

ERIC WALTERS

BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH



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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

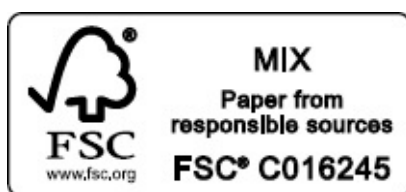
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*For Nick Mednis, my kind, gentle father-in-law.
He was a wonderful father and grandfather. All the
grandchildren called him "Tampa" because the first to
come along couldn't pronounce Grandpa. He almost
always had a smile on his face and often a simple beret on
his head as he walked. The beret I gave the grandfather
in this story was to honor my children's Tampa. I took
it with me when my son and I climbed Kilimanjaro.
I think that would have made Tampa smile.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The room was large and lavish, with dark oak paneling. A big mahogany desk dominated the room, and overstuffed leather chairs and couches encircled it. I'd never been in a lawyer's office before. But then again, prior to a few days ago, I'd never been in a funeral home or attended a funeral either.

There were twelve of us in the room—me, my mother, my brother Steve, my mother's three sisters and two of my uncles, and my four cousins, Adam, Webb, Spencer and Bernard, who insisted on being called Bunny. These were the eleven people in the world who meant the most to me. The only person missing was the reason we were here—my grandpa. A shudder radiated through my entire body. I hoped nobody saw it. My mother reached out and placed her hand on mine.

"It's all right, DJ," she said softly.

Her eyes were so red from crying. I knew how much she was going to miss him. I knew how much we were *all* going to miss him. I just couldn't afford to shed tears. Somebody had to be in control. That was my job.

His death had been hard on everybody, but maybe the hardest on my mother. I'd heard my Aunt Vicky talking about how we must be "reliving" my father's death. I thought that was a funny choice of words—how could a death be relived?—but I understood what she meant. That didn't mean I agreed with her, just that I understood. My father had been gone for so long, since I was really little, that I hadn't even been part of all of that. No funeral home, no visitation, no cemetery, no burial memories. I couldn't relive what I hadn't lived.

With my mother's whispered reassurance over, the room became completely silent again. It was almost as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. Then again, since nobody seemed to be breathing, it wasn't like we needed air. We all just sat there, in silence, waiting for the lawyer to arrive. I didn't know what was in the will, and I didn't care what Grandpa was leaving me, because he'd already left so many memories. But it was a term of his will that we all needed to be there, so we had no choice. It would have been disrespectful for us not to come.

Of course that hadn't stopped my brother from trying to get out of it. Typical. If it wasn't his idea, he didn't want any part of it. Mom had finally convinced him. If she hadn't, I would have convinced him in a whole different way. Steve could be such a jerk sometimes. It was hard to believe that twins could be so different, but we rarely saw things the same way.

The silence seemed so *wrong*. Here we were, waiting to hear the will of a man who didn't believe in silence. He was always talking, telling stories, making jokes or singing songs. More than once, when he thought he was alone, I'd caught him humming or talking to himself. I'd even overheard him having both ends of a conversation and laughing at his own jokes. My mother always joked that he could talk to a stone and get the stone to reply. That was just how he was. Wherever he went, he talked to complete strangers and they always talked back. He once said that strangers were just people he hadn't become friends with yet. He was so relentlessly friendly, so happy, so full of life. He *was* so full of life.

I hated seeing him in that coffin. The minister talked about how "lifelike" he looked lying there.

That was garbage. That was the first time I'd ever seen him when he wasn't moving about. He was emotions in motion. He would jokingly say that he was what hyperactive kids grew up to be. He was what *I* would like to grow up to be, but that wasn't possible. For one thing, I don't have his way with people. He made everybody feel so comfortable. Total strangers felt like friends, friends felt like family, and family...well, he just made us feel like we were the most important people around. All of us. When people talked about tolerance for others, he bristled. He didn't believe in *tolerance*, I believed in *acceptance*.

Of course, I knew that everybody who was born died eventually, but I guess I didn't believe he would ever die. He told me he was going to live forever or die trying. He died trying. He was getting ready to put in a whole new garden. It was going to be more work than many men half his age could handle. He was looking forward to going to the cottage and having all of us up to visit. He kept saying he was going to water-ski this year. I knew he wasn't; he just said that to get his daughters all worried. Ninety-two-year-old men shouldn't be water-skiing.

A few nights ago he went to bed and woke up dead. I almost chuckled. He would have liked that—the rhyme of *bed* and *dead*, a little limerick in the making. One minute he was so full of life and the next—nothing. Everybody told us it was a wonderful way to go. No suffering. So for him, I was happy. But it just made it harder for the rest of us. We hadn't had time to adjust, to get used to the idea that he was gone. I still half expected him to walk into the room and—

The door opened and everybody turned as a man in a suit walked in.

