

~ Something to Believe In ~  
CHAPTER 1



His thoughts were like puzzle pieces, scattered across the landscape of his mind, as he attempted to assemble the mosaic of his father's teachings. Trying

to remember his father's exact words, Phineas ventured into the forest once more. He'd been there plenty of times and, each time, played a game all by himself. He often let his imagination run wild, inventing worlds that weren't really there. In his mind, Phineas had chased small, stinky trolls through the woods, played hide and seek with naked nymphs at the glassy pond, and slept under weathered trees whose spirits talked back to him in the dark, telling him stories of what used to be.

"No more," he whispered as he followed a lightly marked trail that his own feet had made through the years. It was a part of the woods where vegetation no longer grew as it used to, a thin strip of dirt, as thin as Phineas himself was.

He was a wisp of a boy, as delicate as the morning mist that vanishes at the touch of sunlight. And even though he was almost an adult now, and no longer a kid, he was still very slim. Only that now, he was so tall that he'd grown about a head taller than his own mom. And well, those fantasies and fairytales had to be left behind, along with all those clothes that no longer fit him.

"Life's an open road, every day a new adventure," his father always chorused. Phineas had tried to live by that mantra, even if his life felt like a nightmare sometimes. Even if he felt so lonely that during his entire childhood, his mind conjured up

imaginary friends and creatures to keep him company.

“But I’m an adult now, so I’m not doing that anymore,” he said aloud. “I will not imagine things that aren’t there, and I’ll concentrate my efforts on getting a scholarship to a good university.”

Phineas kneeled on the mulch and picked a couple of mushrooms from the ground, putting them in a hand-woven basket his mother made when he was five years old. Foraging was something his mother had taught him. It was a very handy skill to have when one lived in the middle of nowhere—literally.

Nested in the wild with a forest behind it, the Hart farm was an enormous expanse of countryside where they raised cattle to the south. The sea crashed at their doorstep. It was a fantastical land, a place most people probably only dreamed of. The sun rose on top of the piercing blue water every morning, its light bathing the windows of the house and warming the kitchen floor. And every afternoon, the sun hid behind the tall trees of the forest, dressing the house with eerie shadows that, as a kid, Phineas had named demons.

Now, being almost nineteen and still living at home, Phineas dreamed daily of everything—everything but what he already had. His thoughts were like fireflies, illuminating the darkness with

flickers of dreams, dancing in the depths of his consciousness. He wanted to go to America, where there were as many Universities as anywhere else in the world. Or maybe to Europe, to a University in the middle of Scotland or maybe even England? He had so many dreams of traveling to a world he knew nothing about, to meet new people, people that weren't his parents. There was nothing wrong with Monika and Paul, but he daydreamed of so much more. Living nineteen years with the same two

people would take a toll on anyone, or so he told himself.

“It’s not that much to ask for, right?” Phineas wondered, gathering a few more mushrooms he knew were safe for consumption before turning



around and heading back to the house. “I already stayed here a year more than I had to. Mom and Dad promised that if I stayed one more year to help with the farm while Dad’s knee got better, then we could

discuss plans for University. I mean, it's not like I don't already have a thousand ideas and plans..."

As Phineas kept talking, no one replied. The forest was quiet around him, with just a few birds chirping here and there. The hush of the forest enveloped him like a soft embrace, as if the ancient trees were holding their breath in his presence.

"Dad constantly says life is an adventure, and well... I already know what I want my next adventure to be. Why can't they just say yes and let me be?"

Huffing a sigh, Phineas got to the edge of the forest and looked backward, almost as if hopeful that the answer hid back there in the woods. Then, squaring his shoulders, he headed back into the farmhouse, entering through the tiny kitchen door where he was immediately greeted by the smell of fresh strawberry jam being stirred on the stove.

His mother, Monika, greeted him from the stove. "How was the gathering, my boy?" She was a short and plump woman with tight curly hair that was a shade lighter than Phineas. While Phineas' hair was orange, his mother's was almost strawberry blond. Monika usually kept it long, but it was now up in a messy bun as she cooked. She wore a light flowery dress. When her son approached and planted a kiss on her forehead, she smiled widely.

