



CHAPTER ONE

MEETING WITH A PROBATION officer required a certain look. A jacket and tie.

A body-hugging yellow spandex superhero costume beneath his street clothes hadn't been part of his plan.

But a spur-of-the-moment trip as Captain Chemo to the hospital bedside of a sick kid, combined with a stuck zipper on the costume, hadn't left him with any other option. He'd been forced to pull a Clark Kent.

Hayden Hawkins glanced at the clock in the dash and muttered a few choice curses. He was going to be late. He whipped his new Camaro into a parking space opposite the Erie County Courthouse.

Climbing out, he grabbed his sports jacket from the backseat, then shrugged into it.

Despite the mid-May weather's perfect seventy-two degrees, a bead of sweat trickled down the middle of his back as he fed quarters into the parking meter.

He jerked upright with a disgusted sigh. He'd spent time in Panama in a Marine uniform, a fully loaded pack on his back, and it hadn't seemed this hot.

Either he was getting old and soft or spandex was the devil's fabric.

Determined to prove both points wrong and make up lost time, he sprinted across Sixth Street and up the stone steps in front of the courthouse.

At the security checkpoint, Jeannie, a shapely brunette sheriff's deputy, smiled as he placed his cell phone and change into a tray to pass through the X-ray machine.

"Hayden Hawkins. Here to see your brother Alan?" The handcuffs dangling from her belt swayed, emphasizing her hips as she stepped from behind the counter.

They'd been playing this game for almost a year now, ever since she'd started at this post. His oldest brother, Alan, worked in the district attorney's office, and when Hayden had time off from his position as a high school gym and health teacher, he sometimes

met him for lunch. Today was a school day—only eighteen school days left in the year—but he'd taken a personal day, getting a sub to cover his classes.

Hayden grinned at the woman. "Maybe I'm here just to see you."

She fluttered her hand over her chest. "Oh, be still my heart. Hayden Hawkins, making a special visit just to see me?" She leaned closer. "You looked flushed. You feeling all right?"

"Being around a beautiful woman does that to me."

She snorted. "Nice try, Romeo, but your reputation precedes you. Move along."

"You can't believe everything you hear through the gossip grapevine. Unless it's good. Then you can believe it."

"I believe you've got a short attention span, and I'm looking for something more than thirty days, sport."

He winked. "Be the best thirty days of your life."

She laughed. "I hear that's a distinct possibility, but I'll still pass."

"I'll ask again next time."

"You know what the definition of insanity is, right? Get through the metal detector, you're holding up the works."

He glanced at the empty lobby behind him, then pointed at the handheld scanner lying on top of the security machine. "Sure you don't want to hand search me?"

"Go!"

"Admit it. You'll be heartbroken the day I come through here and don't hit on you."

He sauntered through the metal detector with nary a blip—for which he counted his blessings. The last thing he needed at the moment was a hand search, pretty deputy or not.

He blew Jeannie a kiss as he headed down the hallway. She shook her head and laughed again.

He waved over his shoulder as he turned the corner to the elevators. One was for police and prisoners only. He hesitated, finger over the public elevator button.

Upstairs, his brother Ian's son was in trouble. The son Hayden had promised to keep an eye on.

Apparently he'd done a lousy job of it.

Nor had he recovered from the shock of hearing the kid's mother's voice on the phone. Ronni Davidowski Mangano. The love of his brother's too-short life.

The woman who'd broken Ian's heart while he was fighting for his life.

A voice Hayden hadn't heard in thirteen years, despite his ongoing relationship with her son, Nick.

Time for a forced thaw in their long-standing cold war. Nick needed him. Needed *them*.

Hayden jabbed the button.

###

It could be worse.

Ronni Mangano wanted to snatch back the errant thought the moment it formed. Life over the past few years had an uncanny way of proving it could, indeed, be worse.

Tempting fate didn't seem like a wise move at the moment.

She was exhausted already, so one more thing could be the proverbial straw....