“Good afternoon,” he said as he settled in behind the desk.

There was a mumble of responses from across the room.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. “My name is John Devine, and I've been David's lawyer for twenty years. This is a very sad day, and I must admit that this was a day I didn't expect to be part of. I'm much younger than David, but even so, I expected him to outlive me.”

That comment generated smiles and nods.

“He was a man of so much passion. It was a true joy to have known him.”

That was my grandpa. He *was* a joy.

“The terms of the will are both straightforward and, shall we say, most interesting.” Mr. Devine paused and smiled. “And with a most interesting twist.”

Interesting was such an interesting word. It could mean almost anything.

“Let's begin with the more conventional parts,” he said. “All of David's assets—his home, investments and cottage—are to be divided equally among his daughters.”

That was fair, and he was always fair.

“All of these assets, with the exception of the cottage, are to be liquidated and dispersed to the four heirs. The cottage's ownership will be transferred to list his daughters as co-owners. It says, and quote, ‘This was a place of so many great memories shared with my family that I wish it to be used in perpetuity by my grandchildren and their children and their children.’” He paused. “Is that all clear?”

There was a murmuring of agreement and nodding of heads. I was happy. Some of my best memories were from the cottage. Weekends and summers spent with all of my cousins and our parents and Grandpa.

“Excellent,” Mr. Devine said. “Now I need to set out the next part—the interesting part—of the will. A sum of money—a rather substantial sum—has been put aside to fund an undertaking...or

should say, *seven* undertakings.” He paused. “This is without a doubt one of the most unusual clauses that I have ever been asked to put in a will.”

He looked slowly from person to person, deliberately pausing at each one. Everybody was staring directly at him, leaning forward in their seats. He certainly had everybody’s complete, undivided attention—even Steve’s.

Just read the thing, I thought.

“I know you are *all* anxious to hear about these undertakings. However, I cannot share them with any of you at this moment.”

There was an eruption of confused protest.

“Please, please!” he said, cutting the protest short. “You will *all* be fully informed, but not all of you will be informed at the same time. Some people will have to leave the room prior to the undertakings being read.”

I knew where this was going; he was going to ask the grandkids to leave. That wasn’t fair. I understood the younger ones being asked to leave, but why me? I was almost eighteen—well, in a few months—and it wasn’t like I wasn’t mature enough to handle anything. And it wasn’t as if my father was here to support my mother—that was my role. I should be allowed to stay even if the other five grandsons had to leave.

Mr. Devine continued. “Therefore, as per the terms of the will, I request that the grandsons—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Steve said.

Everybody turned to him.

“I don’t want to be kicked out of the room,” he reiterated.

“You’ll go if you’re told to go,” I said forcefully.

“You don’t understand,” the lawyer said. “He *can* stay.”

“If he’s staying, then I’m staying as well,” I said.

“And me too,” added my cousin Webb.

The room erupted in protest again.

“Could everybody please just stop!” the lawyer yelled as he stood up. “Please, I am reading a will. Decorum is needed. Out of respect for the deceased, you all need to follow his directions. Is that understood?”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Me too,” my brother said.

I knew he meant it. He was impulsive and he could be a real pain. There were times I wanted to give him a smack—and had—but he *was* okay.

“Before I go on, I need to ask *everybody* to agree to respect the terms of his will—*all* the terms of his will.”

“Of course we agree,” my mother said.

My aunts and uncles all nodded in agreement.

“Excellent,” the lawyer said. “Now, I need to have everyone except the six grandsons to leave the room.”

“What?” one of my aunts exclaimed, voicing the disbelief we all felt.

“Did you say that the adults have to leave?” Aunt Debbie asked.

Mr. Devine nodded. "Yes. Everyone except the grandsons."

TWO

If it was eerie to be here to begin with, then it was even eerier to watch all our parents leave the room. My mother, the last to leave, hesitated at the door and we locked eyes.

“It’s okay,” I mouthed to her.

She smiled ever so slightly and closed the door, leaving the six of us alone with the lawyer.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, “I’m assuming that nobody saw this coming.”

“Grandpa was always full of surprises,” Bunny said.

“So I guess because of that we’re *not* that surprised,” Steve added.

“Interesting perspective,” the lawyer said. “The only way you would have been surprised is if I didn’t do something to surprise you.”

“Pretty much,” my brother agreed.

“So if he’d done nothing, then you would have actually been surprised, which wouldn’t have been surprise. Sort of a Catch-22, don’t you think?”

