

Chapter One

The grimy Coca-Cola clock on the wall of Pete's Garage showed 5:30. Pete wiped his hands on a utility rag, threw it aside, and grabbed his jacket off a peg on the wall. His brother Andy was just closing up the garage when a green Honda hatchback coughed, sputtered, and died in front of the garage doors. Pete shrugged and shook his head at the driver, but Andy flashed a smile at the harried-looking young woman who slipped out of the car.

Pete shook his head. "For heaven's sake, Andy," he muttered under his breath as he crossed the parking lot, "can't you just tell a customer we're closed?"

Even as the harried woman talked, Andy looked relaxed. His smile usually put people at ease, but this customer was too wound up to notice. She had a kid straddling her hip and another one clinging to her leg.

"It can't be the gas filter, can it? That's what was wrong with it the last time. My friend told me I should bring it here, but it's just luck I came here this time; you were the closest place . . ."

"No, ma'am, gas filter wouldn't make 'er stall that way. Too bad it's not; I could fix it for you right now."

Pete ground his teeth while Andy explained that he would have to buy the part from the Honda dealer, which couldn't be done sooner than tomorrow.

"But I'm desperate!" the woman whimpered. "I can't take the bus home with two kids, can I?"

"Listen, lady," said Pete. "You're lucky we even looked at your car, 'cause we're closed. See the sign? Now my brother here likes to be the Boy Scout and do his good deed for the day, but that part's not available till tomorrow!"

"I'm really sorry," Andy said.

One of the kids started to cry.

"I got no way home . . ."

"How far do you have to go?" Andy asked.

"Division Street and Birch."

An awkward pause. "Oh, what the . . . It's not too far out of our way, we'll drive you. Hurry up, we're late already." Pete was, as always, surprised to hear his own voice making the offer.

Driving back from the dingy row houses on Division Street, Pete and Andy got snarled in the six o'clock traffic jam. Pete swore softly and regularly, cursing the sun in his eyes, the other drivers, and the woman with the whiny kids. Andy hummed along with the radio. A smile twitched the corners of his mouth.

"What's so funny?"

"You are."

"Me?"

"First you rip a strip off that poor woman, then you go half-way across town to drive her home."

"Her and her screaming brats, who probably kicked a hole in the upholstery back there." Pete made no attempt to defend his contradictory behavior.

He thought of that again when they walked into the house and he dropped his jacket onto the floor. "What kind of man,"

Audrey was fond of saying, “at thirty-six years old still wears his high school jacket?” She hung it up—as she would again later tonight and had every night for fifteen years—with a shake of her head.

Pete wouldn't have parted with that jacket for diamonds. It had the Marselles Central High crest on the front, the team name, “Raiders,” emblazoned across the back, and the words “Captain” and “Rocky” on the sleeves. He'd come a long way since Marselles Central High, but he was still proud of that jacket. And Audrey—a screaming, short-skirted freshman girl in the bleachers . . .

Audrey, he supposed, was currently an annoyed housewife in the kitchen. He rushed in to assure her he didn't mind eating a cold supper. But his plate was already in the microwave, and Audrey was laughing along with Andy at the story of their errand of mercy. Pete brushed his wife a quick kiss on the cheek, but she caught him around the waist and kissed him firmly on the lips.

Jenny was at the table, dawdling over a piece of cake. Pete sat down next to her. “Hi, angel, what's up?” The screen door burst open as Randy and Kevin tumbled over each other and into the kitchen.

“Daddy! Uncle Andy! Look!”

“I got a blue ribbon in the track meet! That's first place!”

The tangle of children swallowed up Pete. Audrey slid his dinner out of the microwave and placed it before him. Andy slipped his own plate into the oven. Pete dug his fork into a pile of mashed potatoes.

Pete Johnson. One lucky guy. And he knew it.