She glanced sideways at her fourteen-year-old son, Nick, slumped in the seat next to her.

Or rather, one over from her. He'd intentionally left the plastic-coated, wire-mesh seat on the bench between them empty.

She reached across the space to poke him in the leg. The khaki pants she'd ironed only an hour ago already looked rumpled. Not the image they were going for today. "Sit up," she murmured. "And fix your tie."

With a dark glare that swept first her, then the stark waiting room, Nick pushed himself upward. He yanked on the blue tie she'd retrieved from a box of his stepfather Scott's things in the basement storage room after they'd discovered that the tie Nick had worn to a family wedding only last summer was too short.

"Whatever, Mom."

Ronni clamped her molars together and went back to studying the gray-tiled floor. The bench opposite them, like the one they occupied, was bolted to the floor.

All in all, not such a welcoming place.

But then, she imagined the Juvenile Probation Office in the Erie County Courthouse wasn't meant to be welcoming. And bolting the furniture to the floor made sense when dealing with teenagers, who at even the best of times could have hair triggers.

And being in the probation office on a gloriously sunny May day didn't exactly constitute the best of times.

The door to the hallway opened, and a uniformed officer escorted in a boy who couldn't have been more than twelve.

In handcuffs.

Making Ronni wonder what such a baby-faced kid could have done to warrant cuffs. And if his mother felt half as despondent as she did. As much of a failure...

See, it could be worse. Nick in handcuffs was something she never wanted to see. Though since he'd been arrested—he'd been caught with a backpack full of spray paint,

along with some pot he still insisted belonged to a friend—at some point he must have been cuffed. Hopefully, he'd learn something from this and get off the path he was currently on.

The officer guided the kid to a seat, looming over him.

Ronni jiggled her leg, checking her watch. Hayden had said he'd come.

Had *promised*.

What if he didn't?

She'd swallowed her pride and thirteen years of silence to contact him when, at Nick's intake meeting, there'd been mention that the judge might consider appointing Nick a Big Brother.

A volunteer to provide the boy with a proper, stable, male role model.

And she'd blurted out Hayden's name. The "rules" since Ian Hawkins—Nick's father—had died had been that she ignored the Hawkinses, and they ignored her. Not that she hadn't deserved their contempt. She had. *Did*. Their scorn and anger was justified.

Exceptions to the "pretend you don't exist" rule had been made for phone contact with Lydia Hawkins, the family matriarch, when making plans for Nick's bimonthly and holiday visits with them when he'd been younger. Those phone calls had been polite but to the point. Now they all texted or called Nick directly on his cell. The most she ever saw of them was through the living room window when one of them dropped Nick back at home.

But Hayden had always been Nick's favorite uncle. After *dada*, *unk* had been Nick's second word. Hayden had spent tons of time with them, both before and after Ian's diagnosis with leukemia.

Until Ian's death had changed everything.

Once Hayden had finished his stint in the Marines—he'd enlisted immediately after Ian's death, putting his college education on hold—he and Nick had maintained a decent enough relationship. By then Nick had been almost six—old enough to take to a ballgame and other outings. Hayden also saw him at the Hawkins family gatherings she'd always made sure Nick attended. The older Nick got, the more he mentioned Hayden with the sort of awe and enthusiasm that made Hayden her first thought, as opposed to saddling him with yet another man who might be in and out of his life. Why draft a stranger when Nick had so many uncles?

Besides, Hayden taught at Millcreek High School. Not the same school Nick attended, but still...he had plenty of experience in relating to teenagers.

Her son needed someone to talk to. Because God knew he wouldn't talk to her.

The hallway door opened again.

Recognition took only a millisecond. The angular jawline, the vibrant blue eyes, the short-cropped, quasi-military-cut-but-spiked-in-the-front chestnut hair...

Hayden Hawkins, Ian's ten-months-older Irish twin, his wild-child partner-in-crime, walked in.

Trouble had never looked so damn good, except when it had been the two brothers together. Hayden Hawkins personified the boy—now the man—your mother had warned you about.