“Do you think, sir, that we could go on?” I said. “I believe we’re all anxious to hear what you’re going to tell us.”

“I’m sure you are,” he said. “But, actually, *I’m* not going to tell you anything.” He paused. “Your grandfather is.”

Instantly, a bizarre thought popped into my head: maybe he wasn’t dead. Maybe somehow this had been some sort of—

“I’m going to play a video your grandfather made,” Mr. Devine said.

I felt my whole body sag. What else could it be? It was stupid of me even to think that he was still alive.

The lawyer walked over to a big cabinet that held a television. He turned to face us. “I was in the room when your grandfather recorded this. I think *all* of you will be at least a little surprised by what he has to say.”

He clicked a remote, and the TV came to life. First it was blank, and then there was Grandpa!

“I’m not sure why I have to be wearing makeup,” he said, turning to face somebody off camera. “This is my will, not some late-night talk show... and it’s certainly not a *live* taping.”

A couple of unseen people laughed, and then Grandpa turned to look directly into the camera.

“Good morning...or afternoon, boys,” he began. “If you are watching this, I must be dead, although on this fine afternoon I feel very much alive.”

I looked at him closely, trying to figure out when the video would have been made. He didn’t look any different or younger than when I’d last seen him, so it wasn’t that long ago, and I could tell it was recorded right here in this office. Somehow that made it seem more real and less real all at once.

I recognized his striped sweater—my mother had knit it for him. And, as always, he was wearing his black beret. It had been strange seeing him in the coffin without it, but apparently it was a term

the will that it wasn't buried with him. I wondered where it was.

"I want to start off by saying that I don't want you to be too sad. I had a good life and I wouldn't change a minute of it. That said, I still hope that you are at least a little sad and that you miss having me around. After all, I was one *spectacular* grandpa!"

We all started to laugh.

"And you were simply the best grandsons a man could ever have. I want you to know that of all the joys in my life, you were among my greatest. From the first time I met each of you to the last moments I spent with you—and of course I don't know what those last moments were, but I know they were wonderful—I want to thank you all for being part of my life. A very big, special, wonderful, warm part of my life."

He reached down and took a sip from a glass in front of him. His hand shook ever so slightly. His hands never shook; he was nervous.

"I wanted to record this rather than just have my lawyer read it out to you. Hello, Johnnie."

"Hello, Davie," the lawyer replied.

"Johnnie, I hope you appreciate that twenty-year-old bottle of Scotch I left you," Grandpa said. "And you better not have had more than one snort of it before the reading of my will!"

The lawyer held up two fingers.

"But knowing you the way I do, I suspect you would have had two."

The lawyer looked a bit embarrassed. "He did know me well," he said to us.

"I just wanted—needed—to say goodbye to all of you in person, or at least as in person as the law allows." He took another sip from his glass. The hand was still shaking.

"Life is an interesting journey, one that seldom takes you where you think you might be going. Certainly I never expected that I was going to become an old man. In fact, there were more than a few times when I was a boy that I didn't believe I was going to live to see another day, never mind live long enough to grow old."

From the stories he'd told us, I knew how close he'd been to death on many occasions. He had been shot down when he was a pilot in World War II, and then he'd flown all over the world after that.

"But I did live a long and wonderful life. I was blessed to meet the love of my life, your grandmother Vera. It is so sad that she passed on before any of you had a chance to meet her. I know people never speak ill of the dead—and I'm counting on you all to keep up that tradition with me—because your grandmother was simply the most *perfect* woman in the world.

"Her only flaw, as far as I can see, was being foolish enough to marry me. She gave me not only a happy life, but four daughters...four amazing daughters. I just wish she could have been there to watch them grow into the four wonderful women who became your mothers."

My grandmother had died when our mothers were young—the youngest, Aunt Vicky, was only four at the time. My grandpa raised the girls on his own at a time when men didn't do that.

"I was always comforted by the thought that I believed she was watching them too. Sitting up there in heaven or wherever. I guess as you're hearing this, I have an answer to that question. I pray that I'm with her now."

He lifted up the glass again and made a little toast toward us. I noticed his hand wasn't shaking anymore. He was getting more comfortable, more relaxed. More like Grandpa.

"Being both father and mother to my girls meant that I was always running fast to try and c

everything. Sometimes the need to earn a living got in the way of me being there for my daughter. There were too many school plays, violin recitals and soccer games that I never got to. And that was why I made a point to be there for almost every one of your games and school events and concerts," I said.

He *was* there for everything, always. Sitting in the bleachers screaming at the referees, or in the front row at the concerts, cheering and clapping, or right there by the bed when you woke up after having your tonsils out. He was just there.

