

THE TROUBLES OF JACK BARRELBOTTOM



CHAPTER

1



“I’m home!”

Jack stepped through the front door of his Aunt Melba’s brownstone, tripped over a large package, and fell flat on his face. Candidly, he might have tripped even if the package hadn’t been there. That was the sort of thing he did. But this time, the package was definitely the culprit.

As Jack set the package upright, he blinked with surprise. There, scrawled on the plain, brown, paper wrapping in spidery black letters was his name: Jonathan Stout Barrelbottom III.

“What kind of a name is Stout Barrelbottom?” one of the nastier boys at his school asked once. Then he glanced at Jack’s behind and snickered, “Never mind. I see where it comes from, Barrelbutt.”

The next time Jack caught a glimpse of himself in the hall mirror, he sighed. “I see where it comes from, too,” he muttered.

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He'd never received a package before. Puzzled, he turned it this way and that but found no clues to the contents. So, he did the only logical thing a nine-year-old boy would do. He opened it. Inside was a suitcase that looked as though it was from bygone days. Its cracked and weathered leather was indicative of treks to distant lands. The handle was so worn it looked ready to fall off. Ragged leather straps with dull brass buckles crisscrossed over the front to form an X to secure the suitcase shut, and brass riveted snaps were stamped with the letters JSB.

'My initials,' Jack thought, his curiosity growing. 'Why would this old case have my initials on it?'

Where the straps crossed was a circular leather centerpiece about the size of one of Aunt Melba's coasters that she insisted he put beneath a glass of milk or water. The centerpiece looked like it was open, as if something once fit into it, but was now missing. He reached forward to touch the space.

"What have you got there?"

Jack snatched his hand back and whirled around, his heart hammering in his chest. Aunt Melba, a pinch-faced woman with severe hair, wide shoulders, and thick-soled, sensible shoes, glared at him from a side doorway. Her lips curled.

"Well?" She waved a hand at the suitcase. "What is that?"

Jack looked down. "It's a suitcase."

"I can see that," she said, her mouth tightening.

"Then why did you ask?" Jack wondered. But he kept the question to himself.

"Where did you find it?" His aunt asked.

"I found it right here, where it is now."

"Did you!" Aunt Melba tapped her toe, a harsh staccato sound that hurt Jack's ears. "Or did you maybe, just maybe, drag it home from that horrid shop? You're nothing but trouble, Jack! Looks like trouble has found you again!"

'That horrid shop' was the local junk store, Fumblebee's. Crammed from floor to ceiling with other people's castoffs, it was dusty and grimy, and it smelled funny when the weather turned warm. Mr. Fumblebee opened the shop two years previous. Shortly after, he suffered serious burns — barely cheating death — when a fire consumed much of the building. Jack was instrumental in helping clean up and organize the shop before Fumblebee reopened it. And shortly after that, Mr. Fumblebee also accepted the position of curator at the natural history museum in the village. Mr. Fumblebee wore white cotton gloves to protect his excruciatingly burnt hands that were now even disfigured, but all the better since he was handling priceless artifacts as a museum curator.

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Although Jack's mom and aunt Melba didn't completely approve, they allowed Jack to go there occasionally because he didn't have any friends. He loved it there. No one taunted or intimidated him or made him feel sad there. He and Mr. Fumblebee shared a fondness for one another and similar passions including local history and world cultures. Mr. Fumblebee let Jack prowl about the shop and keep anything he found particularly intriguing. Jack hid a collection of special finds in his bedroom.

The old suitcase was just the kind of artifact Jack might stumble across at Fumblebee's. And since he had been there that afternoon, he understood why his aunt suspected he'd brought it home. But he hadn't. He started to tell her as much when the front door suddenly opened. His mother breezed inside, and then stopped short and looked from her son to her sister-in-law. When she spotted the suitcase, her eyes widened. Her hand flew to her chest, and before Jack could catch her, she fainted in a heap on the floor. He might not have been able to catch her anyway.

Aunt Melba shot Jack a furious look. "Now look at what you've done!" She clacked across the hardwood floor and crouched awkwardly beside Jack's mother. "Bettina! Wake up this instant! This is most undignified!"

Jack shifted from foot to foot. "Should I get some water?"

"Of course, you should!" Aunt Melba barked, and then muttered "Fool" under her breath.

Jack hurried to the kitchen, whisking the suitcase away. He didn't know why his mother fainted when she saw it, but he didn't want her seeing it again when she woke. The suitcase had felt empty, but when he set it down, he heard a thump inside. Rather than investigating the noise, he filled a glass with water from the tap and rushed back to the hallway.

"Careful!" Aunt Melba's screech was too late.

He crashed into her, spilling water all over her and the hall floor.

"Fool!" This time, his aunt spat out the word loud and clear.

"I'll get a towel," Jack's mother said, lifting herself from the floor. "Come with me, Jack."

Jack backed away from his furious aunt and trotted after his mother. In the kitchen, he found her staring at the suitcase.

"Mother —" Jack began.

But his mother, still not over her shock, interrupted him. "The last time I saw this suitcase was also the last time I saw your father — before he disappeared." She brushed her fingers over the initials.

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“It belonged to my father?” Jack was bewildered.

“And to his father, your grandfather, before him,” his mother answered.

“I have a grandfather?” Jack was even more befuddled.

“Of course, you have a grandfather. He is my father.” Aunt Melba appeared just in time to hear the question.

“He was much older than my mother when they married. She died decades ago of malaria. Shortly after her death, he remarried a wicked woman. She was your father’s mother and your grandmother. She died of unexplained circumstances when your father was just an infant. That’s what happens to a woman who marries a decrepit eleventy-one-year-old man who traipses around the world while leaving her alone with young children — not that I would know, of course.”

“Melba, he’s just a boy!” Jack’s mother said sternly as if to stop Melba, who now looked impish, from unleashing what was her life-long anger.

“He’s 108 years old, Jack, not eleventy-one!” she explained, still locking eyes with Melba.

Aunt Melba thrust an envelope at Jack. “Typical boy, you went right for the present without reading the card first.”

Inside the envelope was a postcard. On one side was a picture of a mountain and a lake. On the other was a message written in the same spidery script as the package’s address:

To: JSB III,

Come tomorrow at noon. We have much to discuss.

From: JSB I

His mother read it and passed it to Aunt Melba, whose lips tightened.

“So, my father is finally ready to meet his heir,” she said between her clenched teeth. She fixed her steely gaze on Jack. “Isn’t it just delightful that you’ll meet that old rickety, selfish, storytelling, prune-faced man? I can only imagine what a ramshackle his house is. If you hope to die of boredom, Jack, you’ll succeed.”

“Melba! You have said enough. Stop it right now!” Bettina said. “Pack a small bag of your cleanest school clothes, Jack, in case we stay the night at your grandfather’s home.”

His mother shooed him upstairs to his bedroom, but he paused on the top stairs. Below, the women whispered

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to one another. He heard his mother say “Jon” and “somewhere out there”. He trudged to his bedroom, still clutching the suitcase.

Jon. That was his father’s name, short for Jonathan Stout Barrelbottom II. A world explorer, he disappeared while trekking through some faraway land when Jack was just three. His mother had spent a fortune trying to find him. With each passing year, though, her hopes dimmed. When the money ran out, she took a job as a secretary, and she and Jack moved in with Aunt Melba.

‘But now,’ Jack thought. ‘Somewhere out there, maybe my father was still alive. If so,’ he pondered further, ‘maybe the suitcase holds clues to his whereabouts.’

The circular leather centerpiece that lay where the suitcase’s leather straps crossed, while empty, emitted a mysterious glow. With fumbling fingers, Jack undid the buckles, pulled the straps free, popped the latches, and opened the lid.

Inside the suitcase was a tightly rolled animal hide bound with a length of rawhide, a zebra skin to be exact. The fur was smooth to the touch but was well worn; in spots there wasn’t any fur at all. When Jack picked it up, a key fell out, a skeleton key made of shiny brass. At one end, called the bow, the brass was embedded with a miniature monkey skull carved in ivory, which was inlaid with four sparkling stones — two red rubies for eyes, one blue sapphire mounted on its forehead, and a diamond for a nose. The bit at the other end of the key formed the letter ‘M.’

Jack set the hide next to the suitcase and unrolled it. For one heart-stopping moment, he thought it might lead to his father’s location. It was a map of the world in its simplest form with inked names of continents and numbers strewn about.

Jack scanned the map for some hint of who the owner was or their address, and spied writing in one corner. It was so tiny and faint that he almost missed it. He hurried to the window where it would be possible to see with the naked eye. ‘Magnifying glass!’ Jack thought.

He glanced up at a small door in his bedroom ceiling. Up there was a wooden box of his most prized possessions, including a magnifying glass and other items he uncovered at Fumblebee’s. There were various coins from far off lands, like Africa, Australia, Ecuador, and Tibet. A few Indian head coins completed the collection. Fumblebee gave these to Jack because he had extras.

“They’re not worth much,” Fumblebee admitted when he agreed that Jack could count them amongst what Aunt Melba would call his many brick-a-brack of knick-knacks— if she knew about them.

In the wooden box, Jack also squirreled away his sketchbook of drawings and doodles and a battered toy telescope. Along the side of the tin telescope read ‘Colonel Percy’s World Adventure Carnival’. It was what Jack

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cherished most because his father had given it to him on his birthday the year he mysteriously disappeared. He hid all these valuables in the crawlspace so his aunt wouldn't throw them away.

Jack tiptoed to his door, eased it open, and peered out. 'The coast was clear.' Moving as quickly and quietly as he could inside his bedroom, he stacked boxes from his closet on top of a chair, climbed his makeshift ladder, and pushed open the trapdoor. He grabbed his small wooden box of trinkets and made his way back down. Magnifying glass in hand, he revisited the mysterious map. He felt a jolt when he read the words clustered in the corner: "I'm trapped! Please find me!"

It wasn't the message that shook him so much as the handwriting; it was familiar. He retrieved his sketchbook and leafed through it. A black-and-white photograph of his father holding him as a baby fluttered out. The photo was in such poor shape; over-exposed, blurry, faded, scratched and cracked from handling. Jack couldn't distinguish himself or his father from the white background but cherished it none the less because it represented a bond with his father and happier times.

On the front of the picture, Jack's father had jotted a note: "Jack and Me, 2 months old." The word "me" on the photograph was identical to the word "me" written on the map branded on the zebra hide.

'My father wrote the message on the hide,' Jack thought, even more baffled. 'But when? Why? And who was it for?'





CHAPTER 2

“Are you back there, Jack?” his mother called.

It was early the next morning, and Jack, his mother, and Aunt Melba were on the road to his grandfather’s home. Melba was driving.

“My car! My father! My childhood home!” Aunt Melba replied curtly when Jack’s mother suggested she and Jack go alone.

On the seat next to Jack was the old suitcase. Besides a change of clothes, he had packed his wooden box with the map, the brass-monkey key, the toy telescope, the magnifying glass, his coins from distant lands, and a flashlight. He also stashed his sketchbook, the postcard from his grandfather, and the photo of his father with him as a baby. It had taken some muscle to pull the straps of the bulging suitcase tight enough to thread the buckles and hold it together, but he did it. Jack hadn’t told his mother what he’d found inside the suitcase. Her reaction to the suitcase itself had been troubling enough.

A sign that said WELCOME TO KASKO marked the turn off the highway onto a side road that led to a mountain. Jack recognized it as the one in the postcard. Soon afterward, the three turned into a long driveway that led to a grand house. Aunt Melba parked the car near a large marble fountain by the front entrance. The fountain was dry and choked with leaves and weeds, but a magnificent statue stood in the center.

“What a shambles,” Aunt Melba muttered, shaking her head with disgust.

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Jack barely heard her. He was preoccupied with the house — or the mansion — that loomed over him. A tall look-out tower stood high above the roof behind the mansion. In the distance, a light shimmered, hinting at a body of water beyond a sprawling field, while thick forest blanketed another portion of the estate. Most impressive, however, was a mountain that presided over all like a king on his throne. “Mount Olegwasi,” Jack whispered. There was a picture of it on the postcard his grandfather sent.



Jack got out of the car. “Oceanus,” he murmured after glancing at the word engraved at the base of the statue situated in the center of the fountain.

“Who’s that?”

“An ancient Greek deity, or God of the mythical river that circles the Earth,” his mother replied.

Aunt Melba snorted, and then said of the statue, “A dried-up, good-for-nothing, old coot with delusions of grandeur.”

“Not talking about me, I hope, Melba,” a gravelly voice from the front door said.

Jack flinched with surprise. He hadn’t heard the door open or seen the old man who was now standing before them emerge. A strange sound rasped from Aunt Melba’s throat and through her clenched teeth that Jack realized would be typical to any exchanges with her father. Jack stared in horror as he realized she was trying to smile and laugh.

“Father, dear, it’s been too long,” she said.