Ronni had somehow forgotten that whole bad-boy thing when he'd come to mind. Damn. Maybe she should have gone with one of Ian's other brothers?

Alongside the row of chairs, he leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his yellow-and-blue paisley tie. His biceps stretched the lightweight fabric of his beige sports coat.

The oft-admired summer-day blue of his eyes turned icy, spewing venom in her direction.

Not surprising that thirteen years later, he still carried a grudge.

For a moment, her chest constricted, making it hard to breathe.

He jerked his chin down. "Sorry I'm late. Ran into some...traffic."

Nick jumped out of his seat. "Unk. What are you doing here?" He cast a wary glance from his uncle to his mother.

Hayden's gaze softened, but his tone was firm. "Nicholas. Perhaps a better question would be what are *you* doing here?"

Her son studied the shiny toes of the new black dress shoes they'd purchased only yesterday. The old ones had been another casualty of his recent growth spurt. "Uh..."

The door to the inner offices opened. A woman with a folder in her hand called out, "Nicholas Hawkins?"

Ronni shot to her feet. "Yes, ma'am."

After introductions and handshakes, Mandy Curtis, her son's probation officer—*there* was a phrase a mother never wanted to hear—escorted them down a hallway and into a cramped office. She directed them to a round table in the corner. Ronni took the chair on one side of Nick, Hayden sat on the other.

"Okay," Mandy announced, "we're going to cover all the terms of your probation." She pulled papers from the file she'd carried, and started going over them.

Because Nick had agreed to plead guilty, and because it was his first—and please, God, hopefully last—brush with the law, he'd been placed on "informal adjustment," which meant he didn't have to actually appear before a judge in court. Judge Madison,

however, was aware of his case and had established the parameters for his probation. If Nick failed to comply with all the terms, or failed two of his drug screenings, he'd be brought before the judge.

Which Mandy implied would be a seriously bad thing.

The paperwork also indicated that if Nick didn't toe the line, he could be removed from home and placed in juvenile detention.

Ronni's stomach rolled at the thought.

Nick was basically the only family she had left, and she wasn't about to lose him—not to drugs, and not to the court system. This *had* to work.

Mandy read aloud from the document. "You live with your mother, and obey all her rules and regulations. You will let her know who you are with, where you are going and how you can be reached."

Ronni leaned forward and tapped the copy she and Nick were reading. "Huh. Look at this. I think I like this setup."

Her son scowled at her.

They covered further ground, including the amount of time Hayden agreed to spend with Nick. He could spend more time, but the judge had asked he commit to a given amount.

"Why?" Nick asked. "I get all the other stupid rules. The drug tests, the curfew, the community service, all that crap. But why is Unk part of my probation?"

Mandy leaned closer. "Because the judge thinks, given your stepfather's..." She glanced at Ronni. Ronni could tell she was carefully weighing her words. People tended to tiptoe around what had happened to Scott. "...situation, that you need a man in your life. Someone you could spend time with. Talk to."

"I don't want Unk to hang with me just because some judge told him to."

That had been one of Ronni's other fears about a Big Brother volunteer. That Nick would resent someone who viewed him as a volunteer opportunity. Or an obligation.

"Hey." Hayden bumped his fist into Nick's tightly clenched hand on the table. "We already spend time together. This just means we'll get to do more stuff this summer. That's a good thing. I can think of much worse punishments, can't you?"

Nick lifted his shoulders.

"Informal adjustments, which you agreed to, give Judge Madison a lot of leeway in what he orders. You can still change your mind and appear before him in court if you'd rather."

"No!" Ronni and Hayden said at the same time.

“All right. I’m going to take Nick down the hall. He’s going to get his picture taken, and then he’s going to have his first drug test.”

“Frikk’in’ joy,” the boy muttered under his breath.

“I’d like the two of you to read over the paperwork again while we’re gone. Make sure you understand everything.”

When the door closed behind them, the silence was deafening. With each passing moment, the air in the room grew thicker. Tension tightened Ronni’s shoulders as Hayden stared at her.

