

Chapter 1 – The Golden Watch

The Cumberland Conference Room in Building 5200 at Oak Ridge National Laboratory smelled faintly of coffee, sheet cake, and industrial carpet cleaner. Rows of folding chairs scraped against the floor as colleagues settled back into their seats, paper plates balanced on their laps. A corporate banner in block blue letters hung above the projector screen:

“Congratulations on Your Retirement.”

At the center of it all stood Steve Wakefield, sixty-two, black hair streaked with gray, a neat goatee framing his reserved smile. His eyes flicked now and then toward the slideshow running behind him—photos of potlucks, team-building days, and department group shots. Each image told the same story: Steve Wakefield, steady IT man, three-and-a-half decades of quiet database work.

Applause swelled as his manager handed him a velvet box containing the traditional golden retirement watch. Someone in the back called, “About time, Steve!” drawing a wave of laughter.

Becky clapped warmly from the front row. Married to him for thirty-nine years, she knew this polished performance well—the polite smile, the practiced humility. She wasn’t resentful, only reflective. Thirty-five years of databases, she mused, the phrase she’d repeated to neighbors and relatives for decades whenever anyone asked what her husband did.

Andrew leaned forward, grinning. “Dad, that’s 12,775 days of databases. I could chart it if you want.”

Emily smirked and nudged him. “Brother Face, let Dad enjoy his cake before you bury him in math.”

Dan shook Steve’s hand firmly. “Congratulations, sir. Thirty-five years is something to be proud of.”

Steve accepted the watch, his hand lingering on its weight. From his blazer pocket, the corner of an old ID badge flashed—ORNL logo, acronyms few outside the lab ever noticed. A couple of colleagues squinted curiously, but Steve shifted his jacket and deflected with another joke about outdated servers.

By 1:00 p.m., the party had wound down. The family stepped out into the parking lot, the afternoon air unexpectedly warm for October. Cicadas still droned from the trees bordering the lot, their rattling chorus stubborn against the season.

Andrew squinted at the sun. “Feels more like August than October.”

Steve slipped the velvet watch box into his pocket. “Weather doesn’t always care about the calendar.”

Becky adjusted her purse strap, smiling faintly. The warmth, the racket of cicadas, even the ordinary feel of the day—it all seemed strangely heightened. “Thirty-five years of databases,” she murmured again, more a family refrain than a judgment.

By late afternoon, around 5:00 p.m., the Wakefields gathered at McGhee Tyson Airport. Their friends Jamie and Carol had each driven one of their own cars so the family wouldn’t have to leave vehicles at the airport.

Jamie helped unload suitcases from the back of his SUV, then gently lifted baby Leah into his arms. “She did great at lunch. Cleaned up her peas, then tossed half of them at Carol. After that she tried to sing along to the radio.”

Carol laughed, shaking her head. “Country music never had a better backup singer.” She kissed Leah’s forehead before settling her back into her mother’s arms.

Andrew adjusted the diaper bag strap across his shoulder, still frowning. “Nine months is awfully young for a trip this long.”

Steve rested a hand on his son’s shoulder. “She’ll do fine, Andrew. You’ve got a whole crew here who will spoil her rotten before we’re halfway to Honolulu.”

Becky added with a reassuring smile, “She’ll be with all of us. And she’ll have stories someday about being part of this adventure, even if she won’t remember it.”

Andrew sighed, and Katelyn gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “We’ll manage.”

They hugged Jamie and Carol goodbye, thanking them both for watching Leah earlier and for the airport drop-off. The cicadas still droned faintly in the trees along the parking lot, their song stubbornly clinging to summer as the family wheeled their bags inside.

Inside the terminal, the air buzzed with boarding calls and the smell of soft pretzels. Their itinerary was long: Knoxville to Atlanta, then onward to Los Angeles, an overnight hotel, and finally the morning flight to Honolulu.

On the first leg, Leah fussed briefly before Katelyn soothed her, rocking her gently and humming until the baby drifted back to sleep. Andrew let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, but his eyes stayed fixed on his daughter, watchful, as though willing her to stay calm. Emily offered little jokes to lighten the mood, while Dan sat quietly beside her, his calm presence a steady anchor for the row.

During their layover in Atlanta, Steve sat apart, eyes on his phone, scrolling weather maps. Storm tracks curled ominously across the Pacific, their swirling patterns south of Hawaii marked with warning icons. He pinched and zoomed, studying the systems that could intersect with their route not long after the *Oceanic Majesty* was due to leave Honolulu. His frown deepened, unnoticed by the others.

Hours later at the LAX hotel, the family collapsed into their rooms, exhausted. Leah stirred once more, her small whimper breaking the silence. This time, it was Andrew who lifted her from the crib, whispering softly until the baby quieted against his shoulder.

Steve stood at the window, neon from Century Boulevard reflecting off his glasses. His fingers traced the golden watch in his pocket as his gaze lingered on the storm data still glowing on his phone screen.

“Storm season isn’t over,” he murmured again. Not as a quip this time, but as a warning no one else seemed to hear.