

[CHAPTER ONE]

One year ago ...

I KNOCKED ON THE door to my Dad's house and waited. I put my hands in my pockets and felt the soft felt box containing the expensive wedding ring I just bought. It was a tiny thing, even smaller than my wallet, but the wedding ring within it had the potential to change my life ... if I could just gather the courage to ask Sally to marry me, that is.

But right now, I needed to talk to Dad. I could have done that over the phone or over a video call or even through simple text message and email. But when we were talking about matters as important and life-changing as this, I felt that face-to-face interaction was the best. 'Course, I could already guess what my old man was going to tell me about just asking her, but I still valued his input.

I didn't have to wait long. I heard the door lock *click* and a moment later the door opened. My Dad—Nyle Maxwell I, who I was also named after—stood in the doorway. He wore a simple blue button-down shirt and tan slacks, his way of dressing 'casual.' Of course, as a very famous and prominent judge in Central Texas, my Dad was usually decked out in dark black robes sitting up on a bench bringing judgment upon sinners and ensuring justice was served.

But to me, he would always be Dad.

Dad smiled when he saw me, although he looked a little tired as well. "Nyle! So good to see you. I didn't expect to see you today. Normally, you text me ahead of time to let me know you're coming over."

I smiled back, despite my nerves. "Sorry, Dad. This was kind of a last minute thing. I was driving back from Sally's house and decided to take a detour through the neighborhood. Hope I'm not dropping in on anything important."

Dad shook his head. "No, no, you're never a distraction. Your mom is at the woman's Bible study at church and won't be back for at least another hour. I've just been sitting around reading legal briefs."

I frowned. "From work? Don't you *ever* stop working?"

Dad chuckled. "I know, but I'm as passionate about the law as you are about your coming police work. By the way, I got a call from your teacher in the academy. Said she was very pleased with your process and wanted to let me know she thought you would make an excellent cop someday."

"Good to hear," I said. I hesitated. "So, um, can I come in now? There's something I want to discuss with you, but it's private."

Dad's kind expression turned serious when I said that. "Sure. Come in and make yourself at home. You know you never need to knock when you're coming home. I'll get the tea."

Dad turned and went back into the house. I followed him in, closing the old wooden door behind me, and walked down the hallway past the family pictures on the walls. I stopped for a moment to look at the most recent family photo, which had been taken at my high school graduation some years back. It showed all four of us—me, Mom, Dad, and my younger brother Joseph—standing in the Cane High School football field, smiling together as whoever held the camera took the picture. Although I didn't miss high school—despite what the media would have you believe, it's no more fun to be a jock than a nerd—I smiled anyway before I resumed

walking into the living room and took a seat on the old but still good blue sofa that I had spent many a weekend playing video games on.

Dad's holo-TV was on and it was on one of the big news channels. The news anchor—a pretty blonde woman apparently named Sherry—was reporting on something involving SI Games. She stood by herself in a recording studio, the SI Games logo floating beside her.

“... SI Games has not commented on this matter,” Sherry was saying. “They have assured all Capes Online players that their Glitch Elimination Task Force is working on eliminating the glitch which has recently caused hundreds of affected players to lose control of their characters and receive instant bans from CO staff. SI Games’ spokesperson, Dina Mallory, has—”

I turned the holo-TV off and sat back. Although I used to play the original Capes Online game all the time when I was a kid, I hadn't tried out the new VR edition that had come out a few years ago and took the world by storm yet. I knew my younger brother, Joseph, played it all the time, but frankly I just never had time for games anymore. Between the police academy, working my day job at the local grocery store, and spending time with Sally, I rarely had time for games. The VR aspect was supposedly hyper-realistic, but I knew I would probably never get a chance to play it, which was fine by me. The real world was far more interesting, in my opinion.

My thoughts were interrupted when Dad entered the living room with two cups of sweet tea. He handed me mine before taking a seat in his old brown recliner, which squeaked slightly under his weight but held nonetheless. He didn't seem to notice it, however. He simply sipped his tea and then looked at me with a questioning look in his eyes.

“So, what did you want to talk about, Nyle?” asked Dad. “It sounded very important from what you told me.”

I hesitated. Normally I was decisive. I rarely hesitated to act or speak when I knew what to do. Heck, sometimes I even acted when I *didn't* know what to do.

But when it came to asking Sally to marry me ... I wasn't sure. I felt nervous. Indecisive. I put it off. It sounded like an excuse, and it was, but it was also the truth. Still, I felt like I could always tell Dad the truth, which was why I was here.

“I want to marry Sally,” I said, without meeting my Dad's gaze. “I want to ask her to marry me.”

Dad said nothing, causing me to look up and see him looking at me with a puzzled expression on his face. “Well, what are you doing here, then? I'm not Sally, in case you didn't notice.”

I couldn't help but smile, starting to feel a little relaxed now. Dad's humor could be a little, er, ‘cringeworthy,’ as my younger brother might say, but I found it was often exactly what I needed to hear most of the time. “Because I wanted to know how you and Mom did it. You've been married for thirty years, haven't you?”

“Thirty-one years as of last month,” said Dad with a smile. He sipped his tea again. “As for how I did it, that's easy. When I decided I wanted to marry your mom, I just asked her. Okay, I took her to the park where we went on our first date and *then* asked her, but I didn't waste any time. Never saw any reason to.”

“Really?” I said. “It was that simple?”