"This was both a promise I made and a complete joy. You boys, you wonderful, incredible, lovely boys, have been such a blessing...seven blessings. Some blessings come later than others."

Seven? He meant six. There were six of us. He must have been even more nervous than he looked. His voice caught over the last few words, and I thought he was on the verge of crying. He took another sip from his glass. A long, slow sip.

"But I didn't bring you here simply to tell you how much I loved you all. Being part of your lives was one of the greatest achievements of my life, and I wouldn't trade it for anything, but being there for all your big moments meant that I couldn't be elsewhere. I've done a lot, but it doesn't seem that time is going to permit me the luxury of doing everything I wished for. So, I have some requests, some *last* requests."

We all looked at each other, questioningly.

"In the possession of my lawyer are some envelopes," he said. "One for each of you."

I turned around. Mr. Devine stood off to the side of the room. In his hand was a fan of envelopes.

"Each of these requests, these tasks," Grandpa continued, "has been specifically selected for you to fulfill. All of the things you will need to complete your task will be provided—money, tickets, guides. Everything."

Tickets and guides? What did he want us to do?

"I am not asking any of you to do anything stupid or unnecessarily reckless—certainly nothing stupid or reckless as I did at your ages. Your parents may be worried, but I have no doubts. Just as I have no doubts that you will all become fine young men. I am sad that I will not be there to watch you all grow into the incredible men I know you will become. But I don't need to be there to know that will happen. I am so certain of that. As certain as I am that I will be there with you as you complete my last requests, as you continue your life journeys."

He lifted up his glass.

"A final toast. To the best grandsons a man could ever have." He tipped back the glass and drained it. He put down the glass and stared directly into the camera. "I love you all so much. Good luck."

The screen went black. He was gone.

The lawyer turned off the TV. "In my hands are the seven envelopes. One for each grandson."

"You mean six," I said. "There are only six of us."

"Well, as I said, there is a most interesting twist. There *is* a seventh grandson."

THREE

I went up to my room and closed the door. I needed to be alone to process that last little piece of news. My grandpa had had another daughter—a daughter conceived, born and raised without his knowledge. That daughter, now dead, had a son named Rennie. My grandpa had only become aware of this extra grandson a few months ago. So there weren't six of us, there were seven. It was strange how this news had disturbed me but seemed to amuse Steve. That was so much like him.

And in my hand, along with the envelope from my grandpa, was information about his extra grandson. Rennie was, almost to the day, the same age as me. There was a request from my grandpa relayed through his lawyer, that we all contact Rennie so he'd feel more a part of our family. I'd do it because Grandpa had asked me to, but not right now. First things first. I had to look at my task.

I sat on my bed in my room, alone. Alone was the only way to read this. I couldn't guarantee how I'd handle it, and I didn't want anybody to see me cry. I held the large manila envelope in my hand. It was thick, so obviously it contained more than a simple letter.

I turned the envelope around in my hands. My nickname—DJ—was typed on the front. Somehow it would have been more real if it was in his handwriting. Well, as real as any of this could be.

There was no point in looking at it any longer. Carefully I unsealed the top and looked inside. There was something soft and black—his beret! I pulled it out and couldn't help but smile. Pinned to it was a piece of paper with my name on it. He'd left it for me! That meant so much. Gently I placed it on my lap and then turned the envelope over and three smaller envelopes tumbled out. One said *1—Read Now* in big letters, another *2—Bottom*. What did that mean? The third had *3—End* written on it. All three were in his handwriting. It was like he'd heard that I didn't want them typed. Slowly, deliberately and carefully, I opened up the first envelope.

Dear DJ,

I remember the first time I ever held you—my first grandchild. You were no more than fifteen minutes old when your father placed you in my arms. Soon to be followed by your brother. I'd never held anybody so young—I didn't even hold any of my daughters that soon. Things were a little different in my day. I know you won't make that mistake with your children—you'll be right there with your wife. That's the right thing to do, and I know I can always count on you to do the right thing.

That made me smile. I always prided myself on doing the right thing, and my grandpa appreciated that.

It may sound strange to talk to you about a wife and children, but life all happens so quickly. It seems like only moments ago that I was like you—a teenager. And then it all happened so fast, from boy to young man, to man, to father, to grandfather to, well, a memory. You'll have to accept my apology for sounding both morbid and philosophical, but death tends to do that to a man.

Death...he was dead. I didn't know when he had written this, but it was the last thing he'd ever written just for me. Well, I guess technically the second and third letters would be the last, but still, I could appreciate being philosophic. I'd done a lot of thinking about life and death over the past few days.

