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Finders Keepers

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by

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Chapter One

Tears pooled in Bridget's eyes as she spotted the familiar red-and-white form of the Barnegat Bay lighthouse. How many times had she visited here with her grandfather to view the beauty of the bay inlet? *Too many to recall.* Swiping the tears with the back of her hand, she pulled her compact car into the near empty lot. Granted, there wouldn't be any more trips here with him, but in memory of this wonderful man, she wanted to take another look before she started her last year of graduate school in two weeks. After all, who knew where she'd finally end up once finished.

Bridget parked close to the wooden fence and then leaned forward to see past the trees to the top of the tower where the neatly painted black observation deck glistened in the sun. She took a deep, fortifying breath, pulled the camera off the passenger seat and prayed for some closure over her grandfather's sudden death.

A gust of warm, sea salt air infiltrated the car as she opened the door. The breeze held the familiar scent of seaweed and kelp, greeting her like an old friend. A wobbly smile tugged at her lips as she locked her car and then followed the pathway leading to the lighthouse. Turning the old handle, she opened the

wooden door and started up the steps to the tower with a prayer in her heart.

As soon as she reached the lookout, she unzipped her camera case and glanced down toward her left. At one hundred seventy-two feet above sea level, the rocks in the jetty appeared smaller, and the folks on the cement pier who were fishing, reminded her of miniature figurines. Peace washed over her as she gazed further into the distance to Island Beach State Park and to where the bay's inlet met the Atlantic Ocean. So many wonderful stories that her grandfather had shared rushed through her mind, bringing him close to her.

Out of the corner of her eye, something caught her attention. It looked like a small, abandoned skiff floating in with the tide, approaching land. She lifted her camera and pushed the zoom lens to take a closer look. No one was around that stretch of beach, which wasn't too surprising since most folks went to Island Beach to swim. The way the skiff was swiftly moving, Bridget realized that it wasn't anchored and in a matter of minutes it would be beached—just like life seemed since her grandfather's death.

She hesitated only a moment then flew back down the two hundred and seventeen stairs, out the front door and then down the three concrete steps to the long stretch of beach leading to the ocean. She tugged off her shoes and dropped them by one of the American Holly bushes, which lined the nature trail bordering the narrow beach. By the time she ran the eighth of a mile or so, her heart pounded. Whether it

was from some innate sense that she was on some sort of precipice, or from running in the uneven sand, she couldn't say.

The boat was only a few feet out now, and Bridget lifted up her Capri pants before entering the water to pull the boat onto the sand. Thankfully, it wasn't too heavy. She pulled it far enough up to be sure it would be secure and then glanced at the lone backpack lying in the bottom of the skiff. A tingle ran down her spine as if someone was watching her, but a quick glance over the beach revealed nothing. Shrugging off the odd sensation, she gingerly reached for the backpack and unzipped it. After all, she reasoned, if she was going to find out who this skiff belonged to, she'd need some identification.

Reaching into the backpack, she felt something and lifted it out. A cell phone. Bridget set that aside and reached back into the bag to make sure she hadn't missed anything else. Air was the only thing greeting her seeking fingers. *How strange.*

Chapter Two

Gabe held his binoculars steady. Someone had taken the bait. Would this repeated experiment prove to be a lesson in futility as well as the others? If only his father hadn't put such an odd request in his will. But dad was dad, and although he had been wealthy by earthly standards, his money never defined him. Rather, the wealth of his faith and generous spirit made him who he was. So, when the lawyer told Gabe of his father's request to bequeath a trustworthy stranger with a half-million dollars, it didn't shock him. How he wanted him to find that person, was another matter all together.

Gabe's frustration mounted. He had more important things to do than sit here with his binoculars for the rest of his life. Not for the first time, he wondered how difficult it would be to find this "someone." Integrity seemed to be as outdated as the old skiff he set to sail. This was proving to be a more difficult task than he had ever imagined. After all, this was the sixth boat, the sixth cell phone and backpack he'd lost.

Until this point, each person who found the belongings claimed them for his own. Granted, some did talk to other people on the beach, probably to see if

they knew anything of the whereabouts of the owner. One even took it to the park authority to see if someone had claimed to lose the skiff, in which they were given the standard reply that if no one comes to claim it within three months it would be theirs.

The end results were all the same—he was minus another boat.

With a long sigh, he lowered his binoculars and looked into the blue sky above. *Will this time really be any different? Or will it be another case of finder's keepers?*

The cell phone jingled, and Gabe nearly dropped the binoculars in his surprise. There was only one person who would be calling on this phone.

Bridget, finding only one number in the cell phone's address book, dialed it. It felt a bit awkward calling someone when she had no idea what their name was, let alone who they were, but she couldn't come up with a better solution to find the owner of this skiff—and find them she must. It was weird, almost as if the boat wasn't some inanimate object, but rather a life that she could relate to. Like this skiff, she was alone and lost. Even God seemed distant.