“Pretty much,” said Dad. “Of course, I was nervous as hell, but when has that stopped me from doing anything? It's never stopped *you* from doing anything, either, or any other man in the Maxwell family. Certainly never stopped me from sneaking out at night to go see girls when I was in high school. Your grandfather can tell you all of that.”

I smiled when Dad said that, knowing just how rebellious he had been in his youth. Of course, the Dad I always knew was a prim and proper lawyer and judge who was well-known for his strict interpretation of the law, but I'd seen pictures of him in his teens and twenties. At times I found it hard to believe that such a rebellious teenager could ever be the same person as my law and order father, but occasionally I would catch a glimpse of that same rebellious teenager in my Dad's eyes and now was one such moment.

"So you think I should just ask her," I said slowly.

Dad nodded without hesitation. "Of course. You've been dating her for a year now. She's probably just waiting for you to ask."

"How do you know that?" I said.

"I know women," Dad replied. He sipped his tea again. "And women *always* think men should propose faster than men want to. At least, women who still *want* to get married, anyway. Not too many women like that nowadays from what I've seen of your generation."

I sometimes forgot that Dad had a very, er, 'traditional' view of life. Even among people from his generation, he was fairly conservative. I had to admit to leaning that way myself sometimes, but Dad was far more blunt about the differences between men and women. I understood this got him some heat from the media at times, but he didn't seem to care. That was another thing I always liked about Dad. He did and said what he wanted and never apologized for any of it.

"You're right," I admitted. "Still, it seems like such a big thing. Marriage, that is. I just want to make sure I'm making the right choice."

Dad lowered his tea and looked at me in disbelief. "What other choice is there to make? I've seen how you and Sally act around each other. She doesn't have eyes for any other man *but* you and you clearly don't even give other women the time of day. You *have* to ask her to marry you."

Dad's bluntness caught me off-guard. "Oh, you really think so?"

"Yes," said Dad seriously. "Plus, I bet your mom fifty bucks that you would ask her to marry you this year. I love your mom more than any other woman in the world, but you know how she gets when she wins bets."

I should have been surprised to hear that my own parents were betting on when I would ask my girlfriend to marry me, but somehow I wasn't. My family could be kind of weird at times. "I assume Joseph is in on it as well."

Dad chuckled. "You're right. Joseph thinks you won't get married until next year, though. Says he knows you too well to assume otherwise."

I glanced up at the ceiling. "Is Joseph here, too? Or is he also out?"

"He's with *his* girlfriend," said Dad. "You know, Sarah? The goth one?"

Although Dad didn't say it, I could tell he didn't think very highly of Joseph dating a 'goth' girl. I had met Sarah once before and she was indeed what you would call 'goth,' but I didn't think much of it. It did seem odd to me that Joseph would date a girl like that, but he insisted that goth girls were the best and that I just didn't understand. I had no idea what *that* meant, but I also knew better than to question my little brother's brain, which seemed to run on a completely separate track from my own at times that sometimes made me wonder how we could possibly be brothers.

"I remember her," I said. I took another sip of tea, but the sweet liquid hardly registered on my mind. "But we're getting off-topic. I *want* to marry Sally. I *want* to spend the rest of my life with her. I even want to have kids with her. But ..."

“If you want all of that, then I see no reason to delay,” said Dad. “Go and get her, soldier.”

I shook my head. “You’re right, but I still worry that I might not be able to provide for her. Or that I won’t be a good father or—”

“You worry too much,” said Dad, shaking his head. “Understandable. I had a lot of the same worries as you when I first asked your mom to marry me. But you worry even more than me. Not surprising. You got that from your mother, who is also a big worrier.”

“I know,” I said. “And normally I *would* just ask her, but—”

“Then go and do it,” said Dad. He leaned forward on his recliner, locking eyes with me. “I *know* you can do it. Even better, I *know* you will be a good husband to Sally and a good father to any children you have with her.”

“Really?” I said. “Why?”

Dad’s serious expression broke into a grin. “Because *I* raised you, obviously. You had no choice *but* to turn out to be a good man. Unlike me, who turned out good despite my best attempts not to be.”

I groaned and rubbed my forehead. “Why am I not surprised to hear that?”

Dad chuckled. “Because you know me too well, that’s why. But seriously, I believe in you, Nyle. Always have and always will. And I am one hundred and ten percent behind whatever you choose to do.”

I smiled again. “Thanks, Dad, I really appreciate it.”

“So I take it you have decided to ask her, then?” said Dad as he reclined again.

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I’ll take her out on a date to the first place we went out and then ask her there. I’ve already got the ring. It’s just a matter of timing now.”

“Excellent idea, son,” said Dad. “I’ll be more than happy to hear it. Your mom will be, too, although I think I’ll have to sleep on the couch for a month when I ask her for the money she bet against you.”

“Right, Dad,” I said. I lowered my sweet tea and glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s getting late. I should probably be heading back home now. Got a big day at the academy ahead of me tomorrow and I don’t want to be groggy for it.”

“Sure, but before you leave, I have one last thing to tell you,” said Dad. “One last piece of fatherly wisdom that you need to know.”

Curious, I said, “And what would that be, Dad?”

Dad’s face broke out into an even bigger grin. “Whatever you do, don’t ask Sally to marry you when you’re standing on a rickety old bridge above a pond. When she says yes—and she will, trust me on this—she’ll probably get really excited and hug you. The old bridge won’t be able to handle all that love, though, and the two of you might end up getting very wet before all’s said and done. So ask her to marry you on solid ground. Trust me, your clothes will thank you for it.”

I just laughed. “Okay, Dad. Sure.”

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