“Hi mom, it wasn’t bad. Mushrooms are in full bloom at the moment, so many of them are running around begging for attention.”

“You know mushrooms don’t bloom,” she replied in a teasing tone.

“I know, it was just a saying,” he replied.

Phineas went to the sink and started washing the mushrooms, his fingers dancing delicately over each mushroom, washing away the soil that clung to the tender caps. Then, he placed them on a board and started slicing them as thinly as he could. After a moment of silence, in which only the birds singing outside the window kept them entertained, Phineas turned to his mother, who was now pouring the jam into sterilized jars.

“Mom...”



“Yes?” Monika didn’t turn. She put one jar aside and moved on to the next.

“Why don’t you and dad want me to go to college?”

She must have sensed the nervous energy in the room, because she turned around fully, looked at him with eyes that knew too much and said too little. Eyes that Phineas knew well enough, eyes that he’d seen plenty throughout the years anytime he asked questions that his parents didn’t have straight answers to.

Questions like: *Why do we live so far away from everything? Why can’t we go into the city? Where exactly is the island located? Can you show it to me on a map?* Questions with answers he’d learn to interpret. His parents had never hid the outside world from him. He knew his geography and watched TV—prerecorded—like every other kid. He knew a bit about politics too. His parents had also told him plenty of stories about their lives when they used to live in Seattle, then Scotland, and then Costa Rica. Eventually, they’d decided they’d seen enough of the globe and went off the radar, off-grid. They loved life like this here. They’d never planned to bring a kid into their world, but life invariably had its own ideas.

“Phineas,” his mother said slowly, snapping him out of his current daydream. Her words were like



butterflies, fluttering gently in the air, hoping to draw him closer without causing him to fly away in fear. With each sentence, she chose her words like a painter selecting colors for a masterpiece, aiming to create a portrait of warmth and invitation. “We’ve talked about this. It’s not that we don’t want you to go, it’s just that with your father’s injury last year, things got more complicated and we needed your help around the house. Now, well... Why don’t you wait until your father finishes work later and then speak to him about this?”

Phineas nodded, a little deflated but still hopeful. Maybe tonight would be the night his father said they were ready for him to go. Maybe he’d sit by the desk in his room, and together they could have a look at all the universities he’d researched while the satellite was on and he could connect to the Internet—which was a rare occurrence.

“Okay, mom, I will.”

Smiling, Monika reached out to him and planted a kiss on his right cheek. After that, he helped his mother bottle up the leftover jam, and together, they got ready for dinner.

It was almost an hour later when they heard a noise outside prompting Phineas to look out the window. The outside world beckoned like a captivating stage, and Phineas couldn’t resist the urge to draw back the curtains and become an

audience to the theater of the night. In the distance, and coming from the opposite edge of the forest he'd been foraging, came his father. Paul was taller than he was, but more robust. His hair was the color of wet sand and his eyes were so dark that Phineas often wondered how it was possible that he had lighter eyes than both of his parents. While his mom had green-tinted, hazy brown eyes and his father had dark brown ones, Phineas' eyes were almost yellow, so light green that his eyes hurt if he looked directly at the sun or the day was too bright.

“He’s coming,” Phineas said.

“Perfect, I’ll set up the table. Bring the food,” his mom ordered.

While she put the plates on the table, Phineas got the sauteed vegetables and plated them along with some rice.

Through the window, he watched his tired father approach, the light of the shed no longer visible on the edge of the forest. During the day, his father was always at the shed, working with wood and creating mesmerizing furniture that people all over the world purchased through a contact his father had on the outside. Since he was a kid, the workspace was the only place Phineas wasn’t allowed to enter—it was too dangerous with all the tools when he was younger, and then, his father had gotten so used to working in the comfort of silence,

that not even his mother dared to bother him when he was there. Some days, he finished earlier; some days, he finished later. Either way, neither of them ever went looking for him. Phineas had never questioned this. It was simply the way things were.