“Mmm, has it? Or has it not been long enough?” The old man turned to Jack’s mother. His expression softened. “Bettina.”

With her eyes suddenly swimming in unshed tears, his mother clasped his grandfather’s hands in her own for what seemed like longer than a moment. When she let go, she laid a hand on Jack’s shoulder.

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“Grandfather Barrelbottom, this is Jack,” she said. “Jack, this is your grandfather, Sir Jonathan Stout Barrelbottom.”

After his mother’s introduction, Jack and his grandfather shook hands. Then Sir Jonathan, holding tight to his cane, leaned forward so his gaze was level with Jack’s.

“Ah, yes,” he murmured, staring deeply into Jack’s eyes. “You are indeed one of us. An adventurer. A risk-taker. One who sees beyond what is, to what might be. You, Jack, are a Stout Barrelbottom through and through.”

Jack didn’t like to correct people, especially his elders — but an adventurer? A risk-taker? The biggest risk Jack ever took was when he climbed stacked boxes in his room to reach the trapdoor in his ceiling. Before he could say as much, a tall man with narrow lips overshadowed by an enormous pointy nose stepped out of the home. His hands and feet were most impressive in size. Sir Jonathan introduced him as his butler, Mr. Noseworthy. Another boy might have laughed at the name, but Jack knew better.

“Luncheon is ready,” the butler droned. “I’ll get the bags from the car, shall I?”

“Good man,” Sir Jonathan commented as he ushered Jack and the women into the foyer.

“Been here for ages. Knows this place better than I do. You need anything while you’re here this summer, Jack, you just ask old Noseworthy.”

Jack stopped in his tracks. “This summer?”

Sir Jonathan looked at him with confusion. “Did I forget to invite you to stay with me for the summer? Well, no matter. Consider yourself invited.”

Jack’s mother stepped in. “Sir Jonathan, that is very generous of you, but we couldn’t possibly accept. I have a job and —”

“You misunderstand me, Bettina,” Sir Jonathan interrupted. “The invitation is for Jack.” His eyes cut to Melba. “For Jack alone. No need to give me your answer now,” he added, holding up a hand. “Let’s have lunch first. I believe Noseworthy has prepared something quite delightful.”

Jack’s mind whirled as he followed the grown-ups to the great room. ‘Stay here with my grandfather and Mr. Noseworthy for the whole summer —’ he pondered. The idea could have terrified him, but the more he thought, the more the venture appealed to him. His mother would be working five days a week, leaving him alone with Aunt Melba hour after hour. He felt a pang of regret when he remembered Mr. Fumblebee’s shop, but it vanished the minute he walked into the great room of the mansion.

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To Jack, Fumblebee's shop had nothing on Sir Jonathan's great room, which had a 20-foot-long dining table that stretched from one end to the other. Wall to wall, floor to ceiling — even hanging from the ceiling — the vast room was packed with unique objects and keepsakes. There were stacks of thick leather-bound books; countless bronze, jade, and marble figurines; a nightmarish assortment of carved wooden masks; and several insect collections in display cases under glass, from beetles to butterflies. The room was filled with a vast collection of big game animals stuffed with cotton and on display from what must have been Sir Jonathan's safaris. They included exotic wild cats, a rhinoceros, a hippo, a zebra, a pair of hyenas, and a giraffe towering high into a vaulted ceiling. It was like a museum.

Over time, the lips on the hyenas, whose mouths were wide open, had dried and shrunk above the gum line so drastically that they looked like they were laughing hysterically rather than like the ferocious beasts with bone crushing, steel-trap jaws they once were.

All of the animals were prepared for Sir Jonathan by a taxidermist many, many years ago as the thick layer of dust upon them showed. Right beside the door, a life-size stuffed bear stood mounted on a pedestal, claws and jaws bared. A plaque on the pedestal simply read "Daisy: She Loved Marshmallows".

Melba recoiled in horror when she saw the bear; it was new to her. Even Jack's mother looked a little taken aback. Jack noticed there was no layer of dust on the bear like on the others. 'The taxidermist must have prepared it recently,' he thought.

"Now you know why you must stay with me, Jack," his grandfather said quietly. "You see, I'm too old to sort through my belongings myself. I need your help. Please, say yes."

Jack gazed around the room in awe. He contemplated the suitcase, the brass-monkey key, and the zebra-skin map, and even what Sir Jonathan had called him: a risk-taker and an adventurer.

Jack looked at his mother, who shot Sir Jonathan a stare. She viewed him as overstepping his boundary. Her lips tightened with a look of trepidation at the prospect of not having Jack under her watchful eye for the summer. She anticipated the regret she felt when allowing Jack to go to Fumblebee's junk shop unsupervised. She didn't like the idea but waited for Jack to respond. Jack turned to Sir Jonathan and simply said, "Yes."





CHAPTER

3

Lunch was a quick affair. Jack's stomach was too full of nervous excitement to eat; his mother only picked at her meal; and Aunt Melba finished hers at record speed. Afterward, Jack watched from the doorway as the two women drove off.



Sir Jonathan cleared his throat behind him. "So, Jack, I usually take a short nap in the afternoon. While I do, please feel free to explore. I will see you again later."

With that, Sir Jonathan headed up a grand staircase. Noseworthy was in the kitchen tidying up. Jack stood alone in the foyer. There wasn't much to explore there, so he returned to the great room.

"Hello, Daisy." Jack greeted the bear, and then said, "Oh, hello to you, too." At Daisy's feet was what he thought to be a large stuffed domestic cat he hadn't noticed before. He squatted down for a better look.

"The taxidermist did a poor job with you," Jack observed. The cat was missing an eye, which made it look fierce. It seemed to stare right at Jack. He shut one eye and glared back. "You don't scare—"

Before Jack could finish his declaration of bravery, however, the cat's tail flicked. Jack shrieked and leapt back, and the cat yowled and darted into a hallway.

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“That would be Morpheus,” Noseworthy said in a matter-of-fact sort of way.

Jack yelped again. He hadn’t heard Noseworthy enter through a different door and sidle up behind him.

“If you kindly follow me, I will show you to your quarters,” the butler said.

Noseworthy slowly led the way up the impressive staircase. Everything in the mansion was old and unkempt. Long hallways led to the right and the left.

“Follow me this way, Mr. Barrelbottom.”

“Mr. Barrelbottom?” Jack asked in dismay. “Mr. Noseworthy, I would prefer you call me Jack.”

“Very well sir, if you prefer.”

Jack didn’t want to offend Noseworthy, so he let it go. The two passed door after door until Noseworthy stopped and opened one slowly.

Noseworthy paused and cleared his throat. “Sir, this is where you will be staying.”

“Thank you, Mr. Noseworthy.”

Jack looked around the bedroom. Aunt Melba would have said it was filled with junk, especially since a layer of dust blanketed it all, as if no one had entered the room in years. To Jack, however, it felt like home, or at least like Fumblebee’s. There were a myriad of intriguing relics, more than he could have ever imagined. Framed photos were neatly arranged on top of a simple desk. He wiped one clean with his shirt and recognized the people in the picture immediately. They were Sir Jonathan and Aunt Melba when she was young. She hadn’t changed at all over the years. She was gazing at Sir Jonathan from the side with her typical scowl — her eyebrows turned downward, and her lips curled. Jack scratched his head as he wondered why there were no photos of his father.

“Mr. Barrelbottom, your grandfather said you have free reign in the home. If you need anything just ask.”

“Mr. Noseworthy, could you call me by my name, please?”

“Yes sir, as you wish. Enjoy your day, Jon.”

Jack spent quite a bit of time taking in all the treasures in the bedroom. It was clear that it had been his father’s bedroom growing up, and he was overwhelmed feeling a connection with him. One display that caught his eye featured 16, shriveled dart frogs from the Amazon neatly arranged in four rows of four in a carefully crafted

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dovetailed oak box with a hinged glass top. A small key to the lock lay at the base of the display case. Each was labeled by species with a short description of each. They were carefully pinned on black velvet from the upper left to lower right as if following the was spectrum of a rainbow depending on their vivid, iridescent colors: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. One frog was missing though. The description read; “The poisonous golden dart frog: One of the most toxic animals on earth. It has enough venom to kill ten grown men.”

Jack was fond of amphibians: toads, frogs, newts, and salamanders. He especially liked red-spotted newts. Over time they change from vivid orange to red and then to a yellowish brown. But reptiles frightened Jack. Snakes, crocodiles, snapping turtles, lizards! ‘Nothing good could come of a confrontation with one of those,’ Jack thought.

When he ran his hand over the wooden desk wiping the dust away, there appeared the carved initials J.S.B.II. He opened the top drawer and found a jack knife neatly placed on a leather-bound journal. A monogram J.S.B., though worn, was engraved on the blade of the jack knife.

Jack opened the journal tentatively and saw that it was filled with hand written information on plants and wildlife. The pages of the journal were so discolored and worn, however, that it couldn’t possibly be his father’s. It must have been Sir Jonathan’s.

Jack then entered the cedar closet to hang up the few clothes he had packed. It was quite large and bare, with the exception of a single chair and ladder leading up to an iron hinged hatch door. It reminded Jack of the secret trap door in his own bedroom at Aunt Melba’s house. He carefully maneuvered up the ladder step by step — holding his suitcase in his left hand. The hatch door had a large intricately etched lock. ‘The key in the suitcase!’ Jack thought.

Resting the suitcase on one of the ladder rungs, Jack fumbled inside it until he was finally able to grasp the key. He heard and felt a click as the key unlatched the lock. Then he heard a “clink, clank, clink” as the key fell out of the lock and bounced down the ladder steps onto the floor. He grunted as he lifted the heavy hatch door. It creaked open as the hot air from the attic and a nasty smell of must overcame him. He carefully pushed the suitcase up through the trapdoor, sliding it on the attic floor. He then navigated his way up the ladder while holding the hatch open. He stood in the attic and then instantly heard: SLAM! The door shut and there was no handle to open it from the inside!

‘I’m trapped!’ Jack was alarmed — even dreadful. ‘What will Sir Jonathan say? Perhaps Noseworthy will find me, or perhaps not! What would Mom and Aunt Melba think? They would never approve.’

“It’s curiosity that killed the cat,” Aunt Melba once said. He didn’t know what she meant then, but for some

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reason it seemed to make sense now.

‘Trouble has found me again’ Jack lamented to himself.

He fumbled in the dark to reach inside his suitcase for his flashlight. Despite the gravity of the situation, a curiosity typical of a young boy prevailed. The floor was covered with half-eaten acorns and mouse poop everywhere.

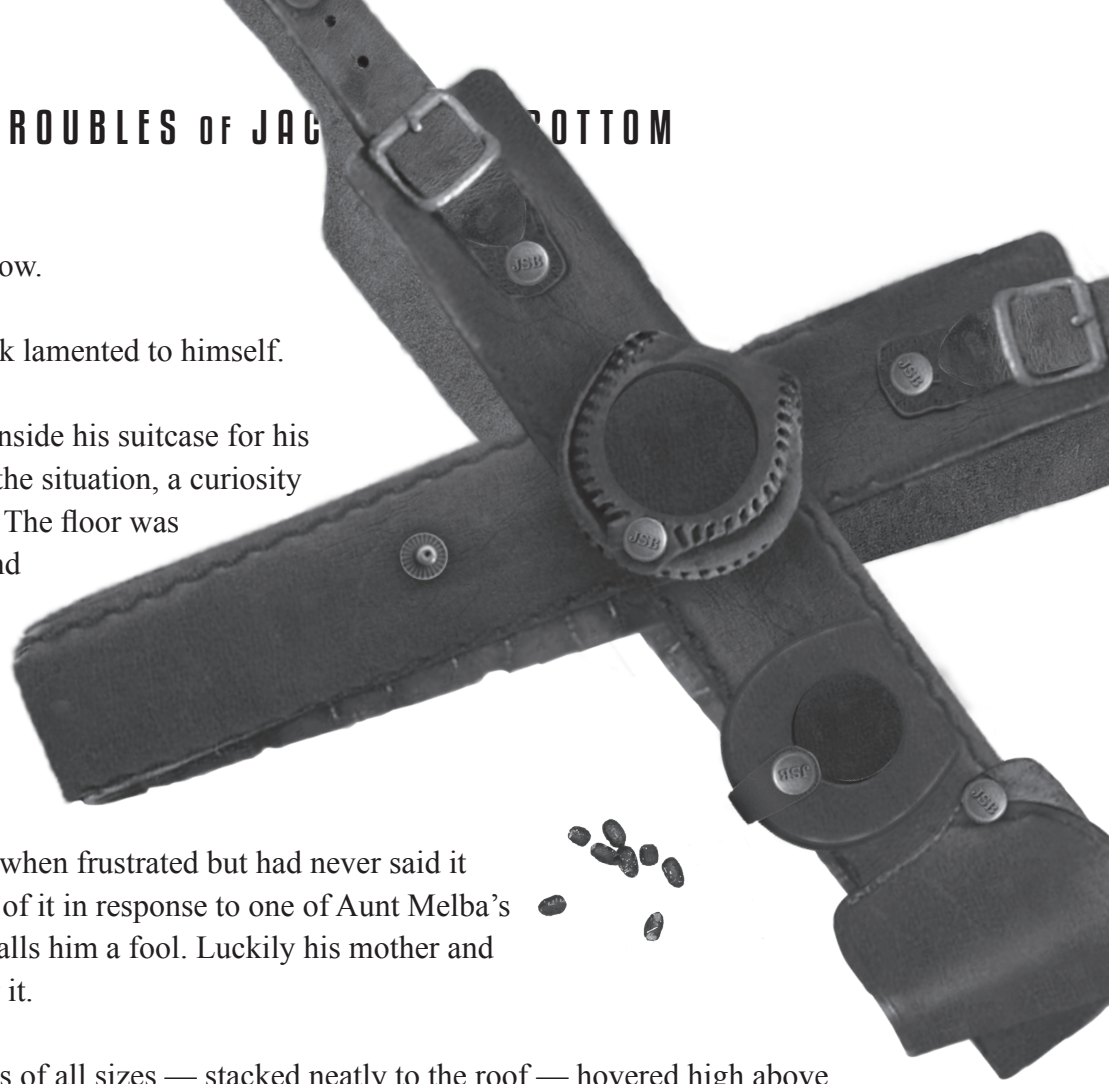
“Mouse poop!” Jack said in disgust.