She looked like hell. Seeing her for the first time, up close and personal like this...she wasn’t the Ronni Hayden remembered.

This was a shadow of that woman. A ghost.

Dark smudges she’d tried, unsuccessfully, to hide, accentuated the lack of spark in her eyes. She’d lost weight—not in a *you-look-great* way. More like someone who’d been sick. Or who just didn’t care enough anymore to eat properly.

The hard mileage life had dealt her showed.

Karma was one hell of a bitch. Served her right.

And yet, for the briefest moment, he wrestled with the urge to lift her from the chair onto his lap and wrap his arms around her.

For a while she’d been his second-best friend on the planet.

But that had been before she’d broken his brother’s heart while he’d been dying.

Clearing her throat, she asked, “Are you sure you want to do this? We could ask Finn or Greg. Or one of the others.”

“Hell, no.” The stupid urge vanished, replaced once again with the bottled-up anger that had simmered for years. “*I* made a promise to Ian on his deathbed, remember? Oh, wait a minute. That’s right. You weren’t there, were you?”

A flicker of outrage animated her eyes for a split second. Then it went out, and she looked away from him, shoulders slumping, gathering the oversize purse on her lap into an odd embrace. “No,” she said softly. “And believe me, that’s something I’ll regret to *my* dying day.”

All the times he’d confronted her in his imagination, this wasn’t the response he’d pictured. “Why?” he demanded. “If we’re going to work together to help Nick, then I need to know why.”

She shrugged. “I was young. Barely eighteen. The man I loved, the wild, rowdy, bigger-than-life man who’d stolen my heart, was fading, inch by inch, in front of my eyes. I was scared. The idea of watching him die...” She raised her shoulders again,

shaking her head so hard her chin-length, chocolate-brown hair flapped. “I ran. Not my finest moment.”

“No, it wasn’t. He loved you and Nick. More than anything.”

“I know.”

“You broke his heart.”

This time she whispered. “I know.”

“Did you *know* his last word was your name?”

Her repeat head shake was barely perceptible.

“Well, it was. ‘Take care of Nick and Ronni,’ he said. And I swore to him I would, even while I was cursing you left, right, and sidewise under my breath. Look at me,” he ordered.

Ronni lifted her face and her eyes glimmered. His chest tightened but he continued, “I hate you for that. What you did to him was inexcusable. He was scared, too.”

She nodded.

“He needed you. And you weren’t there for him.”

She nodded again. And part of him wished to hell she’d argue with him. Rant about how she’d been justified. Make lame-ass excuses, not like the things she’d said so far.

Because her quiet but obviously deep-felt pain was getting under his skin like a splinter.

And he couldn’t afford that.

Like a splinter, he needed to cut it out. Before it got infected. Before *he* got infected—caring again about the woman who’d taught him that it was better to beat a hasty exit before your heart got involved. Got shattered.

Once, he’d been jealous of what Ian and Ronni had shared. But in the end...

If that was what love got you, he wanted no part of it. *Love ’em and leave ’em wanting more* had worked just fine for him. He offered women thirty days of fun, romance and pleasure. Nothing more. They knew going in that it would end and when.

He cleared his throat. “We don’t have to be best pals this time around. Hell, we don’t even have to like each other.”

A jolt of shock registered in her face, and she leaned back a fraction of an inch, recoiling from his words.

“But we do have to work together. For Ian. For *Nick*.” He stuck out his hand. “Deal?”

She slowly extended her own, and he took it, stunned by the tremors in it.

“Deal,” she said. “For Ian. But mostly...for Nick. I’d walk through fire for that boy. Hell, I’d dance with the devil himself.”

Hayden forced a roguish grin. “You don’t have to dance with the devil, darlin’. Just with me.”

Want to read more of Hayden, Ronni, and Nick’s story? Get your copy now! Available as an ebook, paperback, and audiobook.

<https://books2read.com/GablePromisetoKeep>