Eight

Margaret looked into the stands as the announcer introduced all the runners. She saw her mom and her dad cheering. Whistling loudly, Reggie stood beside them with his fingers in his mouth. The guy beside Reggie lowered a bouquet, and Margaret knew it was Jon. He winked at her and blew her a kiss.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the announcer’s voice came over the intercom. “In lane number five, wearing the red, white, and blue of Team USA, is the winner of this year’s women’s 400-meter U.S. Track and Field Championship, Miss Margaret Alice Robertson.”

Margaret Alice? Why did he have to say that? I’ve got to change my stupid name.

The entire stadium seemed to erupt in applause at the mention of Margaret’s name. Margaret readied herself for the starting gun, and within moments, she began the race of a lifetime. Although she was favored to win, the girl from Kenya would be her greatest challenge. They ran neck and neck until, on the last lap, the Kenyan twisted her ankle, and the only other runner who was close was the girl from France. The French girl was fast, but Margaret knew that the race belonged to Team USA.

Determined to beat her personal best, she put it into high gear and crossed the finish line. Amidst the crowd's cheers, she heard the announcer say something about a new Olympic record.

“An Olympic record, Ladies and Gentlemen. Margaret Alice Robertson joins two other Olympic greats from Griffin, Georgia: Margaret Matthews and Wyomia Tyus.”

The crowd was going crazy as Margaret grabbed an American flag from an excited fan. She ran up and down the track to the wild applause of adoring fans. Cameras flashed and lit the night. When she finally began to exit the track, she saw someone standing by the locker room door with a bouquet. She smiled from ear to ear as he came into focus.

“You were amazing out there,” Jon said as Margaret stopped within a few feet of where he stood. “I was so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Jon. Thanks for coming.”

“I brought you these,” he acknowledged as he held out the bouquet of daisies.

“How did you know daisies were my favorite?”

“Oh, let’s just say it was a lucky guess.”

Margaret reached out to take the flowers from Jon’s hand, and he took another step closer to her. She smelled like something from the sewer, but she didn’t care.

Jon took her by her free hand and pulled her close. She could feel the heat between them, and her heart beat wildly in her chest.

She wrapped her arms around him. She saw the bouquet of daisies over his left shoulder as he lowered his mouth toward hers.

“Margaret,” her mother’s voice boomed through the closed door. “Margaret! Wake up. You have company.”

“Oh, brother,” Margaret moaned. “What is Diana doing here so early? She ruined a wonderful dream.” Margaret had gotten hot during the night and managed to push the blankets off of her

bed. She lay in bed in her sleep shirt with her wrapped ankle propped up on a pillow. Her top sheet looked like a miniature mountain range against the wall.

When the door opened, Margaret closed her eyes to the light from the hallway. She was also sure that Diana would be turning on her bedroom light.

“Hey, Margaret,” Jon said as the bedroom light came on.

Jon? Jon! Ahhhh. I'm half-naked, for crying out loud. Oh no. I've got bedhead. What is my mother thinking? Just because he's over here always doesn't mean he's my brother.

“Hey, Jon,” Margaret mumbled as she pulled her sheet back over her body.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay, I guess. I don't know. I kind of just woke up – like two seconds before you walked in.”

“Sorry about that. I told your mother I could come back, but she said you would be up for seeing me.”

I'm always up for seeing you. Now that you've seen my ugly cry face, rubbed my matted head, touched my hairy legs, and seen me half-naked, I suppose we're almost family.

“I'm glad you came by. I was just being lazy.”

“You deserve to be lazy after the day you had yesterday. I brought you a little something.”

Jon held out a bouquet of daisies.

“Reggie and I got them together.”

“Reggie?”

“Yeah. I called him last night to ask about your favorite flowers. He checked with your mom just to make sure.”

“I'm guessing he didn't know daisies were my favorite,” Margaret grinned.

“Well, he figured it would be roses. He said he wanted to go in half when I told him I was getting you some. He wanted me to wait until tonight to give them to you because he had to work today. I wanted to come this morning because I knew you’d be bummed about missing your track meet.”

“You are so sweet, Jon. Thanks for thinking of me.”

Did he just blush?