Jack would occasionally say the phrase ‘mouse poop’ in his mind when frustrated but had never said it out loud. He would usually think of it in response to one of Aunt Melba’s mean comments, like when she calls him a fool. Luckily his mother and Aunt Melba weren’t there to hear it.

Also, in the attic, dozens of trunks of all sizes — stacked neatly to the roof — hovered high above Jack. One was a steamer trunk, which is used to pack clothing for travel. The name “steamer trunk” was coined because they were often found on steam-powered ships. Unlike the other dust-covered trunks, it was tied tightly shut with two lengths of rope and painted bright red; travel trunk labels from all over the world adhered to its surface. Jack struggled as he tried lifting one side of the trunk. He could not budge it because it was filled to the brim. His curiosity once again surfaced, and he cut one rope with his jack knife and started cutting the other. With only a few threads of the rope left — **BOOOM!!!**

Jack was thrust backward off his feet. He landed hard on his back, blanketed with uniforms, or what he thought to be costumes, and antique-like artifacts and relics that burst from the trunk. The uniform that most caught his eye had brass buttons up the front and elaborate piping on the cuffs and the collar. It was a vintage sailor uniform. He tried it on, and it fit perfectly. ‘The rest of the costume must be somewhere in the pile,’ Jack thought.

Jack dug deeper only to find matching pants, and they had socks in the pockets. When he rummaged even further, he uncovered the coordinating boots and hat. He wiped the dust off of a full-length mirror to inspect the costume. ‘Perfect,’ he thought. Though he acknowledged that they were not his clothes, they still made him feel important, even heroic.



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When retrieving his suitcase, Jack examined the X-shaped belt, which, upon further observation, looked more like a portion of a horse's harness. It was wrapped tightly around the suitcase, and it occurred to him that it might also be meant to be worn. He quickly unlatched the buckles, removing the straps from around the suitcase, slid his arms through it, and tightened it around his shoulders. When he returned to the mirror, he gasped. The empty circular compartment that now lay against his chest emanated a faint glow as it did when he first saw it at Aunt Melba's.

In this very moment, a stronger gold light rushed through crevices in the floorboards beneath his feet. Jack retrieved a crowbar from a pile of old tools in a corner of the attic to pry the floorboard up to see what it was. It took exertion and some finagling, but he was finally able to bend a board up.

A large gold coin was emitting the light. Jack reached to pick it up and saw a black marble embedded in the coin's center like the iris of an eye; it was surrounded by an etching of eyelids, a brow, and patterns of numbers, letters, and words. Jack realized the coin was meant to be snapped into the compartment of the belt. The coin fit perfectly, and the glow subsided.

There was also a holster riveted to the belt, and Jack thought it was surely there to hold a rifle or a tomahawk, or even a large machete. He searched the attic for a weapon but to no avail. He did, however, find an old knapsack with an interesting design. There were three triangles that overlapped and were embroidered onto the back flap. Jack filled it with whatever he could.

Suddenly, Jack remembered the predicament he was in; he was stuck in the attic. His heart began to pound as he realized time was of the essence. He searched the perimeter of the attic. In the far corner was an entrance into the very top of the circular lookout tower of the mansion. The floor was an intricately laid mosaic of a compass rose with a spiral granite stairway leading downward. He tentatively took each step down. The temperature cooled as he descended down the stairs.

When he reached the bottom, he realized there was no way out as he stood before what was once an entryway that was now covered by a brick wall. 'I'm doomed,' Jack thought. He worked his way back up the granite stairs and noticed an open granite-framed window as he climbed toward the second floor. It was high above the ground, but perhaps his only way out. He opened the small window and threw out his hat and then the suitcase and knapsack. He nervously climbed onto the sill. Though it was a tight fit, he squeezed through headfirst and then clutched onto thick wisteria vines crawling up the side of the tower. Now with perspiration glistening on his forehead, he wriggled his way down to the ground.

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Jack found himself behind the mansion. He looked toward the back of the estate over the tall grass. In the distance, there was something peculiar on a hilltop. It was large and white, sitting high in a magnificent Oak tree. He put on his hat, picked up the suitcase, and with his other hand, dragged his knapsack toward the large Oak. As he approached the tree, he was stunned. It was a large boat perched high in the tree. It was as if the tree grew around it while pushing it high off the ground.

The sizable boat did not appear seaworthy, even if it wasn't in a tree. In large capital letters, the word "IMAGINE" was painted on the boat's stern. A tattered rope ladder hung from the stern of the boat with its other end staked to the ground to secure it. The steps were evenly spaced and knotted every 12 inches. Jack counted them; the ladder stretched 17 feet high.

How could Jack resist climbing the rope ladder? He had never been on a boat before, not even a canoe. Carefully navigating his way up each rung, he began to sweat and tremble while being careful not to look down. When he reached the top, he climbed over the side of the boat and onto the deck. The deck boards rotted and squeaked beneath his feet as he moved toward the living quarters in the galley below.

Jack had never been so excited and scared simultaneously. He tentatively entered the wheelhouse where the captain of the boat steers and pushes and pulls levers that control the engine. He stood on the seat and clutched the wheel while inspecting the control panel. A large compass pointed directly north.

As Jack entered the galley below, portholes allowed barely enough light for him to see. A kerosene lantern sat on a table next to a box of matches. He lit the lamp so he could examine the room's contents more clearly. It was bare except for the basic essentials to live: a table and two chairs, two canvas hammocks, a bureau, nightstand, and a wood stove. The bureau drawers were open with its few contents emptied onto the floor. J.S.B. II was carved into its surface, just like it was on the desk in the bedroom. To the right of the bureau, coat hangers dangled from a mounted pole with a shelf above meant to store hats. To the left of the bureau was a poster-sized unframed canvas with a beautifully hand-painted bird's eye-view of what clearly was Sir Jonathan's country estate. There was the mansion and a lot of other structures. There were fields, rolling hills, forests, rock ledges, rivers, streams, quarries, and sand pits. Rudimentary words written on various locations of the estate jumped out at him: African Desert, Australian Outback, Amazon, Himalayans, India, and many other places around the world.

"A club house, a boathouse, and a tree house all in one!" Jack exclaimed, and then he sniffed.

'Mice,' he thought with disgust as he lay his suitcase and backpack on top of the bureau. While approaching the hammocks, he noticed the floor creaked. He tested it again with his other foot. He was standing on a square cut-out. "Another trap door," he whispered. Once again curiosity overcame Jack. He was able to pry it open with his fingers. Lowering the lantern into the square-shaped compartment he saw there was nothing in it. 'Hmm, this must have been used for something,' he thought as he slammed the door shut.



9 13 1 7 9 14 5

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Climbing back up to the wheelhouse, Jack was curious to see the bow of the boat, so he straddled the edge of the gunnel and leapt onto it. From this vantage point, he could see that Sir Jonathan's estate was grand with pastures, rivers, streams, wooded areas, and sprawling hills, as indicated on the painted canvas estate map. All bordered Lake Pennacook in the shadow of the magnificent Mount Olegwasi.

Jack knew the origin of the words Olegwasi and Pennacook. He and Mr. Fumblebee had researched ancient First nation tribal culture. Translated, Olegwasi means "dream well". Pennacook means "falling hill place". Jack recalls thinking the two words together described him perfectly — a dreamer who often falls to the ground.

"I'm so clumsy," he whispered.

Mr. Fumblebee had explained to Jack that some believed that the majestic mountain continually filled the lake with freshwater, especially during the winter thaw. The lake was once a small pond and the water flowing off the mountain was filled with knowledge and wisdom, causing the pond to grow into a majestic lake over time. The lake in turn overflowed into rivers and streams, sharing the knowledge and wisdom with the land and beings. It happens at the full moon of each month. Some say a roar can be heard echoing through surrounding mountain ranges underneath moonlit skies.

Then there is the mysterious Turtle Island. The ancient Indigenous peoples believed a turtle carried the Earth on its back. The island moves ever so slowly across Lake Pennacook depending on the season and the moon's phases.





CHAPTER

4

There was a rusted metal railing wrapped around the bow. Jack was uncomfortably high up, but his mind wandered regardless. He imagined that he was on a ship crashing through waves while smelling the salt air in a warm tropical breeze.

There was a small anchor on the deck tied to the rusted railing with a long rope. Obviously, the anchor was meant to be thrown over the side of the boat so that someone like Jack could shimmy down the rope. Jack leaned over the rail and flung the anchor over the side. With both hands on the rail, he watched it sail through the air, but it became apparent quickly that the rope wasn't long enough to reach the ground.

SNAP!



The weight of the anchor broke the rail and Jack tumbled off the boat. He, feeling weightless for the first time, was falling headfirst toward the Earth. The plunge seemed to last forever, though hitting the ground came soon enough when he belly-flopped onto what felt like unforgiving terrain. The impact knocked the wind out of him. He gasped for air with his legs and arms thrashing about. He rolled side-to-side as he waited for his abdominal muscles to relax but it was just not happening. Finally, he lay calmly on his back while looking directly up at the white-hot sun. His eyes closed and he lost consciousness.



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A few minutes later, Jack began to wake up. He gulped, inhaling deeply while opening his eyes and looking directly into the sun again. He lay there for a moment, unsure of what just happened.

“MOUSE POOP! I’ve done it again.” Jack exclaimed! “I’m so clumsy!”

His head hurt terribly. He felt a bump on his forehead twice and then looked at his fingers. ‘No blood,’ he thought. He tested his arms and legs and they still worked. ‘No broken bones.’ He averted his eyes from the sun only to see the anchor above swinging back and forth like a pendulum, still attached to the broken railing.

Still catching his breath, Jack heard a clicking sound on top of his chest and then a whirrr. Click, click, click, whirrr. He sat up quickly and brought his hand to his chest. The gold coin was making the sound! He unsnapped the leather compartment that held the coin. It was hot and he dropped it to the ground. Click, click, click, whirrr. Click, click, click, whirrr. The black center circle of the coin began to turn counterclockwise and rise up from the coin. It got taller and taller. Click, click, click, whirrr. Click, click, click, whirr. The perimeter of the circle then turned clockwise and also rose. Very slowly, it rose an additional six inches and stopped.

“A TELESCOPE!” Jack yelled out loud. **“IT’S A TELESCOPE!”**

The black marble of the coin was the eyepiece of the telescope. Jack peered through this extraordinarily powerful tool, scanning the shore of Lake Pennacook; he saw people, small fishing shacks, and ships with sails moored in the harbor along with other vessels tied to docks and piers. The land was flat, and heat was rising toward dark clouds creeping in from the north behind a village. Jack lowered the telescope. ‘Something’s wrong!’ he thought. ‘There are no houses or boats and certainly no ships on lake Pennacook!’

Jack then pondered why it was that Mount Olegwasi all but vanished while he was peering through the telescope. The wind began to gust as if a storm was brewing. He raised the telescope to his eye again, twisting it to focus. ‘Ah!’ Jack thought. ‘Again — a bustling village!’ He was perplexed once again. Bewilderment seemed a common occurrence since he arrived at Sir Jonathan’s estate. The blustery wind then began to howl.

“BARRELBOTTOM! BARRELBOTTOM! BAAARRREEELLLBOTTOM!”

It sounded just like the way Aunt Melba would yell at him, but it wasn’t her. He lowered the telescope from his eye and was astonished to find himself standing in a crow’s nest high atop a sailing ship.