I don't know what I expected the first time I held you, but it wasn't what I got. There was no crying or squirming from you. You were so calm—calmer than I was. You looked up at me, eyes wide, and I got the feeling you were studying me, trying to figure out who this old man was and what was going to happen next. And even stranger, I got the feeling that you almost had it figured out.

Your mother always said that you were an old soul. I know you've heard that so often, and at times it even made you bristle, but it's true. You were always the kid who did what he was supposed to do. From sleeping through the night, to toilet training, to learning to read, to being the captain of every team you ever played on. Most kids didn't know what was going on. Some of the smarter kids had questions. But you, well, you seemed to have the answers.

I also remember so clearly when your father died. It wasn't just the saddest day in your life, but one of the saddest in mine. I was powerless to protect either your mother or you or your brother from the pain. I saw you shed tears, but you were so strong. I think you helped your mother through it all more than I did. Let's be honest, I think you helped me.

Maybe that's where your old soul evolved into a leader. You became more than a child. You took care of your mother and your brother and then all of your cousins. I know that sometimes your brother and cousins may have resented having another "parent," but I know they respect you so much. I expect as each of you completes the requests I've made that there will be communication among the seven of you. I know you will be there to help the others fulfill their challenges, but also hope you'll be strong enough to accept their help too. A good leader knows when to follow, when to accept help, when to go to others for assistance.

I've always thought that the problems of the world were caused because we failed to understand one simple fact: we are all part of the same family. There are not different races of people but one race—the human race. If we were able to trace our lives back through the generations, we'd find the links that connect us all. There are people who speak about the Garden of Eden as if it was a fact, and others who see the theory of evolution as more than a theory. In some ways they're both correct. However, we all share the same beginnings. We started with one mother and father—one Adam and one Eve—even if through evolution.

I know I've told you some of my tales from my time in Africa. I flew different types of small planes up and down the whole of East Africa. Those were times of adventure, abandon and excitement. It was there where my soul was healed after the horror of war, where I became able to live and love again and go on with life.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust—those words were said at my funeral. I believe them.

DJ, here is my request. I want some of my ashes returned to where it all began for mankind, but also where my life began again—to Africa, to the Rift Valley. I want you to go to Tanzania and climb

Mount Kilimanjaro.

Some of my ashes have been placed in my walking cane. When you reach the top, scatter my ashes the wind so that they can be blown throughout the valley and I can once again be reunited with my ancestors.

With my great thanks, and great love,

Grandpa

P.S. Say hello to Elijah for me—he will be there to meet you at the airport, take care of you and make all the arrangements for your trek up the mountain.

He wants me to climb a mountain to spread his ashes? I could hardly believe what I'd just read. I looked away from the envelope. Africa...I was going to Africa...to Tanzania to climb a mountain. I almost felt too stunned to think. But I needed to. I did a quick calculation in my head. My last exam was in three days. I would be starting football camp in August—on a full scholarship. Grandpa had been so proud. As long as I left right away, I'd have plenty of time to do this. After all, how long could it possibly take to climb a mountain?

FOUR

“Don’t worry, you’ll catch your flight,” my mother said.

“I’m not worried,” I replied. “It’s just that for international flights I’m supposed to be there three hours early.”

“We’ll be there almost three hours early.”

“What if there’s a major traffic jam or we get a flat tire or—?”

“The roads are clear, and if we needed to, we’d fix the tire.”

I sat back and tried to relax. Then again, I’d only be truly relaxed when I was on the plane coming back home, the wheels touching the ground and my task finished. It would take no more than seven or eight sleeps. That made me sound like a toddler, but that’s how I always counted being away from home.

“It’s going to be strange with both you and your brother gone. I’m going to be worried.”

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” I offered. “Remember, Steve is just going to Spain.”

“So I should be worried about you and that mountain?” she asked.

“You don’t need to be worried about *either* of us. It’s going to be a walk in the park.”

“Climbing a mountain is hardly a walk in the park,” she said.

“No, actually it is. Kilimanjaro is in a national park. How dangerous can a park be?” I joked. She didn’t laugh, so obviously she didn’t think my little joke was funny.

“Steve leaves soon, right?”

“The day after you.” My mother chuckled. “Your brother reminds me so much of your grandpa.”

“Steve? He’s *nothing* like Grandpa.”

“Your grandpa mellowed with age, but think of the stories he told from when he was young. I think that’s why the two of them never got along as well as he did with the others. Your grandpa saw too much of himself in Steve and wanted to try to change him so he wouldn’t go through the same grief.”

“Grief?” I asked.

“I often wonder what all those adventures of Grandpa’s were about. I know the war was hard on him, and I wonder if he was trying to find himself,” she said.

“And what is Steve trying to find?”