After the fourth ring a masculine voice answered, "Hello, Gabe speaking."

Bridget shuffled her feet in the sand, "Hi. My name is Bridget, and I... well I found a skiff and I was wondering if it might belong to you..." her voice trailed off in uncertainty.

Silence. Then, "You're calling about my boat?"

"Yes, at least, it's someone's boat..." feeling more and more skeptical by the moment, Bridget rubbed the back of her neck to ease the tension which had settled there. "Did you happen to lose one?"

The man chuckled, "If you only knew."

Bridget scrunched her brow together. "Excuse me?"

"Long story, but yes, I have a 16 foot skiff that had my green backpack and cell phone in it, which is no longer in my possession."

She eyed the backpack. "Looks like I may have found it."

Gabe held his phone in one hand and steadied the binoculars with another as he watched the woman with a riot of curly hair blowing in the breeze place the backpack back into the skiff. *Finally, I found her!* Even though he had two left feet when it came to dancing, he was tempted to step a little jig or at least shout out a 'yee-haw!' but instead he steadied his voice. "Can I meet you somewhere?"

The woman's soft, feminine voice replied, "I'm on the beach by Barnegat Lighthouse. Are you nearby?"

He set down the binoculars and reached for the ignition. His heart stepped up a beat in anticipation of meeting her face to face. "I can be there in ten or fifteen minutes. Can you wait that long?"

"I'll be here."

"Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me."

Chapter Three

Bridget watched a tall, thin man in a white windbreaker approach. His brown hair tousled in the wind. What must her hair must look like, she wondered as she tried to grab hold of the wayward curls, but it was useless. They sprung from her grasp like a coiled spring.

The handsome man stopped a few feet shy of her and held out his hand, "I'm Gabe."

She let go of her hair and placed her hand in his firm grip. "Nice to meet you."

His hazel eyes twinkled. "And you have no idea how nice it is to meet you."

Bridget felt the heat rise to her cheeks. The way he studied her made her feel...well, seen. Not just the fleeting glance kind of thing, but like he was looking into her soul. She cleared her throat and pointed to the boat, grabbing at anything to say. "Well, there it is..."

"Sure enough," Gabe said, he gaze never leaving her face. Suddenly he sighed and jammed his hands into his tan shorts. "I have something I need to tell you..."

Upon hearing the seriousness in his voice, the silly romantic notions that unwillingly flitted through her mind, left at once. "Yes?"

Gabe squinted and looked out over the bay. "This skiff, well, I set it to drift on purpose."

"I don't understand..."

Gabe ran his fingers through his hair. "This is going to sound really strange, but please hear me out."

Bridget wondered how the day could get any more bizarre than it already was. A wayward skiff that she felt a connection with, a handsome stranger looking at her with interest... with a quick nod she said, "Shoot."

"Have you ever heard of Sleep Easy?"

She thought for a moment wondering where this conversation was going. Sleep Easy did sound vaguely familiar. She took a stab at it, "You mean that company that designed those expensive special mattress and pillows?"

Gabe cringed. The expensive part wasn't his father's idea, but once a patent is sold, it's in the company's hands. "That's the one. My father, well, he..." Gabe rubbed his forehead. "Look, would you like to grab a bite of dinner with me or have a cup of coffee? I have a lot of explaining to do."

Bridget's mind raced. Should she go with him? After all, she didn't know the man. However, she didn't feel threatened in any way. In fact, quite the opposite was true. She could hear her grandfather tease her about an old favorite commercial of theirs... *Inquisitive minds want to know...* if there was a mystery to be solved, Bridget was on it like a sugar on maple—guess that's why she liked statistics so much. "Sure."

His eyes widened. "Really?"

She shrugged and laughed, "How about if I meet you at DQ."

"Great. It's a date."

Bridget didn't dare read into that statement—besides she was leaving for school in two weeks—she didn't have time to venture into a relationship now. Gabe walked over to the skiff. "Do you think I should row this over to the pier and tie it up?"

"That would probably be a good idea. Want me to give you a push out?"

Bridget noticed a little dimple appear as he smiled. "That would be great. Thanks." He pushed the boat further into the water and took a seat before reaching on the sides to where the paddles were secured. He put them in the water and as Bridget pushed the skiff, he pulled with the oars. In a matter of seconds he was floating. "All clear."

Bridget took a few steps back until she was on the beach once again.

"Meet you in about fifteen minutes?"

"Sure. See you at DQ."

Perhaps Dad did know what he was doing after all, Gabe thought as he pulled at the oars, thankful for the physical activity to displace some of his extra energy he had since meeting Bridget. When was the last time he met a beautiful woman like that? Granted, there were plenty of physically attractive women he knew, but their beauty diminished as he realized they were after his wallet. Bridget, well, he could just tell there

was something different—something special about her. Would this be one find he'd like to keep?