“Barrelbottom! Do you see land, boy? We should arrive at our destination on the African coast by day’s light tomorrow!” yelled the sailor from the deck below. Jack pointed Eastward. “Well get down here, boy! Dinner is being served!”

Jack swallowed hard when he looked down. “Trouble has found me again,” he whispered.

A rope ladder similar to the one he climbed to reach the tree house hung from the mast. Jack began to count the number of steps to the deck of the ship. When he lost count at 83, his heart began to pound. Then, realizing that

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the holster on his hip was actually for his telescope, he secured it and began his descent down the ladder. His entire body was trembling, his hands sweating. He could only look straight ahead. One by one, Jack carefully navigated the countless steps down. It was grueling and time-consuming, but with each step toward the deck, his confidence grew. When he neared the bottom, he leapt onto the deck where the impatient sailor stood.

“The cook is waiting for you and the food is almost gone!”

“Yes sir!” Jack said out of respect for the sailor.

“Sir? Did you call me Sir? You call me Captain! Captain Norris! Captain Howes Norris,” he shouted with anger. “Down to the galley, boy!”

Jack was hungry. ‘What a long day!’ he thought as he ran down the stairs to the galley. Jack estimated that there were 20 men eating dinner. As Captain Norris entered the galley the sailors all looked at him with disdain. It was clear that they despised the captain. ‘I bet he’s mean to them,’ Jack thought.

The wind was whipping, and the waves were big, which is why the lanterns were swinging back and forth. Jack struggled to maintain his balance as he walked through the galley and accidentally bumped into one of the sailors.

“Move it, boy!” yelled the sailor.

“Well, it’s about time,” the cook grumbled.

He threw Jack an apron and handed him two plates stacked with slop. Jack made his way back to the two remaining sailors who had not been served. When he returned to the kitchen, the cook was eating his own plate of slop.

“I want the pots scrubbed and put away!” It seemed the cook and the sailors could only communicate by yelling at one another.

“Sir, I haven’t had dinner yet,” Jack said nervously. The cook looked angry, just like the rest of the sailors.

“You can eat when you finish the chores!” he said.

While reaching for a dirty pot to wash, the bow of the ship rose dramatically and slammed down while listing to one side. A wall of seawater rushed through the opening of the galley and swept away whatever was strewn across the floor.

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“DINNER’S OVER! A STORM IS BREWING!” warned the captain.

The sailors all fled the galley at once to man the ship. Jack could see black clouds approaching through the galley door as the bow of the ship rose again and slammed down. Jack braced himself; water once again burst through the galley door toward him, knocking over the table of dirty pots.

‘This is no place to be,’ Jack thought. When he climbed the stairs to the deck, the captain was muscling the wheel to stay on course. Jack was fighting his way through the driving rain and wind when a powerful wave hit the bow and recklessly overcame him. It swept him down the port side of the boat, causing him to slam into the railing of the stern. He was dizzy as he stood up clutching the rail.

Jack reached for a life ring, put his arms through it, and then pushed it down and twisted it to maneuver it around his waist. This time, the bow dipped below the surface of the ocean causing another surge of water to pummel him. The wave — larger than all the others — drove Jack over the rail and off the stern of the ship. Even while wearing the life ring, the strength of the wave caused him to plunge deep into the ocean’s frigid water. Slowly, the life ring did lift him back to the surface. He frantically paddled his arms and legs to stay afloat. The ship bumped up and down at the mercy of the angry ocean, and in its battle to move forward, made its way further and further away from Jack until he could no longer see it on the horizon.

“Help, help!” Jack yelled to no avail.

It wasn’t long before the waters calmed. The dark clouds passed, and the sun began to shine through blue openings between white puffy clouds. He had never felt so alone, floating helplessly like a corked soda bottle. He pulled his telescope from beneath the water’s surface and scanned the ocean. He could see no land or boats from his vantage point.

“I could be floating for days,” Jack whispered. Hopeless, his heart continued to beat rapidly. “I have never been in such trouble and it’s my own fault. It must be my imagination or a daydream. But it seems so real.”

Again, Jack was puzzled. He raised the telescope to his eye again and looked through the lens which was blurred from the ocean water. Turning it to sharpen the focus, Jack thought with a fright, ‘Maybe there are sharks below, or a giant squid that will wrap its suction-cupped tentacles around me and swim to the bottom of the sea and eat me.’

Holding the telescope to his eye once again, Jack was astonished when he saw Noseworthy pushing through tall wet grass at the rear of his grandfather’s mansion.





CHAPTER 5

“Mr. BARRELBOTTOM! Jack!!!” Noseworthy was frantic. Groggy, Jack dropped his telescope to the ground, and Noseworthy clutched his arm to pull him up to his feet.

“You’re soaking wet; you should know better than to sit in the rain. You could catch a chill and that could be the end of you.” As stoned-faced and monotone as Noseworthy was, he genuinely looked concerned. Jack knew he was in a world of trouble. “We have to hurry! Your grandfather is waiting for us.”

Noseworthy blotted Jack with a dishrag in the kitchen, drying him as best he could. Then, at the opposite end of a 20 foot long library table from Sir Jonathan in the great room, Jack removed his hat as he took a seat. Sir Jonathan had been waiting for Jack while thumping his cane in unison with the tick tock of a Cuckoo Clock hanging on the wall. He was stunned by Sir Jonathan’s attire. His coat was adorned with decorative piping, buttons, ribbons, and pins, indicating that he truly was a renowned world explorer. Jack was terrified Sir Jonathan would be angry with him for wearing the sailor outfit and the X-shaped belt. It seemed, though, that he didn’t notice, as he never commented on it.

“Ah, Morpheus, we have a special guest today,” Sir Jonathan said as the cat leaped on the table in front of him.

“Jack and Morpheus have met, Sir Jonathan,” Noseworthy said abruptly.

Morpheus was very old with protruding fangs, double paws, a crooked tail, and of course, only one eye.

“Morpheus is a Maine coon cat named after the God of dreams, my boy. A Greek god with this name is known for shaping and forming the dreams of humanity by creating

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images and stories of one's past, present, and future. Morpheus could assume any form — human or other, including cats."

Jack pondered whether Morpheus the cat had been communicating with him through dreams. 'Was my short voyage off the coast of Africa a dream? Maybe it was my imagination, or maybe it was real. What type of message would Morpheus be trying to send me? But he's just an old feral cat.' Jack was confused with what Sir Jonathan had just explained.

For lunch, Noseworthy prepared an assortment of exotic fruits, vegetables, cheeses, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and cold iced tea. Sir Jonathan reached for the sandwiches and pushed the rest of the edibles aside. With a platter in hand, Mr. Noseworthy then walked down to Jack's end of the long table to serve him. He also chose a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and thanked Mr. Noseworthy.

"Wonderful as always, Noseworthy, thank you," Sir Jonathan said as he brought his glass of iced tea to his lips with a trembling hand indicative of his age.

Once alone with Sir Jonathan, Jack finally had the courage to speak freely.

"Sir, I feel like I am in terrible trouble. I mean —" Jack cleared his throat.

Sir Jonathan began to clear his throat too. They were both clearing their throats together and it seemed to go on forever. Finally, Sir Jonathan leaned toward Jack as he did when they first met.

"Young man, you are troubled. You are not in trouble."

'Either way it sounds like trouble to me,' Jack thought.

Pointing at a world map on the wall, Jack asked, "Sir, have you journeyed around the entire world?"

"I have been to many places, Jack, far and wide. But, while a map is a tool to plot out travels, it's a boy's heart and imagination that lead him on life's most profound journeys. Sometimes, choosing to diverge from a map is what enriches a man's life."

Jack sat quietly and pondered what Sir Jonathan had just said. He still wondered if he suspected that he had been on a mysterious journey. It was so peculiar, though, that, again, Jack wasn't entirely sure if it was real.

"Well, lunch is finished, my boy. I suggest you run outside for some fresh air. It's a big world out there."

Jack ran outside to the tree house. He recalled dropping the telescope when Noseworthy helped him stand up. He knelt on the ground and ran his fingers through the tall grass.

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“Found it!” Jack exclaimed with relief.

The telescope had returned to its original coin shape. He snapped it onto his chest and ran up the ladder to the tree house.

Inside, before he changed his clothes, he emptied the contents of the suitcase and knapsack in a corner of the galley. He was still wrestling with the idea that he had been on a ship off the coast of Africa. How could he have been? He had only been on his adventure for a short period of time before he was retrieved by Mr. Noseworthy.

He leapt onto his hammock and unsnapped the coin to examine the etching on the surface more closely. He saw his reflection in the coin, then held it to his own eye.

“There must be another coin — or eye — somewhere,” he whispered. “Maybe it’s also in Sir Jonathan’s attic.”

An idea suddenly popped into Jack’s head, and he ran back to the mansion to meet with his grandfather.

He found Sir Jonathan sitting at a oversized library desk sifting through dozens of vintage photos from his explorations.

“Don’t mind me Jack, I’m just reliving old times. Some say I live in the past,” Sir Jonathan gave Jack a wink.

For a moment, Jack lost his train of thought. He was attempting to take in his grandfather’s collection of relics, antiques, and safari trophies. It was overwhelming! Then, something caught his eye — a rifle in a glass enclosure. The stock was made with beautifully carved walnut and the barrel with highly polished steel. A gold presidential seal was embedded in the stock and a name was engraved.

“Sir — This rifle, is it the one you used on your expeditions?” Jack asked.

Sir Jonathan cleared his throat. “It’s a Winchester rifle. It belonged to President Theodore Roosevelt. They called him “Teddy”. We took many excursions in which we hunted game. I was just a young boy, but we became good friends. He gave it to me as a gift.”



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There was a plaque at the base of the cabinet that read,

“WE DESPISE AND ABHOR THE BULLY — T.R.”

“And the words on the plaque, Sir?”

“Those are powerful words that Teddy shared with me. I was a troubled child, Jack, just like you. A bully comes in all different varieties, not just as people. But curiosity, inner strength, confidence, and the courage to face challenges help a child rid the feeling of self-doubt. Teddy also coined the adage ‘Speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.’ You’re a smart young man, Jack. In your case, the big stick would be your inner strength to consider and confront what might happen in the future.”

Jack pondered his grandfather’s words and recalled what he said earlier in the day — about him being “troubled”. In this minute, he could not fully comprehend his advice. Jack suddenly remembered that he had sought out Sir Jonathan for a reason. It took a moment for him to muster the confidence to ask his grandfather the question he wanted to ask.

“Sir, I found a treehouse in the wooded area. May I sleep there during my stay this summer?”

“A treehouse, you say? Hmm, I don’t recall a tree house on the estate.” Sir Jonathan smiled while also looking perplexed. Jack was not sure if Sir Jonathan was serious or not. He gave Jack what was becoming his signature wink.

“Yes, you may Jack. I can’t think of a better place for a boy to stay.”

Jack thanked Sir Johnathan while shaking his hand.

“Good night, Sir.”

“Olegwasi, Jack,” his grandfather replied.

Jack was confused. “Mount Olegwasi, Sir?”

“Olegwasi, Jack — the First Nation Abenaki tribe’s word meaning ‘dream well,’ They are known as the People of the dawnland. It’s a long-time Barrelbottom tradition to say ‘Olegwasi’ rather than good night.

Jack nodded, acknowledging he already knew it’s meaning.

“Yes Sir, Olegwasi. Dream well.”



CHAPTER

6

Jack spent a good amount of time cleaning and organizing the treehouse, his home for the summer. It had been neglected for many years. He returned to Sir Jonathan's attic frequently to retrieve more clothing and relics he had discovered there. He searched for a matching coin — the other eye — but to no avail. He also recovered the bejeweled brass key he had dropped in the closet. 'You can never have enough of what could be valuable artifacts,' he thought to himself.

After tidying and arranging his not-so-new goods that were at least new to him, Jack climbed on his hammock. The fact that they were all from different eras brought him intrigue. Jack unsnapped the coin from his harness. He held his magnifying glass close to the face of the coin and observed tiny numbers, letters, and words intricately engraved on it. The back of the coin was simply a smooth piece of frosted glass, as if it tumbled in the sand and in the ocean like a piece of sea glass.

Jack pressed his thumbs on the black marble center of the coin. Click, click, whirrr. Click, click, whirrr. Engraved rings around the coin rose transforming back into a telescope. He realized then that he could manifest a telescope from the coin anytime by putting pressure on the black marble. He held the telescope tight to his chest. Sir Jonathan had gone to bed for the night, and the early evening sky was bright orange as it often is at the end of a summer day. Jack lit the lantern on the nightstand next to his hammock, and then grabbed a hold of the leather world map from the drawer. He held it next to the estate map mounted on the wall and brushed his fingers over his father's words: "I'm Trapped! Please find Me!"