“Maybe the same thing. Peace.”

I didn’t think Steve would ever find anything except more grief. Well, at least he was an expert at finding and giving it. He was my twin brother, and I loved him, but there were times I could have killed him. We were so different—even physically. I towered over him and must have outweighed him by ten kilograms. I loved sports, and he had no interest in them whatsoever. History was one of his passions, and the only history I cared about was the score in yesterday’s games.

“I’ll try to keep in touch by texting you when I’m gone. Can you keep an eye on everybody for me?” I asked. “You know—all the guys—to make sure they follow their tasks.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure everybody will be fine.” She paused. “Are you going to contact Rennie?”

“That’s what Grandpa asked us to do, so I’ll do it. It’s just so...so...”

“Yes, it is. I can only imagine the shock your grandfather felt when he found out he had another daughter and a seventh grandson.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I didn’t want to think about that right now. “I just want to make sure they’ll all be okay,” I said. “I’m a little worried about Bernie.”

“Bunny will do just fine.”

“Please don’t call him that,” I said.

“Bunny is what he calls himself. It’s cute.”

“It was cute when he was four. He’s fifteen and in high school.”

“Well, I remember somebody who used to walk around in a little tiger suit,” my mother said.

“I was three, not fifteen. How cute would it have been if I wore it to high school? And at least I wanted to be a tiger and not a bunny.”

“He likes being called Bunny,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter what he likes. Being called Bunny is the sort of thing that gets him picked on a lot of the time.”

“I know your aunt is grateful for the help you’ve given him.”

“I’ve tried. As long as I’m there, nobody really dares to pick on him much, but next year I’m not gonna be around. It’s not like Spencer is going to step in.” Spencer was Bunny’s “big” brother, but he wasn’t very big and wasn’t much less of a target than Bunny.

“He might,” she said.

“It’s not the same. Nobody in the world is afraid of Spencer.”

She laughed. “I’m just glad my little *Tigger* has always been there to take care of his little cousin Bunny, the way Tigger took care of Winnie-the-Pooh.”

There was nobody else in the car, so calling me Tigger, her special name for me, was okay. It wasn’t so okay when Steve called me that, especially in public.

“You are a very hard act to follow,” my mother said.

“What?”

“Sometimes I think your cousins feel like they can’t hope to compete with you.”

“It’s not a competition,” I said.

My mother laughed. “I never thought I’d hear you say the words *not* and *competition* in the same sentence.”

“I just try to do my best, that’s all. The point of a game is to win, but I am a good loser too.”

“And how much practice have you had at being a loser?”

“I’ll try to lose more in the future.”

“Losing isn’t the end of the world.”

“I never said it was.” Although it had felt like it the few times it happened.

We circled around the ring road leading to the terminal.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come inside?” my mother asked.

“No need for you to spend money on parking. I’ll be fine.”

She slowed down and pulled into an open spot. I got out quickly, and she popped open the trunk. ~~grabbed my green duffel bag and my backpack and of course my grandpa's cane with his remains in~~ secret compartment inside. I held it tightly.

“Are you sure you have everything?” she asked.

“Everything.”

“I’m not even sure why I asked. You are the most responsible seventeen-year-old in the world.” She paused. “But I’m still going to be worried until you get back.”

“Funny, but I’m going to be worried about *you* until I get back.”

She started to tear up. I felt tears start to surface, but I blinked them away. I couldn’t let her see me cry or let her know that I was worried.

“I better get inside and check in,” I said.

She threw her arms around my neck. She was small but strong. I gave her a big hug back.

“I love you,” she said.

“Yeah, I sort of figured that. I *am* pretty loveable.”

She made a huffing sound in my ear.

“I know, I know, Mom. I love you too, but I have to go.”

She squeezed a little tighter before letting go.

“I’ll text you as soon as I’m on the ground,” I said. I reached out and gave her another hug and then walked toward the terminal. I stopped, turned around and waved. She waved back, and then I went inside.

Now that she was gone, I could let my defenses down a bit, although I didn’t want to cry in front of strangers either. I was worried. More than that, I was scared. I was traveling halfway around the world by myself, to climb a mountain. A really big mountain. Maybe I should be scared. I just couldn’t let anybody know.

I had one thing to do before I checked in. I pulled out my phone and sent a text to my cousins.

Hey guys. Just getting on plane to Tanzania. Good luck to all. Back soon. Text if you need help. Don’t let Grandpa down.

I pushed *Send*, knowing that almost instantly all six would get my message. Each of us had an individual task to complete, but somehow it felt like it was up to *me* to make sure they were all completed. But I’d have to finish my own task before I could help anybody else.