“I also wanted to hear from you what the doctor said. Reggie told me, but I don’t think he was listening very well. He seemed a little clueless.”

“Reggie’s always clueless,” Margaret laughed. “Something has happened to him, though. He has been so sweet to me since yesterday. He’s usually a pain in my neck.”

“Well, big brothers are supposed to be a pain in the neck.”

They both laughed, and Jon sat on the edge of her bed. “So, what did the doctor say?”

“It’s not broken, thank heavens. He said it was just a nasty sprain. He was worried about ligaments but felt immobilizing my foot for a while would probably be good enough. He’ll go a different route if I have more problems with it.”

“I guess it’s good that track season is over; well, it’s over after today.”

“Yeah. I’ll have a few months to get well and start training again before next season.”

“About that sign on the water tower.”

Margaret froze as her stomach flipped, and her heart was in her throat.

“You know everyone is saying I did it. I promise I didn’t. It’s kind of funny, though. No matter how many times I deny it, everyone believes I’m the guy. I’m like a rock star on campus.”

“I think you’re already a rock star on campus,” Margaret pointed out. “You can’t be the starting quarterback for Griffin High School without being a rock star.”

“I don’t know about that. Anyway, I didn’t do it. I climbed the tower last night to take it down—like a peace offering to the seniors. You’ll never believe what I found. Whoever put the sign up locked the trap door to the catwalk. That was ingenious. I couldn’t get past the lock to take down the sign. I did get a good look at it. That extra message is a clue as to who did it.”

Margaret’s heart stopped.

“It’s a love note,” Jon continued.

“Really?” Margaret croaked.

“Yeah. It says, ‘I LOVE YOU,’ and then it’s either followed by the person’s name who did it or the name of the person he wrote it to.”

“Whose name is it?” Margaret whispered.

Here it comes. It says JD. I love you, JD.

“Jo. It says, ‘I LOVE YOU JO.’ I suppose it could be a girl’s name.”

“Jo?” Margaret tried to sink into her pillow.

“I think it’s Jo. If a guy did it, he would have spelled it with an ‘e,’ but it’s just J and O – all capitalized. The only Joe I know is Joe Santinelli, but there’s no way in the world he would climb the water tower. He’s afraid of his own shadow. I think JO is short for a girl’s name. You know, like, ‘I love you, Jo-Ellen, or something like that.”

“Must be,” Margaret murmured.

“Is that sand art?” Jon motioned to the Mason jar sitting on Margaret’s desk.

Margaret's heart dropped to her feet. "Uh, yeah. I was just messing around."

"Cool. I did something like that once. Well, I guess I better go. I've got to meet some guys at the gym, and then I've got to help my dad with his rental house."

"You have to do that a lot," Margaret pointed out.

"Work out or work on the rental?" Jon grinned.

Margaret hit him with her spare pillow. "You know what I mean."

"I know. I always tell my dad that when I'm grown, I'll never set foot in another rental."

"Let me guess," Margaret interrupted. "He says that one day you will thank him."

"You must have ESPN."

Jon reached over and rubbed the top of her head. "See you around."

Am I like his puppy dog or his little toddler sister? I'm nearly a woman.

"Yeah. I'll see you later. Thanks for coming by."

The door to Margaret's room closed, and she lay back on her pillow in disbelief.

JO? I can't believe it. All I went through and he didn't even get the message. I'll never be Mrs. Jon Davenport. Well, he carried me into my house, took care of me, and brought me flowers. He even took the time to find out the name of my favorite flower. That's got to mean something. I guess I can hope. I can always hope.

Margaret got out of bed and hopped over to the window. She pulled her curtains back and watched Jon get into his car. He looked up at her window and smiled. He rolled his window

down and waved. Margaret waved back as he drove down her driveway.

She managed to get back into bed without any pain, with a smile plastered across her face. She announced out loud to anyone who cared to know, “I love you, Jon Davenport, and yes, I am going to marry you.”

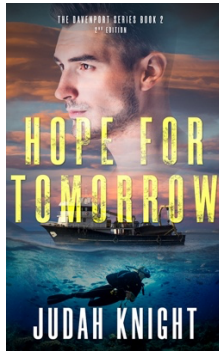
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