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In an instant, an amber glow radiated from the estate map highlighting the word “cairn”. Jack remembered that Mr. Fumblebee had once used that word in reference to a mound of stones built by ancient Indigenous people to mark a grave or as a landmark as a navigational tool. Simultaneously, there was a glimmer on the world map right where Jack, in that moment, stood on Sir Jonathan’s estate. The dot shined brighter and traveled along a line drawn from Jack’s location to the handwritten word Africa.

‘Africa,’ Jack thought. He was off the African coast during his journey on the ship. His journey ended abruptly when he was swept off the ship by a wave in the storm. ‘It must be where my father is.’ Jack quickly packed his things and put them in the knapsack he had found in Sir Jonathan’s attic. Of course, he would bring the map, a length of rope, the flashlight, the magnifying glass, a box of matches, and most importantly, his harness and telescope. Jack had hung his favorite outfits on the rack with coat hangers and placed hats on the shelf above. ‘African safari,’ he thought. He dressed in a beige cotton vest, matching pants, and a safari pith helmet.

Jack leapt onto the deck, crawled over the gunnel and down the rope ladder. His heart was thumping in his chest, this time from anticipation. He followed a well-worn path just wide enough for one person. It led him through a densely shaded wooded forest with towering Pine trees. The borders of the path were lined with bright white Indian pipe plants that glimmered like translucent lights in the intense moonlight.

Scaling one last incline lined with mammoth split boulders, Jack stumbled upon a moonlit meadow. The myriad of Indian pipes transitioned to a blanket of beautiful pink lady’s slippers, otherwise known as moccasin flowers. The path led straight to the cairn in the center of the meadow — a four-foot-tall heap of hand-sized stones and pebbles surrounded by a garden of sweet pea flowers, which are signs of friendship, good wishes, and goodbyes.

Jack pondered of what the symbolism of the cairn that stood before him might be. Hoping it was a navigational tool rather than a grave, Jack placed a stone atop it for his own safe travel and whispered, “Olegwasi.”

To the right of the cairn was a large circular piece of flat slate. He slid his fingers underneath the heavy stone to overturn it. The slate flopped over with a thud, leaving a gaping hole in the ground. He shined his flashlight down the hole and shuddered at the thought it might indeed be a grave. Unable to see the bottom, his imagination overwhelmed him. ‘Maybe it’s treasure or a bear’s den — or maybe it leads to where father is trapped!’ If it was a clue to his father’s whereabouts, he needed to investigate further.

Tying his rope around a nearby sapling, Jack carefully lowered himself deep into the hole. Click, click, whirl, whirl. The sound Jack now recognized easily had lost its luster. His telescope had collapsed into the coin once again, so he snapped it into the harness on his chest. Descending the hole was a tight fit and he was afraid. Reaching the bottom, he came upon an entrance to a tunnel. “I’m doomed,” he whispered.

Holding his flashlight with his mouth, Jack crawled through the tunnel on his hands and knees. It was so confined that he was unable to turn around. Warm air flowed through the tunnel right in his face. He heard insects chirping faintly and a moan. ‘The moan of a bear?’ Jack’s heart felt like it was in his throat now.

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The further Jacked wriggled through the tunnel, the noise of the insects grew louder, but enough light shone in the distance that he no longer needed the flashlight. He reached the end of the tunnel. He was still petrified but moving forward was worth whatever the risk might be. He carefully exited the tunnel to see that his surroundings were unfamiliar. They were certainly nothing like Sir Jonathan's estate. Jack recalled Sir Jonathan's words: "It's a boy's imagination that will take him on the best of life's journeys." But this couldn't possibly be what he meant.

The rising sun washed the horizon with bold shades of red and orange that were mirrored in the shallow flooded plains, typically barren ground. It was a break in the monsoon season. Blades of two-foot long grass lay on top of the water pointing in one direction in a slow moving current. The moans were from a pride of lions on a stretch of dry ground seeking shelter in the shadow of a single Acacia tree, which protected them from the hot sun and the oppressive humidity.

Just steps from the tunnel there was a fire smoldering and a lean-to on the edge of a watering hole created by the recent heavy rains. He cautiously walked toward the tent but no one was there. Inside the tent were essentials to spend the night but it appeared whoever was there left in a hurry. All that remained was a bright colored magenta scarf to protect from the blazing sun. He tied it around his neck.



There was a cloud of dust in the distance following a slow-moving vehicle. A man and a young boy stepped from the land rover. "Hello, Mr. Barrelbottom," the man said. "My name is M'hali, and this is my son, Kalulu. I hope the night treated you well. We have come to assist you on your safari."

'How do they know my name?' Jack wondered.

Kalulu was a boy about Jack's age.

"Come this way and we will prepare for the trip," said Kalulu.

M'hali had an enormous pistol strapped to his hip. Jack tentatively climbed onto the rover, and they approached a wooded area at the edge of the plain. M'hali slowed the vehicle and then came to an abrupt stop.

"We will walk on foot from here," he said.

M'hali handed Jack a rifle. Recognizing it, Jack gasped. It was identical to the one in Sir Jonathan's great room — a Winchester with a presidential seal embedded in the stock! Sir Jonathan and Teddy Roosevelt must have been here!

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“What are we hunting for?” Jack asked.

“Wildebeest, but we’ll see what the day will bring. Our village is depending on our catch to feed their hungry bellies, but we will take only what we need.”

They quietly approached a different water hole created by heavy seasonal rains. There were dozens of gazelles and zebras there but no wildebeests. There went Jack’s chest again — pounding hard from the inside as it always did in unfamiliar situations. He wondered if he was the one who was supposed to be there. ‘Perhaps the telescope was meant to be found by someone else.’

“We will go down this trail to see what we can find. Many herd animals use these paths. You stay here Mr. Barrelbottom. Kalulu and I will circle around to push the game toward you.”

Speechless, Jack reluctantly nodded. He crouched down, raising his rifle so he was ready for anything that came his way. M’hali and Kalulu disappeared into the brush. He shuddered terribly, hoping there were no wildebeests around. He felt like he might faint. There were constant warning calls from birds and primates in the trees above. Then Jack heard something different behind him rustling in the brush.

‘It must be Kalulu or M’hali,’ Jack thought.

Then: “Snort, snort. Snort, snort, snort.”

A warthog emerged from the brush toward Jack. He was driving enormous tusks into the ground, foraging for food. Jack froze, though he continued to tremble, and he also began to sweat. He unwittingly cleared his throat and the boar heard him. The long coarse hair on the boar’s back stood up straight as he stared Jack down, dropped his head, and charged Jack’s way with fierce anger and a terrible squeal.

Jack cocked the hammer of the rifle and took aim with his finger on the trigger. The boar continued to advance, creating a thunderous noise. His arms were shaking so uncontrollably that the end of the rifle was waving in all directions! With the boar just feet away, he threw the rifle toward it and dived to the side of the trail. **BANG!** A loud shot boomed loudly and his ears instantly rang terribly.

Lying face down, Jack could no longer hear the boar charging. It had been shot in the chest and was lying just inches from Jack with the rifle between them. ‘Lucky shot,’ Jack thought to himself. He rolled over onto his back, and M’hali was standing over him.

“Are you okay, Mr. Barrelbottom?” M’hali asked as he put his smoking pistol back in the holster.

It wasn’t the rifle that took down the warthog; it was M’hali’s pistol. ‘I could never harm a living thing anyway.’

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Jack thought. ‘No matter the circumstance.’

“Thank you, thank you, Mr. Barrelbottom!” said M’hali. “Had the boar not seen you, our village would have gone hungry.”

Jack felt great pride. It felt good to help others less fortunate than he. There was a celebration at the village for the boy named Jack Barrelbottom from a far-off land because he put dinner on their plates.

The boar was roasted on a large spit, and Kalulu presented Jack with its tusks to wear around his neck.

After the boys finished their meal, Kalulu said — while pointing toward the brush — “Come with me.”

They walked to a remote hilltop away from the village where Jack could see a tattered white canvas tent that seemed to be Kalulu’s clubhouse. Kalulu went inside and lit a lantern, unveiling tribal masks, animal skins, spears, and even some empty brass bullet shells.

“You can stay here for the night,” said Kalulu. “Tomorrow we can venture out in the flooded plains in my canoe.”

“I would like to show you some things I found and offer them to you as a gift,” said Kalulu.

Kalulu handed Jack a canteen and an empty wooden ammunition box with a photo and a few coins inside. He then presented a sheathed machete to Jack that looked worse for wear. It was attached to a heavy cloth military waist belt. All three items had Sir Jonathan’s monogram on them — J.S.B. If they belonged to his father, they would have had the initials J.S.B. II.

The somewhat blurry black-and-white photo depicted two safari hunters. Each had a foot on a downed water buffalo. One of the hunters was President Teddy Roosevelt wearing a safari helmet like Jack’s. The other man was wearing a white button down shirt, a turban, and high boots. Written in ink at the bottom of the photo read “Teddy and Battuta”, and then again, the initials J.S.B.

“My grandfather took this photo. Do you know who Battuta is?” Jack asked, hoping for a clue to the mystery he was trying so hard to solve. The whereabouts of his father was foremost in his mind.

Kalulu shook his head.

“These items were already here when I found this tent as a small child. It’s getting late. I will return in the morning. Goodbye, Jack Barrelbottom.”

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“Olegwasi, Kalulu. Olegwasi means dream well.”

They both smiled and Kalulu disappeared into the brush. Jack clasped the buckle of the sheathed machete around his waist, the machete on one side and the canteen on the other. He examined the photo his grandfather had taken more closely with his magnifying glass. Reflecting on the day's events, Jack thought it had been a very good day. Peering above through a tear in the white canvas, the moon was distant but felt so close. A single cloud moved across the moon and completely darkened the sky.

Jack gazed into the glow of the lantern beside him. He had difficulty seeing in the darkness after looking at the flame. When his eyes adjusted, he found himself back in the tree house once again, lying on the floor underneath his canvas hammock. “This can't be!” he whispered. Jack was flabbergasted, especially since lying beside him on the treehouse floor was the wooden box. The belt with the machete and the canteen was still wrapped around his waist.

He climbed into his hammock and closed his eyes, calling it a night.





CHAPTER 7

Jack let out a sigh of relief.

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“How did you sleep last night, Jack?”

“Very well, Sir.”

“There’s no place better for a boy to be than in the great outdoors. Someday you too may travel the world as I have done, exploring during adventurous safaris,” he added with his wink.

Sir Jonathan cleared his throat. “Jack my boy, I would prefer you call me ‘Grandfather’ rather than ‘Sir’.”

Jack was overcome with emotion. He lifted his arms, almost involuntarily, to hug his grandfather, who hugged him back.

Grandfather put his hand on Jack’s shoulder and said, “Young man, we have so many things to do together. Even an old man stays curious and must seek adventure from time to time. Tomorrow we will go to the village and begin to enrich our lives together.”

Grandfather seemed happy and much more animated than before. Jack felt relieved yet somewhat guilty. Grandfather didn’t suspect he had been to the coast of Africa on a ship or that he had gone on an African safari. He felt uncomfortable withholding the truth about his travels from his grandfather although they may have been in his imagination.

“Young man, I have some chores for you to do around the estate. There’s an old horse barn in the rear; I would like you to clean it up a bit.”

Jack returned to the treehouse and referred to the estate map to decipher the whereabouts of the Barn. “BARN” was scrawled on its location. Underneath the word “Barn” read “HINAN” in tiny handwritten capital letters. Jack had never heard of a country named Hinan. He climbed down the rope ladder and traipsed off with the machete and canteen that Kalulu gave him strapped around his waist. For such a menial task as cleaning the barn, he didn’t find it necessary to bring his telescope. The machete was so long it dragged on the ground behind him on his walk to the barn. He grabbed the machete and swung it up and down and back and forth, pretending he was clearing brush on an exploration. It was a beautiful day to explore the estate.

The barn was a rickety structure with horse stalls inside, farming equipment, tools, and — resting in the middle — a rusted tractor with rotted flat tires. The number of cobwebs in the barn made it appear as if no one had entered it in a long time. Jack cleaned the barn using a rake and a broom. Aunt Melba’s insistence that his bedroom be immaculate primed him for this task.

It was hotter than hot inside the barn.

“I have never worked this hard in my life,” Jack said out loud.

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He found a saddle and bridle on a sawhorse. He climbed atop the saddle, put his feet in the stirrups, and held the reins. Jack had never ridden a horse before. Nestled in the saddle, he imagined he was a cavalry officer and kicked the sides of the sawhorse as if to make an imaginary horse run faster. Lost in the moment, he toppled over onto the barn floor with one foot in the stirrup.

“I’m so clumsy,” Jack murmured.



His ankle ached, as did his back. Lying face-up, he viewed the world upside down and saw a cloud of dust through the barn doors moving toward him in the distance. A gang of nomads emerged from the dust cloud and charged toward him atop camels.

Jack knew immediately that he was in a horrific situation. When he heard the feet of a camel pounding in the sand — in a full gallop — right next to him, he realized that he had actually fallen off a camel, not a sawhorse.