He chuckled at the mere thought. Here he was thirty-one, with no inkling towards romance—before now. Suddenly, the world seemed brighter, and the future more optimistic.

Bridget knew she had a little time to spare, so she made her way back to the lighthouse and sat on one of the benches outside. *Lord, I know You hold the future. I pray that You guide me. Since You took grandpa to be with You, well, I feel homesick—homesick for him—homesick for You. You seem as far away from me as he is. Don't let me try to fill up my need for You with anything else.* Tears gathered in her eyes and she once again brushed them away impatiently and looked back to the single set of footprints in the sand, which reminded her of the poem her grandfather had given to her for her twenty-first birthday. *Thank You Lord for the reminder that You're not far, You're here with me—carrying me.*

Chapter Four

Bridget watched Gabe walk through the door, and her heart did a funny little flip-flop as his gaze locked into hers. With an easy grin he asked, "Do you know what you'd like?"

"You?" She swallowed hard. She couldn't believe that actually slipped out. Quickly catching herself she said, "I mean, do *you*?" Bridget wished the crack in the floor would open up wide so she could slip right through it. *What must he think?*

Thankfully, somehow he seemed to miss her erratum. Instead he continued to study the board. "I think so." He glanced back at her. "Shall we, then?"

She took the place he offered with a wave of his hand in front of him, and then made her way up to the counter.

The girl at the register grinned at Gabe and then looked at Bridget. "Can I help you?"

"May I have a number four meal please with a water?"

"Sure, anything else?"

Bridget reached her purse. "No, that will be..."

Gabe placed his hand on her arm and she glanced up in surprise. "Make that two, please." With a little

shake of his head he said softly to Bridget, "I've got this."

Bridget, saving every penny she could for school, didn't mind at all. "Thanks."

Gabe winked. "No problem."

Gabe followed Bridget to a table and placed the tray down. He tilted his head to the side, "Would you mind if I said thanks for our food?"

Bridget's eyes lit up and she softly said, "I'd love for you to say grace."

Gabe bowed his head, "Thank You, Lord, for this food and for pleasant surprises You send our way. Amen."

"Amen." Bridget fiddled with her napkin and then opened up her burger box.

"So, tell me about yourself."

Bridget tugged down the paper on the straw and then pushed the straw through the lid. "Not much to tell."

Gabe popped a fry in his mouth and chewed for a moment. "Now why do I find that hard to believe?"

Bridget laughed and the carefree sound made Gabe long to say something that would make her laugh again. However, he needed to tell her about his father. "I'm not letting you off the hook that easy, but I will take a little detour and tell you about the skiff."

Bridget leaned closer to the table.

"My father, as I started to tell you on the beach, invented the Sleep Easy line of mattress and pillows, as well as a slew of other things."

Bridget finagled a few fries out of the box. "That's pretty neat."

"He was a great man." Gabe took a deep breath. "He passed away last month... and left an odd request in his will."

Bridget reached over and placed her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Gabe shook his head. "Bridget... you're amazing. Aren't you curious about his will?"

She sat back a bit stunned. "No. Should I be?"

Gabe laughed and sat back, enjoying the moment immensely. "Yes, because you're in it."

Her jaw dropped. "I am? But how?"

"I was to find some trustworthy soul by sending off a skiff. The person who returned it, which is you, is awarded a half million dollars."

Bridget's face paled. "Get...out..." she looked away and then back again. "You're serious?"

Gabe would give anything to know what she was thinking at the moment. "I am."

Bridget was too stunned to speak. Things like this didn't just happen every day—especially not to her. All her concerns for how she was going to finish school vanished like a puff of smoke. "I...I...don't know what to say."

Gabe sat back looking quite contented with himself. "It wasn't as easy to find you as it may sound. Do you realize that this is the sixth boat I've sent out?"

Her gaze swung back to his. "Really?"

“I mean, I know this is New Jersey and all, but even I was surprised at how many times it took to find someone willing to return it to me.” Bridget must have looked as strange as she felt because Gabe stopped and said, “Hey, you OK?”

Bridget nodded. “Just shocked I guess.” She placed her burger back down. Was this some kind of test from the Lord? She wasn’t about to settle for money—her relationship to Him and other people was more important. *Guide me, Lord.* “Gabe...that money shouldn’t belong to me. It should belong to you.”

Gabe could have kissed her right then and there. With a sudden prayer in his heart he hoped one day he may be able to do that very thing. *In Your time.* “No, I don’t need any more money,” he reached for her hand, “on the other hand, I could always use an honest friend. Would you happen to know where I could find one?”

She looked up beneath lowered eyelashes, and softly said, “I might.”

Gabe let out a chuckle. “I think I found a keeper. Thank You, Lord.”

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