

chocolate  
for  
two

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 publishing

# chapter one

When I woke up for real a few hours later, I half skipped, half floated into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee. As I waited for it to brew, I gazed at my ring again, then slipped into a happy daydream to replay the day before in my head like a movie...

“Keep walking,” Jake said.

“Where are we going?” Dry leaves crackled under my flip-flops.

“Shhh...just keep walking straight ahead...you’ll see.” He kept his hand on the small of my back and nudged me forward. The cool breeze provided a welcome relief from New York City’s relentless summer heat.

I coughed and stopped walking. “I’ll see? Given that I’m wearing a blindfold, that seems unlikely.”

He laughed. “I bet I could offer you a million dollars to stay quiet for five minutes, and you wouldn’t be able to do it. Maybe even two million.”

I didn’t reply. I just kept walking.

“Am I wrong?” he asked.

I stayed silent.

“You know I’m right. It’s killing you not to speak right now.”

I bit my lip.

Then I caved.

“I could do it.” I half muttered, half coughed the words.

He laughed again. “I think I’ve just proved my point. Okay, stop walking. We’re here.” He placed his hands gently on my shoulders and turned me to the right.

“We’re *where*?”

“We’re *here*. Let me help you with that.” He removed my blindfold, and I blinked a few times. As the light flooded into my eyes, my surroundings began to take shape.

We were standing in a secluded dell loosely framed by a bright circle of flowering dogwood trees, the grass warm and lush beneath our feet. It was a Saturday afternoon in July, so I knew the park must be packed, but somehow Jake had found a private nook right in the heart of it.

“Are you sure we’re in *Central Park*? The crazy-crowded one in the middle of *New York City*?” I peered up at the buildings dotting the familiar Manhattan skyline beyond the pink-flowering tree branches.

He nodded. “Yes, ma’am.” As if on cue, a few birds chirped overhead.

“But where is everybody?”

He took off his backpack and removed a blanket. “I came across this spot when I was walking through the park a few weeks ago, and I thought it looked like the ideal place for a picnic. A pretty sweet discovery, don’t you think?” He shook out the blanket and laid it on the grass.

I smiled. “It’s gorgeous, Jake. Magical, even. I didn’t think privacy was possible in *Central Park ever*, much less on a Saturday in the dog days of summer.”

He handed me a deli sandwich and a bottle of water, then looked up at the sky. “I thought of you as soon as I saw it. Makes me feel like we’re on a movie set.”

I pointed at him. “Try to remember that when winter hits. You might be cursing me then.”

“Will do.” Jake had moved from Atlanta about six months earlier to take a job as head physical therapist for the Brooklyn Nets...and to be closer to me. *Sigh*. I still couldn’t believe my luck. Not only did he make me laugh, but he always knew where I’d left my phone and never forgot to order my coffee with extra cream and sugar. It didn’t hurt that he was make-me-swoon handsome to boot. Even after all this time, I still found myself feeling a little giddy when I looked at him.

I unwrapped my sandwich, which I knew would be carved turkey and Swiss on Dutch crunch with no pickles and extra honey mustard, my favorite. Jake always remembered my favorite everything. “Don’t worry. If you get too cold when it starts to snow, *I’ll* keep you warm.” I gave him a playful smile.

I expected him to tease me back, but he didn’t, so I shrugged and took a huge bite of my sandwich.

“Shelter, food, and water,” he said as I chomped.

I looked over at him, my mouth full.

“Hmfph?”

“Shelter, food, and water.” He gestured to the trees framing our private glade, then at the picnic spread before us and the water bottle in his hand. “That’s all you need to survive in the world, right? Isn’t that what they always taught us when we were kids?”

I squinted at him as I swallowed. “Come again?”

He shrugged. “Just thinking back to my Boy Scout days. It was all so simple when we were kids, wasn’t it?”

“Tell me about it. I remember being absolutely *consumed* the summer before my sophomore year in high school with—I

kid you not—whether or not to grow out my bangs. My *bangs*. Please.”

He leaned over and brushed a loose strand of hair out of my eyes. “It’s not enough, you know.”

I smoothed my ponytail with my hand. “Not enough? You think I should grow it longer?”

He laughed. “I’m not talking about your hair. I’m talking about food and water and shelter. It’s not enough to get you through life.”

“It’s not?” I took another bite of my sandwich. *When did he get so philosophical?* It wasn’t like him to be so serious.

He started picking at the grass, which I’d never seen him do.

Then he looked at me.

“You know how everyone says that if you want to get married, you should look for someone you can imagine...spending the rest of your life with?” he asked.

I stopped breathing.

*Oh my God.*

I stared at my sandwich.

*Oh my God.*

“But I’ve realized that’s not true. That’s not true at all.”

*Oh my...God?*

I sat there frozen, my eyes fixated on my turkey and cheese, unable to move.

*What is going on?*

“Waverly, will you look at me?”

Slowly, slowly, slowly, I set the sandwich down and lifted my head.

“Yes?” I whispered.

Now he looked down and started picking at the grass again. “I’ve realized that if you want to get married, it’s not enough

to find someone you can imagine spending the rest of your life with.”

I swallowed. “It’s not?”

He shook his head. “I think to be happy—truly, *truly* happy—you need to find someone you can’t imagine spending the rest of your life...*without*.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“My life changed forever when I met you, Waverly.”

I gaped at him, still speechless. Our eyes were locked on each other, but—for once—I couldn’t utter a sound.

He reached over and grazed my cheek with his fingers. “I thought I had it pretty good before I met you, but then you came along and showed me how much better it could be. So much better.”

I smiled.

He cleared his throat. “I know it’s been a bit of an...*indirect*... road to get here.”

I winced. *Indirect* was a polite understatement, given how many times my irrational behavior and fear of getting hurt had nearly derailed us.

“But looking back, I wouldn’t change any of it, because it’s forced me to do a lot of thinking.” He stood up, and I tried to process his words. *Is he saying what I think he’s saying? Is what I think is happening really happening?* The cacophony of my own voice inside my head was deafening. I felt dizzy and was glad I was sitting down.

Jake, however, was standing.

I looked up at him, and slowly, very slowly, he reached into his pocket.

And pulled out a small box.

*Oh my God oh my God oh my God.*

My eyes welled up with tears, and through a hazy, teary blur, I watched him kneel down before me.

Then he reached for my hand.

“Waverly Bryson, I can’t imagine my life without you. I don’t *want* to imagine it without you.”

I was incapable of speech, so he just continued.

“You’ve made me so happy, you *make* me so happy, and I want to spend the rest of my life returning the favor.”

“You...do?” The words came out as a squeak.

“Yes, if you’ll let me. I love everything about you, Waverly. Absolutely everything.”

“Even my jokes?”

He laughed. “Don’t push it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You love me even on those mornings when I talk too much and you—”

He smiled and put his hand over my mouth. “Just let me do this, okay?”

I nodded, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Promise?” He raised his eyebrows, his hand still covering my mouth.

“Promise,” I whispered into his hand.

Slowly he removed it.

Then he opened the box.