His leg was caught in the leather flank strap and the camel was dragging him across the desert sand.

With sabers in hand, several angry nomadic warriors continued stampeding toward Jack on their camels. Jack’s camel went airborne as it leapt over a dune, landing on the other side, and continued to gallop aggressively. One of the nomads caught up with Jack, wielding a saber high above his head. He then swung it fiercely at him. It cut through the camel’s flank strap freeing Jack, who halted jaggedly on the ground. His camel continued to bolt.

Jack lay face down, aching everywhere, as the warriors’ camels surrounded him. Also brandishing a saber, the lead nomad commanded that his camel kneel before Jack before he dismounted. He took Jack’s machete and emptied his canteen in the hot sand.

“Your camel is smart but she’s not a good listener,” the nomad said. “No matter how many times we told her to stop, she wouldn’t. She has a mind of her own.”

‘The nomad had not tried to hurt me with his saber,’ Jack thought. ‘He meant to set me free.’

The man lifted Jack effortlessly onto his camel. They rode off over the dunes with the others following. Jack could see a village of huts off in the distance.

“The Sahara Desert,” Jack whispered.

They reached the huts, dismounting into the clouds of dust mustered by the camels’ feet. The man clutched Jack’s arm firmly and led him into a hut where another warrior waited. One of the two men grabbed Jack’s wrists and yanked them above his head. He patted him down, emptied his pockets, and pulled his boots off to look inside.

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“No,” he said to the other nomad. “There’s no key.”

The nomad placed his hands on Jack’s shoulders and pressed him down so firmly that he landed in a sitting position on a carpet. The nomad then blindfolded Jack with his magenta scarf that he had found in the abandoned lean-to in Africa and tied his hands behind his back with heavy twine. They left him there without saying a word. Jack sat quietly wondering why he was being held captive in the hut alone.

‘Maybe they will burn me at the stake.’ Jack quivered at the thought. ‘Why would they do such a thing?’

Darkness fell and Jack heard a camel approach the hut. Slowly, a tip of a saber pierced the hut’s fabric and moved forward until it was just inches from Jack’s nose. The saber cut a large opening in the fabric. Two arms reached inside to cut Jack’s hands free from the twine with a knife. The hands that freed him then pulled him outside through the opening and helped him onto the camel. The person who saved him was just Jack’s height. ‘This nomad must be young like me,’ Jack thought.

Their camel crept slowly and quietly away from the village and then lunged into a full gallop. It navigated the moon-lit sand dunes swiftly and easily. Jack hung on for dear life until they slowed, approaching a smoldering fire and lean-to. The camel knelt to let him and his small but unfamiliar counterpart dismount. The young nomad’s hood fell off while turning toward Jack.

“You’re a girl!” Jack exclaimed loudly.

“And you are a boy!” She responded wondering why it made a difference. “And you’re a thief! My grandmother made that magenta scarf you’re wearing,” she said, annoyed.

Jack was speechless and didn’t know how to respond. He had found the scarf next to a lean-to in Africa while on his safari with Kalulu. He unknotted the magenta scarf and handed it to her.

“Well, you’re going to need one. Take this one,” she said as she handed hers to Jack. “Blue is not my color anyway. I’m Sierra,” she said.

Jack’s heart was pounding the same way it did when he was in trouble. Sweating profusely, his legs quivered, and an unexpected whistle came from his nose. He cleared his throat, which was the same nervous tick he encountered when he first met his grandfather. Finally, he spoke with a stutter.

“Th-th-th-thank you.” Jack was embarrassed and felt his face turn red. She was a girl after all.

“The tribe that held you captive is not nice. They steal camels and hurt people. They have even murdered people from my tribe.”

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Sierra paused looking at the horizon behind Jack. Her eyes showed that she was distant. At that moment her thoughts were elsewhere, far, far away. Finally she lowered her head and looked at the ground, scuffing the toe of her shoe. She created a small hole in the sand like an open wound, and then covered it up again while tamping it flat and smoothing it over from side-to-side. She seemed upset but quickly regained her composure.

“They tried to steal the camel you were riding. It is my camel, and she led me to you. This tribe attempted to abscond with her many times, but she always made her way home to me.”

You stay here for the night and I will ride out over the dunes to keep watch. I’ll return at sunrise and we’ll ride to my village. Jack was perplexed and confused about making any sense of this journey. Soon, the fire went out and Jack caught a chill. As unbearably hot as the desert is during the day the temperature drops dramatically at night, an average of 65 degrees. The moon cast light onto the towering dunes similar to a mountain range. For a moment Jack imagined he was home on his grandfather’s estate, but he wasn’t.

The Sahara is not lush with mammals and amphibians like home. The sahara is home to venomous viper snakes. Then there is the deathstalker scorpion, the most poisonous scorpion in the world lives in the Sahara. A sting from a deathstalker will leave its victim helpless and in excruciating pain. ‘What if a viper were to appear out of the darkness and a deathstalker crept toward me from behind to sting me?’ And then, Jack shuttered at the thought and realized his imagination was getting the best of him. Regardless, he never slept a wink that night and anxiously awaited Sierra’s return.

Sierra appeared at the top of a dune on her lumbering camel in silhouette with the large ball of the rising sun behind her. They mounted the camel together to head toward her village. Jack nervously held onto Sierra’s shoulders to steady himself. He compulsively cleared his throat as they rode, pretending it was sand causing his nervous tick. When they arrived at the village, Sierra led him toward one of the huts. There was an elderly woman sitting quietly inside.

“This is my grandmother,” Sierra said.

Sierra’s grandmother was old but looked wise. She reached out to cradle Jack’s face with her hands and stared deep into his eyes. Jack felt uncomfortable until the corners of her mouth turned up into a smile.

The children in the village were fascinated with Jack. He looked so much different than they did. Sierra told Jack the girls thought he was cute. Jack blushed. He didn’t know what to say.

After giving Jack a brief tour of her village, Sierra brought him to an entrance to an underground cavern lined and held up by adobe blocks — a mixture of clay, sand, straw and water. They had dried in the hot sun. Both Jack and Sierra ducked slightly while entering. The cavern was dark and cold compared to the oppressive heat outside. Sierra struck a match on a rock and lit a small lantern. There was a crystal-clear stream winding through what appeared to be unending darkness. The space was lined with bottles of goat milk, mountainous

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sacks of grain, and other necessities for a village of nomads to thrive in the hot desert.

“This is where we store food out of the hot sun as well as a source of water for the village, but it’s also a place I like to come to be alone,” Sierra sat cross legged and gestured for Jack to do the same. “How did you get to our land?”

Jack realized his travels might be too difficult for Sierra to believe, or worse, possibly just in his imagination. So, he simply replied, “It was a long journey, and I’m afraid I may be lost. I have been exploring. How did you learn my language?”

“There was a man here long ago who often traveled with our tribe,” she said. “He taught the older children your language, and they have in turn taught the younger children.”

Sierra reached inside her robe for something wrapped in a brightly colored scarf and handed it to Jack.

“The man gave what is wrapped in this scarf to my grandmother. I have one of my own, so I would like to give it to you.” Sierra explained. “She told me that, if it is used properly, it will point you in the right direction, so you never lose your way in life. I think you need it for your travels.”

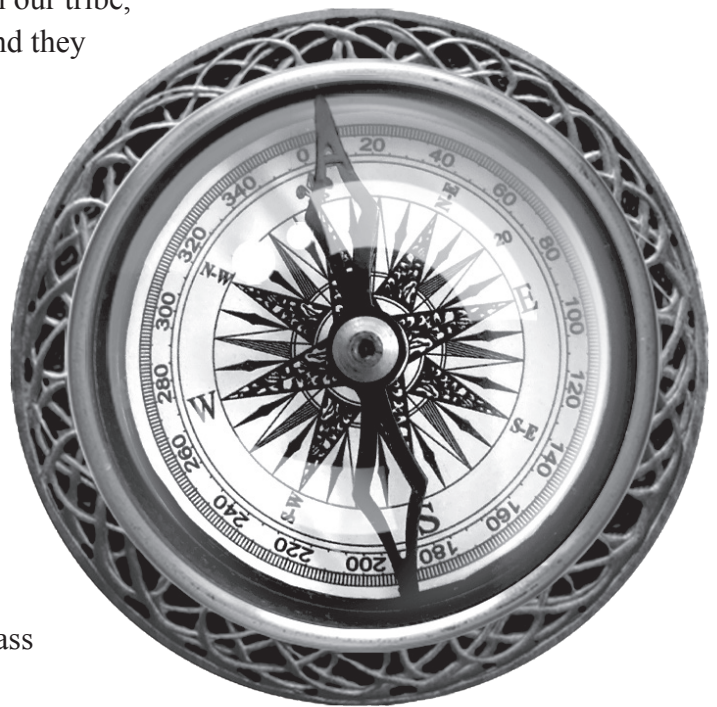
Jack unraveled the cloth. It was a beautiful compass surrounded by dark carved wood and then encased in brass wires that created an intricate design.

“Thank you, Sierra,” Jack said with surprise and then blushed. He twitched nervously and began to sweat remembering that he was talking to a girl. He carefully placed the compass in his pocket.

“You’re welcome, um...” Sierra realized Jack had never formally introduced himself. Typical boy. She leaned forward and said, “You have not told me your name.”

Jack cleared his throat. He was often embarrassed by his name because bullies at school called him ‘Barrellbutt’. “My name is Jonathan Stout Barrelbottom, but you can call me Jack.”

Sierra gasped. She pulled away from Jack with her mouth and eyes wide open.



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“Why that is the name of the man who taught us your language!” she exclaimed, lifting her jaw shut with her hands.

Jack recoiled in disbelief and then stood quickly, bumping his head on the low ceiling. He then fell backward into bottles of goat milk, spilling them everywhere. One spilled on the lantern and snuffed the flame out.

“Sierra!” he shouted in the darkness. “I’m sorry, Are you okay? Sierra!” She did not respond.

Jack fumbled on the ground looking for the box of matches Sierra had used. He found a match and struck it on the floor. As the flame wafted, he was dumbfounded to find himself back in the tree house and that he had knocked over the table and chairs. It was evening so he lit his lantern and climbed onto his hammock.

“It’s happened again! I’m so clumsy!” he murmured in a frustrated tone.

“Sierra,” Jack whispered.

“Kalulu would have been a good friend, but Sierra would have been the most wonderful friend of all. If only I could meet her again.” Jack was still speaking softly to himself. “There must be a way. Perhaps the compass will help me.”

Having been on a journey unprepared, Jack decided he would wear the X-shaped harness all the time when not with his grandfather. He retrieved it and buckled it on. He came to the realization that the compartment was not for the coin; it was for the compass. He unsnapped the centerpiece of the harness and removed the coin, pressed the black marble transforming it into the telescope, and secured it into the holster. He placed the compass in the compartment and snapped it. Like the coin, the compass fit perfectly. The functions of the harness all made sense to him now. A snapped coin purse riveted just above the holster on the harness was where the coin could be placed when not in telescope form.

“Now I’m really prepared for my journeys,” he whispered.

He began sketching pictures of the angry wicked warrior and Sierra. It was difficult to recall exactly what she looked like. He did the best he could and drew a picture of he and Sierra standing side by side in her village.

Moonlit shadows of wind-blown clouds crossed the treetops of the majestic Mount Olegwasi looking like reflections in a running stream. Jack listened as the wind blew through the branches above the tree house with a whistling sound of, drrreeaaaamm, wwweeelll...



CHAPTER

8

Jack awoke to the sweet smell of pine trees. He opened his eyes mulling over the idea that he had never been happier. At the same time, however, he had never been so confused. But with each of his adventures, he felt closer to rescuing his father. Then, in one motion, he sprung out of the hammock and into his boots. He realized he neglected to remove the harness while he slept. He unbuckled it and placed it in the bureau for safe keeping while visiting his grandfather and then ran to his grandfather's mansion.

"Grandfather! Grandfather!" His voice echoed through the halls of the mansion.

"I'm in here, my boy."

Sir Jonathan was very animated and appeared somewhat younger than when Jack had first met him. He moved about the room much more quickly too, and without a cane.

"I'm very excited, Jack! Our timing is perfect to venture to the village. The carnival is in town — Colonel Percy's World Adventure Carnival. It's been years since I've been."

'Colonel Percy,' thought Jack. 'That's the name written on my toy telescope. Grandfather must have taken my father there when he was a boy like me.'

Jack had never been to a carnival. His mouth was agape; he could hardly handle the anticipation. But most of all, he was excited to spend time with his grandfather.

Grandfather took Jack's hand in his as they hurried down the gravel drive to a barn at the rear of the mansion. There were several barns on the estate serving different purposes.