It was just me—me and Grandpa’s cane. It was made of smooth brown wood and the handle was two carved elephants, their tusks intertwined. I thought back to him, cane in hand, walking, or leaning on it, sometimes spinning it around or using it as a dancing partner as he did a little jig, his ever-present black beret tipped to one side. I gave the cane a little shake and I could feel the ashes shifting inside. This cane was such a part of him. Now *he* was part of *it*. Here, in my hands.

FIVE

My eyes jerked open as the plane's wheels hit the runway. We bounced up and down a few times, and then finally stuck to the ground. We rolled along the runway. It was so rough, I wondered if we'd landed in a field. I looked out the window. The runway was a narrow strip of pavement lined on both sides by dense bush. Probably good that I'd been asleep as we approached the airstrip and hadn't seen it coming. I was just glad to be back on the ground.

I really didn't like flying at all. It wasn't just about being up high, which I didn't like. To me, flying was less like science and more like magic. How could a plane hang up there in the air? I knew a little about aerodynamics, but it still didn't feel right to me.

I'd never told anybody about my fear of flying. Particularly Grandpa. He loved flying almost more than anything else. I remember being up in a plane with him behind the wheel. He loved being up there, and I loved being with him, so I made sure he didn't know how much I hated flying. He'd put me in the copilot seat when I was so small I could hardly see out through the windscreen. Sometimes he'd even let me put my hands on the rudder—a four-year-old flying a plane.

While we flew, he told stories: flying in his Lancaster during the war, being a bush pilot in the North, bouncing around Africa. That made me smile. When I thought about the last time he was in the air at the controls of his plane, my smile left. He knew he was getting too old to fly solo, and that wasn't just his thinking but the government's. As he'd said, "Regulations are regulations, and I can't fight them." So he allowed his pilot's license to lapse.

I had been there on the ground, holding my mother's hand, Steve holding the other, when Grandpa landed that last time. He went up alone, just him and the plane and the sky.

If I closed my eyes, I could still see him slowly walking away from the plane after he landed. He'd told me it was one of the saddest days of his life. I was sad for him, but secretly I was grateful I would never have to go up with him again. And that *still* made me feel guilty.



I was now on the third flight of my trip and each plane had gotten smaller and more suspect. Finally we arrived in Moshi, a town near Kilimanjaro. Grandpa would have loved this last plane because it was so tiny. It held only sixteen people and seemed less like a plane than a bus with two propeller-driven engines. Bad enough that it was like a bus, but it wasn't even a *nice* bus. The carpeting on the floor was worn and torn, as were the seats. Torn wouldn't have been bad if my seat hadn't also been crooked—one of the support legs was busted—and if it had a seat belt that worked. Rather than buckling up, the attendant had helped me tie the two ends together.

The plane was still bumping along the runway when people started to get up from their seats. They seemed to have no sense of safety or following rules, although I could appreciate wanting to get out

this plane as fast as possible. On the ground was good, but *feet* on the ground was better. I thought the flight attendant would tell them to sit down, but she hadn't bothered. Passengers held on to seats swaying while they opened up the overhead compartments and pulled out their bags.

The plane finally came to a complete stop, and I untied my seat belt and got to my feet, smacking my head loudly against the overhead compartment. The thud was loud enough that people turned to stare. A few looked like they were about to laugh or giggle, and others looked concerned.

"I'm okay," I said to everybody and nobody. "They just don't make these big enough for me."

I stepped into a gap in the aisle and stood up, almost straight. My head brushed against the ceiling of the plane. I looked up and down the aisle. I was clearly the tallest person aboard. I pulled out my carry-on bag and then Grandpa's cane.

The door popped open, and sunlight and fresh air flooded in. I took a deep breath. It felt good. The first passengers exited, and the rest of us shuffled forward until I climbed off the plane and took my first step in Tanzania. I was here, and that meant I was one-third of the way to finishing my task.

I'd divided it into three parts: flying to Tanzania, climbing the mountain, and flying home. I figured the mountain part wouldn't take much longer than the flights.

I followed the little stream of passengers toward a small building, hoping they knew where they were going. Right inside the doors were the customs booths. One had a sign above it that read *East African Passports*. The other said *All Other Passports*. That was me.

I dug out my passport and went to the back of the line. There were three other people in front of me: two men in their twenties, and a much older woman. Maybe she was the mother of one of them, which reminded me: I'd have to text Mom and let her know I'd arrived.

The men stepped up to the customs booth, leaving just me and the older woman. She turned around to face me.

"First time in Tanzania?" she asked. She had a British accent.

I nodded. "Is it yours?"

"Yes," she replied. "Are you here to climb the mountain?"

"Yes. And you?"