“Hello, my gorgeous family!” The deep voice reverberated like a powerful bass note, filling the small kitchen with its rich timbre. Monika turned with a polite smile, holding onto Paul in a tight embrace. “Missed me?” he whispered.

“Always,” his mother replied.



“Hey, boy!” His father went over to Phineas and rustled his ginger hair, which was growing longer than usual.

“Hi, dad, how was work today?”

“Exhausting.” he replied. “Things didn’t go as planned today, so I honestly can’t wait to go to bed and start again tomorrow.”

They sat down, food was served, and then small conversation permeated the room as they filled their bellies. Phineas looked at his mother a few times, but her eyes told him to wait—to at least give his father a quiet dinner before enquiring about college. And so Phineas waited until the food was eaten, the dishes were done, and all of them were ready for bed.

He was up in his room when his father came over to say good night. He knew it was now or never.

“Dad, can we talk?” Phineas asked.

“Can’t it be tomorrow?” his father replied, stifling a yawn. “I’m honestly exhausted.”

“Well, I... I’d prefer it if it was now... You know how I stayed here for a year longer to help,” he explained, talking faster than usual to get his point across before his father interrupted him. “Well, I know you always say there’s plenty of opportunities in life, and that we shouldn’t waste them, that there’s always something to do...” He took a deep breath, and let the rest of it out. “I know what I want to do.

I want to go to college in a big city, see how things are in the outside world. It's time."

His father looked distraught as Phineas talked. In the depths of his father's eyes, he sensed a storm of emotions brewing, a tempest of concern and sorrow colliding with the unyielding walls of love. He could tell his father hated to see him like this, to see him struggle with his words and this decision. Slowly, Paul grabbed Phineas hands in his and simpered sadly.

"You're right... I know you've been here all your life, so you do not know what the outside world is like. Your curiosity is understandable. I've just been wanting to protect you, I guess, for as long as I could. What about this: We'll discuss your options tomorrow, when I'm back from working, okay? I'll do my best to be back early."

Not really able to believe what he was hearing, Phineas was delighted from ear to ear.

"Yes, sure! I can show you everything tomorrow. I've been looking through options and have so many..." His voice grew still when he noticed the dark circles under his father's eyes, and feeling a pang of guilt, he shook his head. "It's okay, dad, go to sleep. I can tell you all about it tomorrow."

"Thank you. Have a good night, my boy."

Even though he was nineteen, his father still kissed him goodnight, a quick peck to the top of his

head before he headed out of the room. He closed the door behind him.

“Did you hear that? I’m going to college!” Phineas almost squealed, trying to contain the well of emotions so his father wouldn’t hear him. Looking over to his shoulder, he smiled at the small girl sitting there, beaming back at him with a bittersweet expression.

Phineas extended his neck to have a better look at her, and then placed his hand close to his shoulder like he’d done a thousand times before, waiting for her to climb over to his palm.

“What’s wrong, Sun? Aren’t you happy that my father agreed to allow me to finally go off to college?”

Sun climbed into his palm. Her ascent was like a dance of trust and intimacy, as she placed her trust in the sturdy foundation of his hand, knowing she was safe in his gentle grip. He placed his hand at eye level so he could have a better look at his friend. Sun was Phineas only real friend, if he could even



consider her real. She was two inches tall, with bright pink spiky hair and an upturned nose that made her look like the pixie she was.

Sun pouted her lips and then shrugged.

“Not very chatty today, I see. Oh well, we better get some sleep. It’s going to be an exciting day tomorrow.”

Phineas placed Sun in the matchbox on his night table. A small red cushion inside served as a bed. Then, he too laid down in bed. The open window to his right enabled the cool air of the night drift in at its leisure.

As he was about to fall asleep, a flash of light grabbed his attention. He half-opened his eyes, peeked through the window, and thought he saw some strange light coming from the shed. The next minute, a fresh stormy wind picked up, seemingly out of nowhere. He begrudgingly closed the window and threw the curtain closed—it was probably a summer storm coming their way.

*Good.* He hoped to wake up to a rainy landscape and lush, green forest. His dreams were waiting for him, like unopened letters, each envelope carrying the promise of adventures yet to be unfolded...