Grandfather unlatched the doors and, with Jack's help, swung them open. Jack was overcome by the pungent smell of oil, gasoline, rusted metal, mineral spirits, and mouse

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poop wafting from the barn. He wanted to pinch his nose with his fingers but didn't want to offend grandfather. There was a heap of car fenders, windshields, hoods, cut up chunks of steel, rotted tires and wheels. Jack could see the glint of a small car underneath all the scrap.

Grandfather cut a path to a long machine shop bench at the rear of the barn, tossing parts from side to side along the way.

"The darn key," grandfather murmured in frustration. "I can never remember where I put it last." As grandfather rummaged through the mountain of nuts and bolts to find the key.

"FOUND IT!"

Grandfather startled Jack as he held the key up to the light making sure it was the right one. It took a while but together they uncovered the car under the heap of scrap. And there it was.

"Isn't she a beauty, Jack? I made her myself!" grandfather said with pride. "Like an exquisite sculpture or a cherished colorful abstract painting, she speaks to me!"

"Beauty" wasn't the first word that came to mind for Jack but the car certainly had character. There was no windshield or top. It was built with parts from an array of different automobiles of all shapes, sizes and colors. Jack examined the car skeptically wondering if it would even start. It was a two-seater with springs that had broken through them. An upholstered board was retrofitted, functioning as a seat in the rear. The passenger side was actually missing a door.

"It's not for everyone I know, but I wanted something unique I could call my own. I put my heart and soul into it, Jack," grandfather said, still giddy as if seeing it for the first time.

"Many have called me 'colorful' or 'eccentric', Jack. But I prefer to call my peculiarities expressions of my bizarre but esteemed individuality. We are not odd, just different, which is the epitome of who we are. Embrace your uniqueness unabashedly, my boy — with conviction and fortitude."

Grandfather tripped over remnants of more clutter but caught himself as he made his way to the rear of the car.

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“This darn thing, It has never worked properly.” he said as he wrestled with the locking mechanism for the trunk and was finally able to pop it open.

Grandfather reached inside the trunk and pulled out a pair of leather fighter pilot helmets, goggles, and scarves. The trunk was filled with sticks, leaves, and pine needles. When grandfather removed the debris, he exposed animal bones. Something had been living there. Small skulls and even a half-eaten mouse littered the trunk floor. Maybe a bobcat, a small bear, or even a mountain lion had lived there. A shiver overcame Jack as he once again frightened himself by letting his imagination run wild. Strangely, Grandfather didn’t even acknowledge the bones.

“Put your helmet and goggles on, Jack. Without them, your face will look like fly paper by the time we reach the village.”

Grandfather slammed the trunk hard, but it popped up again. He slammed it a few more times before it closed.

“Oh well, let’s hope she starts!” Grandfather said.

He put the key in the ignition and turned it. Eh-eh-eh —vroom—vrooom. The car started with a bang and a pop. As black smoke billowed from the exhaust pipe, Grandfather, with a bit of a struggle, wiggled the gear shift and off they went. As they drove, Jack caught a glimpse of the village below in the valley. Not far from the church steeple was a Ferris wheel reaching for the sky.

“There it is Jack! I can taste the fried dough and cotton candy already. We’ll go right to the Ferris wheel and then play some games.”

The Ferris wheel towered over Jack and Grandfather. His heart began to race, but it was due to excitement rather than fear this time. Just days ago, he would have never considered venturing so high up in the air, but somehow his recent travels empowered him. His confidence was overwhelming. The ride would be a challenge, but Jack felt strong. The man operating the Ferris wheel helped Jack and Grandfather onto one of its chairs, buckled them in, and pulled the lever.

“Here we go, my boy!” yelled Grandfather as if he were a child again. He let out a “WOOO HOOO!” as they reached the top of the ride.

“Let it out, Jack; be loud! I want to hear your voice!”

Jack inhaled and sounded his voice. “WOOO HOOO!”



“Again, son, again!” Grandfather yelled.

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Jack breathed deeply again and billowed, “WOOOOO HOOOOOOOO!”

“A boy’s voice should be heard, not hushed! When the opportunity arises, Jack, let it out, let it out — every time!”

When the Ferris wheel finished its final turn, Sir Jonathan jumped off so quickly that Jack had to run after him.

“Over here Jack, over here!” Grandfather yelled, waving his arms to attract Jack’s attention.

Jack and his grandfather walked by sideshows, caged wild animals, and clowns. A black bear paced repeatedly around the circumference of the small but tall circular iron-barred cage where the bear would perform. A large painted banner typical of a carnival read “Tulip the Man Eating Bear!” But there was nothing man-eating about her. An animal trainer walked into the cage and dropped a rusted bucket in front of Tulip. It was filled with apples and spoiled bananas. He then tossed her a marshmallow as he exited the cage. Jack couldn’t help but notice that the sign was awry. The name “Tulip” was crudely painted over the name “Daisy”. ‘Daisy the bear,’ Jack thought. ‘Was Tulip Daisy’s sister? Daisy liked marshmallows. How did she end up in Grandfather’s great room?’

Jack and his grandfather meandered further and stopped at a game called “Ring the Bell”. A strong man is always present at this game with an enormous rubber mallet. The idea is to swing the hammer onto the base of a post, causing a metal ball to shoot to the top, ringing a bell. From bottom to top levels were marked along the entire post. In capital letters, the sequence of words read “WEAKLING”, “CHILD”, “YOUNG MAN”, “GROWN MAN”, “STRONG MAN”, and at the very top, “HERCULES”.

The carnival strong man was a giant of a man. He stepped forward and swung the hammer with all his might, driving the metal ball up the post and ringing the bell. Jack sensed that, though he was big and strong, he was a nice man. He leaned down and handed Jack the hammer.

“You have three tries son,” the strong man whispered to Jack. “Show everyone what you’re made of. I’m rooting for you because you have the courage to try. I don’t see those other boys taking the challenge.”

Jack thought differently. Regardless of whether other boys were stepping up to the challenge, he felt anything but courageous. With eyes wide open, he looked at his grandfather; his expression was shy and self-conscious. ‘Why would Grandfather let me be in this situation where I would fail?’ Jack wondered.

“C’mon, boy, you can do it!” yelled a man in the crowd, drowning out the snickers from other boys in the crowd.

These boys reminded Jack of his schoolmates who bullied him. He lifted the heavy hammer over his head and

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its weight pulled him backward. He lost his balance and fell, the hammer flying from his hands. The crowd burst into laughter, embarrassing Jack who stood with his shoulders slumped down. The strong man handed the hammer back to Jack.

“Two more tries, Jack. Give it another try, son!” his grandfather said, coaxing him back toward the base.

Jack was suddenly determined to show the boys in the crowd he could do better. This time, his strategy would be to start with the hammer behind him, and then to swing it forward to the base. Clutching the hammer tight, he swung it over his head and smashed it onto the base with all his might. The metal ball rose, surpassing “WEAKLING” and then stopping just above “CHILD”. Again, the boys in the crowd chortled.

‘At least the ball passed “WEAKLING”’ Jack thought as he looked at the post.

“Just imagine if I drove that ball all the way to the top and rang that bell,” he whispered.

“I would be a hero to all these boys and win a prize.”

Jack clenched his teeth with a look of determination. He swung the hammer over his head, this time with all his inner strength, which Grandfather said would be his “big stick” when facing a fear. The hammer crashed onto the base, and the metal ball climbed above “WEAKLING”, “CHILD”, and “YOUNG MAN”, and stopped just short of the “GROWN MAN” before falling!

The crowd was silent. ‘I’m a failure. I didn’t ring the bell,’ Jack thought. Slowly, though, the spectators began to clap.

“That’s a boy!” yelled the man in the back.

As another man in the crowd whistled, Grandfather smiled in a way that Jack had never seen.

“Young man, you are a Barrelbottom! Be proud, my boy!”

As they walked away from the game, Jack asked his grandfather why everyone had clapped even though he had failed. Grandfather’s expression melted into one more serious.

“Young man, failure often teaches us more about ourselves than success. You challenged yourself — tested your own boundaries. It took courage and bravery! You did not win the game, but you exceeded your own expectations. The people in the crowd recognized that. You did your best and you should feel great pride in that.”

Jack thought for a moment. No one can be good at everything, not even the strong man, or the boys in the crowd who had snickered at first. ‘Everyone has strengths,’ he thought to himself. ‘Even if they can’t ring the bell.’

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At the carnival, Jack and his grandfather played more games and ate as much food as would fit in their bellies. Jack even won a tin sheriff's badge for knocking down a cardboard star using a cork-shooting air-pump rifle. After, they stopped to watch a man who was standing behind three stacked apple crates with a monkey. He was dressed like an explorer with a plastic toy gun and a rubber knife strapped to his hip; Jack sensed that he wasn't a real explorer. His fake mustache was slightly askew, which didn't help his explorer facade.

A different banner hung on the crates; it read "Smiley, The Monkey from the Land of Wild Beasts". He was a rambunctious monkey wearing a little red coat and hat. He did somersaults and leapt into the crowd, jumping from shoulder to shoulder with a tin cup begging for money. Jack could hear the coins clink and clank into the cup as people laughed and gladly emptied their pockets.

Jack was standing at the rear of the crowd with Grandfather. When the monkey continued to hop amongst the crowd, he landed on Jack's head and grabbed ahold of his ears, stretching them so they looked like monkey ears, and then turning them inward. Then, the monkey covered Jack's eyes so he couldn't see. After that, he climbed inside Jack's coat and hid. The monkey was tethered to the trainer by a long leather leash attached to his ankle. He tugged on the leash to retrieve the monkey, creating a tug of war between them. As the man pulled harder, Jack was dragged to the front of the crowd with the monkey still in his coat. While everyone laughed, the trainer, who was visibly angry, flashed a phony grin, his mustache falling off completely.

"Let's hear it for Smiley!" The trainer bellowed. "That's a trick we used in the deep dark jungles at the 'ends' of the Earth! Smiley snuck up on savage beasts, tied a rope around their waists, and then I reeled them in for capture!"

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The trainer poured the contents of the coin-filled tin cup into his pocket.

“Say goodbye to everyone, Smiley.”

The trainer pushed the monkey into a canvas bag, and they walked toward a small wagon with a tin roof. It was lined with metal bars on both sides so the monkey was on display for the public to see. The trainer entered the back of the wagon and slammed the door behind him.

“Jack, we must go,” Grandfather said, taking Jack by the hand and whisking him toward the car.

“Grandfather, I feel badly for Smiley.” Jack said. “What a sad life!”

“My boy, it is sad indeed, but he seems like a smart monkey. I’ll bet that someday he will follow his heart and do everything he can to live better.”

The monkey watched from his cage as Jack and Sir Jonathan walked toward the dirt parking lot. Then, he reached into his little red coat and pulled out the tin sheriff badge Jack had won; he stole it while hiding in Jack’s coat during the performance. He turned the badge over and bent the pin forward. The steel lock on the cage wasn’t very secure. After all, the trainer never imagined Smiley to be so clever. He pushed the pin into the lock and turned it. The lock clicked and opened. He removed the lock and the door swung open. Smiley then pinned the sheriff badge on the outside of his jacket and dashed out the door. He was outdoors and free where every monkey should be.





CHAPTER

9

Jack and his grandfather were quiet on the way back to the estate. ‘This was the greatest day ever, but also the worst,’ Jack thought while thinking about the monkey. ‘Maybe I can rescue him.’ Jack felt anger towards the trainer. ‘No one has the right to treat anyone that way, not even an animal.’ Grandfather pulled the car into the barn. They both stretched as they stepped out of the car, and Jack followed his grandfather back to the mansion.

“Grandfather, we forgot to leave our helmets in the trunk of the car,” Jack reminded Grandfather.

Grandfather chuckled. “It has indeed been a long day, Jack.”

“I’ll put them away and meet you inside,” said Jack.

It was dark, and Jack thought walking around the estate at night was spooky. The barn door creaked when Jack pulled it open and stepped toward the rear of the car. He swallowed hard as he recalled seeing the skulls and bones in the trunk earlier that day — and the half-eaten mouse. Shadows from moonlit trees swaying in the breeze moved slowly by the windows of the barn. The trunk was still unlatched as it had been that morning. He would just toss the helmets and goggles in the trunk so he wouldn’t risk touching the carnage on the floor.

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As Jack moved closer, the trunk flew open! A large beast jumped out baring its teeth and SCREEECHED! The vicious animal locked its paws around Jack's neck, knocking him on his back. Jack clutched the animal and was able to pry it from his throat and throw it up in the air. The animal landed squarely on Jack's chest — feet first. Eyes closed; Jack felt heavy breathing just inches from his face. Then something very strange happened. Jack felt the animal pull on his ears and turn them inward.

“Smiley!!!” Jack yelled happily.

The monkey grinned at Jack and reached his arms around his neck, clinging tight.

“How did you escape?” Jack asked with surprise.

Jack noticed the sheriff badge pinned to Smiley's little coat. He searched his own coat pockets and did not find the badge he won at the carnival. ‘Hmmm ... ,’ Jack thought. ‘He must have stolen it from me.’