"The plan is for me to—"

"Next!"

We both turned toward the customs booth. The guard was waving for her to come forward.

"Good luck with your climb," she said as she stepped up to the booth.

I didn't think luck was going to have anything to do with it.

I was hot and tired, and my legs were a little shaky. It had been almost twenty-four hours since my mother had dropped me off at the airport, and I hadn't gotten any more than two or three hours sleep since then. Fear of flying will do that to you.

The woman moved through customs, and I stepped forward.

"Passport, please," the official said.

He opened it up at the picture and held it up, looking from it to me.

"This is you?" he asked.

The question threw me. "Yeah, of course."

"It does not look so much like you," he said. "But many of you tourists look the same. Length

stay?"

"Two or three days."

"Why so short?"

"That should be long enough to climb the mountain," I answered.

"And you think you can do that in two days?"

"Well, I don't know; that's why I said maybe three."

He shook his head and gave me a look like I'd offended him.

"How much currency do you have?" he asked.

"Currency?"

"How much money do you have with you?"

I'd heard about this. He was asking me for a bribe. "I have enough," I said.

"Enough? Are you being insolent with me, young man?" he demanded. "I will ask you one more time, how much money do you have on you?"

His loud words and hard stare left me no doubt that I'd have to tell him and give him a bribe if he asked for it.

"Um...I'm not sure. I know I have enough. I have a couple of hundred dollars in US funds and lots of Tanzanian shillings and a bank card. Everything else is already paid for."

"You are traveling by yourself and you are only seventeen," he said. "Who will care for you when you are here?"

"I'm meeting a man named Elijah. He's probably out there waiting for me," I said, gesturing to the door with the Exit sign above it.

"What is this Elijah's last name? What is his occupation? Is he Tanzanian? Does he run a tour group?"

"I don't know."

"None of it?" he asked in disbelief. "You do not even know his full name?"

I shook my head.

"And you just trust that this Elijah will be out there waiting," he said. "What if he isn't? Do you have a number to contact him?"

Again I shook my head. I didn't feel good about that myself. I had just trusted that Grandpa and his lawyer had made all the arrangements.

"So if he is not there, what will you do?" he asked.

"I'm sure he is, but if he isn't, I guess I'll just wait."

"For how long?"

"Until he comes."

"And what if he does not come until tomorrow or the next day? Do you think this is a hotel where you can sleep?"

"I'm sure he'll be there."

He muttered something under his breath. I didn't need to know Swahili to know he was neither pleased nor impressed with me or my plan.

"Do you have anything to declare?" he asked. "Are you bringing in drugs or guns or alcohol

prohibited fruit or vegetables?”

Of course I wasn't bringing in any of those things, but I'd been told by the lawyer, Mr. Devine, that it was illegal to transport human remains across national borders. That was why they were hidden inside my grandpa's cane.

“Well?” he demanded.

“Um...no,” I stuttered. Lying never came naturally to me.

“Then why did you not answer immediately?”

“I didn't understand you!”

“Why, is my English not *good* enough for you?” he snapped.

“I'm tired. Really tired. I don't have any of those things. I don't even drink and I'd never do drugs and I don't have any weapons...anywhere.”

He looked at me long and hard, as if he was trying to make a final decision about whether or not I should let me into the country. That made no sense. I was pretty sure there was no way he couldn't let me in. His scowl deepened, and then he picked up a stamp and thumped it against my passport and handed it back.

“I can go?”

“You sound surprised. Did you think you should be turned away?”

“Of course not!”

“Then leave and stop holding up the line.”

As I fumbled with my passport and duffel bag and backpack, the cane slipped from my hand and fell to the floor. I bent over to pick it up.

“That is an interesting walking stick,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Most people *leave* with such things. They do not bring them into the country.”

“It's special. It belonged to my grandfather.”

“Let me see,” he said, holding out his hands.

Reluctantly I handed it to him.

“This design is local, carved by the Chagga people. I am Chagga.”

“My grandpa spent some time right here when he was young, a long time ago. He was a pilot.”

He turned the cane over in his hands, examining it with the same intensity he'd reserved for me. I had to resist the urge to grab it away from him. It wasn't just my grandpa's cane he was holding in his hands, it was my *grandpa*.

“This stick it is very light. As if...as if...” He shook the cane, and I could *feel* the ashes moving inside. “As if it were *hollow*.”

He took the top and twisted it around until it popped open. He looked inside, and then looked up at me. “You thought you could fool me.”

“I wasn't trying to fool you. It's just that—”

“It is a serious offence to smuggle drugs.”

“Drugs!”

He yelled something in a language I couldn't understand, and before I could object, two men

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