“No matter, climb into my coat and hide. I have to say goodnight to Grandfather.”

Grandfather was drinking a cup of tea with the ever-present Morpheus at his feet before retiring for the evening.

“Grandfather, I have never had so much fun,” Jack positioned himself in such a way that the monkey wouldn't have a chance to poke his head out of his coat. “My days just seem to be getting better and better.”

“Nor have I, my boy, there will be plenty more days like this one ahead. Get yourself a snack, Jack, before going to bed.”

His grandfather watched from behind as Jack turned to scan the array of food to choose from. A long furry tail hung down from Jack's behind, twitching back and forth. Grandfather cleared his throat again and again, and Morpheus let out a yowl with his lone eye bulging larger than ever.

“Are you okay, Grandfather?” Jack said, turning toward him. “Did you choke on your tea?”

“No, Jack, I was thinking again what a glorious day we had together. Now run along and get some sleep. I'm sure tomorrow will be another eventful day.”

“Olegwasi, Grandfather.”

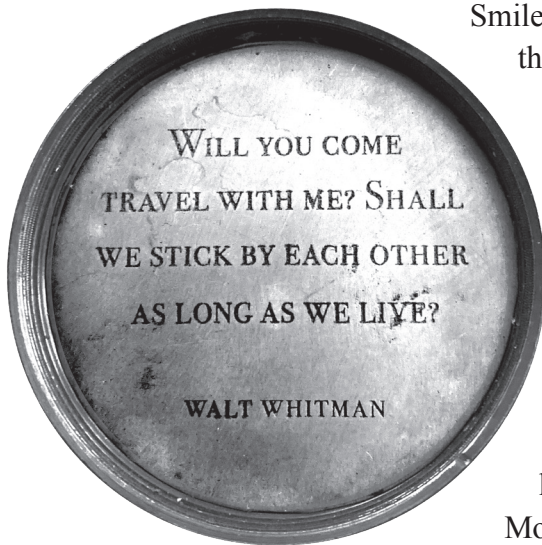
“Olegwasi, my boy. Dream well” Grandfather said with a wink and a smile.

As Jack burst out the back door, Smiley jumped out of his coat and ran ahead to the tree house. He climbed the

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ladder with the speed and dexterity of any monkey, and Jack followed with his flashlight. As Jack entered the tree house, Smiley was submerged in the pile of clothes and relics Jack had retrieved from Grandfather's attic. He was throwing them everywhere, and in an instant, he ran out the door with an arm full of Jack's belongings and climbed the mighty Oak tree that cradled the boat, vanishing into the darkness.

Exhausted from his day at the carnival with Grandfather and his reunion with Smiley, Jack climbed into his hammock and slept soundly through the night, only to awake at the crack of dawn to a CRASH! When he was able to focus his eyes, he saw Smiley swinging from the rafters of the treehouse, knocking almost everything onto the floor. He hopped onto the hammock below Jack's, jumping up and down and making the loud screeching noises monkeys make. 'Smiley was caged way too long at the carnival' Jack thought. 'I guess he needs time to release pent-up energy.'



Smiley once again absconded with an armful of Jack's belongings and scaled the mighty Oak tree all the way to the top. He had made his own perch, like the crow's nest of a ship. As quickly as he climbed to the top of the tree, he made his way back down to the ground. Morpheus was there standing guard at the base of the tree and let out a YOWL! Smiley taunted him — poking his sides and pulling his crooked tail — and then ran into the tall grass with the cat in pursuit, as if playing cat and mouse only in this case it was cat and monkey.

It was a beautiful summer day. Jack had climbed down the ladder to sit beneath an apple tree only steps from the Oak tree and gorged himself with the tantalizing fruit. Smiley had ascended the Oak tree again. Morpheus sat beneath it waiting for him to descend from his perch but gave up. He meandered closer to Jack but sat at a distance as cats sometimes do.

Morning dew rested delicately on the tips of the grass in the field, catching the bright sunlight. Lake Pennacook was remarkably calm. It brandished a magnificent reflection of Mount Olegwasi, underscoring its immensity. Jack wondered what surprises he might encounter today. It occurred to him that, while he was hesitant to tell Grandfather about his adventures, Grandfather also seemed tentative about sharing stories of his own travels.

He examined the compass Sierra gave him more closely. A compass, which must be held flat in the palm of your hand, has one moving part — a magnetic needle pointing north due to the Earth's magnetic pull. Jack thought his felt heavy for such a simple tool. Cradled in dark wood and then wrapped in copper wires that simulated a wave-like design, it had a brass cover on the back. Jack suddenly noticed that there was a notch to the brass cover. With his jackknife, he nudged it open, and a tiny drawing fell out; it was a child's drawing of a young boy and girl holding hands. Jack read the words engraved on the inside of the rear cover: "Will you come travel with me? Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?"

'Could this be another clue?' Jack thought. He wondered who the boy and the girl were.

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“Maybe friends of Sierra,” Jack whispered.

The inside of the compass looked like the working mechanisms of a watch, just as Jack had suspected. There were several moving sprockets and gears and a large spiral spring. Curious about how the compass worked, he touched the moving parts gently, but the spring and gears popped into the air. Morpheus lunged at the flying parts and pounced on the spring as if pinning a bird on the ground.

“NO MORPHEUS!” Jack yelled, swatting the cat while reaching to catch parts with his other hand.

Morpheus lunged back at Jack with his lone bulging eye extending further into a frightening stare. He growled and pressed his seven-clawed double paw into Jack’s thigh ever so slowly, piercing his pant leg like fishhooks and then his skin. It was ever so painful, but Jack froze. He felt numbness travel up his leg to his other extremities. His shoulders slumped like he was paralyzed, and his vision blurred. He felt pressure in his temples and a pulsating beat from his heart thumping in his ears. Confusion overwhelmed him, and he let out a long yawn.



Just as quickly Jack regained his strength and clarity, Morpheus snarled again, still glaring at him without blinking. The cat’s claws retracted slowly from his thigh, leaving seven droplets of blood seeping through the fabric of his pant leg before he leapt into the tall grass and vanished. Cats by nature tend to favor one person over another. ‘Clearly Grandfather is Morpheus’s closest companion, not me,’ thought Jack. Jack did think of Morpheus as just a mean and old vicious cat, but he couldn’t help but wonder whether he was using terror to try to communicate a message to him. ‘Whatever it is, it can’t be good.’

Jack searched for all the parts to the compass and placed them on a flat stone. They were like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. He studied them while moving them into various configurations hoping to figure out how he could put the compass back together. Finally, he carefully and successfully layered the parts back in place and tightened the spring.

Jack placed the drawing back inside the rear brass cover and snapped it shut. Tired and hungry, he took another bite of his apple and then rolled onto his stomach to take in a bug’s eye view of the world. A ladybug had climbed onto a small twig and was struggling through a droplet of dew. Jack gently touched the insect, encouraging it to latch onto his finger, but the ladybug spread its wings and flew away. Jack yawned again, and then again and again. Suddenly the ground began to rumble and quiver. It felt like an earthquake, shaking some of the apples right off the tree. The compass hummed and spun, although counterclockwise. Then, the ground began to sink.

“What is happening?! Grandfather! Mr. Noseworthy! Help me!”

He sank lower and lower into a sinkhole that quickly opened into a large crater, the ground collapsing beneath him. As the Earth opened, he fell, surrounded by rocks and dirt. He hit the ground with a thud and a jolt as rocks

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and dirt continued to pile on top of him. Disoriented, Jack didn't know which way was up or down. He dug frantically until he finally poked his head out of the rubble. He looked at his map to identify his location, but there was no amber glow! And his compass was stuck!

"Who's there?" a loud, angry voice echoed throughout the cavern.

"Here! Here!" Jack yelled back.

A man appeared through the dust holding a torch with a flame and a pickax. A thin elderly man, he was wearing farmer jeans and a miner's hat with a light that shone directly in Jack's eyes.

"This is my goldmine! It is clearly marked so, and you have no business here! Who are you and how did you get here!?" the man yelled angrily in an excruciatingly loud tone.

"I fell through a hole, sir."

Jack looked up and noticed that the hole he had fallen through had closed.

"I don't see any hole, boy. You came to steal my gold! Is that true?"

Jack, puzzled, shook his head "no".

"A tunnel leading to the entrance of the mine has caved in! We'll never be able to escape through an imaginary hole, boy, so we'll do it my way!" the miner yelled even louder, if possible. "Follow me!"

Jack followed the somewhat feeble-looking old man through a maze of tunnels supported by large wooden timbers, side-stepping the miner's sluice, a wooden step-down structure with a steady stream of crystal-clear spring water with finite shimmering specs of gold. "Fool's gold, boy — worthless and good for nothing!" he said as if channeling Aunt Melba in her harsh staccato tone.

"Here it is. A pile of rubble. I've blasted it six times. I figure one more will do it."

Though a bit meager, the miner was determined. He dropped a wooden box at Jack's feet with the letters TNT painted on the side.

"Dynamite," Jack whispered.

The miner grabbed a few sticks of dynamite and buried them at the base of the rubble that was blocking the entrance to the mine. Before carefully clipping the copper electrical wires to the sticks, the miner rolled several yards of the copper wire off a large spool down to an adjoining mine shaft where they would be out of

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harm's way. After snipping them, he attached the positive and negative wires to a wooden detonator box with a T-shaped handle affixed to the top.

"Get back here, boy!" the miner exclaimed, still boisterous.

Jack was beginning to understand that the miner was hard of hearing.

"Cover your ears!"

The miner then plunged the handle hard causing the machine to send an electrical current through the wires to ignite the sticks of dynamite. BOOOM! A plume of dust and wind blasted through the shafts. They moved toward the rubble when the dust settled, and sunlight burst through the newly pummeled opening.

"By golly, we did it! Now you get going and leave my gold alone. And don't tell anyone where I am!"

"Thank you, sir, I won't tell anyone about your gold."

"I know it's COLD, boy! It's winter!" The miner misheard Jack.

Jack wondered whether he was hard of hearing because he was old or because of all the explosions over the course of his time as a miner.

"Sir, I said I won't tell anyone about your gold."

"Did you just say I'm old?" The miner asked, visibly annoyed. "I know I'm OLD boy, I don't need you to point that out to me! Where are your manners?"

Jack said "thank you" again, but the miner didn't hear him.

"He's deaf as a doorknob," Jack murmured. "At least that's what Aunt Melba would say."

Jack ran out the entrance of the mine as fast as he could. His map still wasn't revealing his location and his compass was still stuck. He stood on a snow-covered hillside, and then trudged downward. He slipped a few times but regained his balance. It was slow going, and he was getting cold. Meanwhile, the snow continued to get deeper.

Jack's compass hummed and spun backward again. He heard another BOOM over the hillside from the mine, and then a roaring wave of snow tumbled toward him.

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“AN AVALANCHE!”

Thinking quickly, Jack plowed through the snow to a nearby Pine tree and climbed it so the avalanche rushed beneath his feet. The mountainous snow was thundering down the hillside, burying anything and everything in its path. It hit the base of the pine tree bending it downward, flinging Jack onto the top of the wave of snow as if he was surfing toward the valley below. But he couldn't stand for long. He tumbled and bumped up and down atop the snow while another layer rose above and consumed him.

Still tumbling and also holding his breath, he scraped his face on what felt like pebbles and sand. He now felt more like he was in water than snow. The turbulence threw Jack upward, landing him on his back atop a heap of round boulders so that he was looking at the clouds drifting across the purest of blue sky. He moaned and gasped for air, overwhelmingly confused. He felt conflicted — unable to make sense of any of the experiences and predicaments that unfolded while he was staying with his grandfather.

Despite being banged up, scratched, and bruised, the throbbing burn where Morpheus had pierced his claws into Jack's thigh was the most excruciating. Once again Jack felt numbness in his extremities with a pulsating thump in his ears. 'Morpheus,' he thought. Jack now had a succinct intuition — an innate feeling — that the cat was somehow responsible for this journey. 'But how and why?' Jack wondered. Jack felt like he was in a lucid dream, or one in which he was aware that he was dreaming and had the ability to control it. It was a dream within a dream, of sorts, but he did not feel like he, himself, was the manipulator.

Jack's mind wandered. He missed the company of Grandfather and his treehouse. He envisioned himself at his new home in Kasko, standing on a far-reaching ledge at the highest peak of Mount Olegwasi. When he was able to stand, he raised his arms as if spreading wings and gazed at the world below. Unexpectedly, his body levitated above the ledge ever so slowly, his boots dangling inches above the mica-flecked granite stone. Kicking his feet like a swimmer, he drifted effortlessly away from solid ground and hovered high above the glacier-formed mountainside of rough terrain and cascading streams.

Jack tucked and rolled into a diving position and descended head-first toward Lake Penacook below. His speed accelerated and he began tumbling through the air out of control. Feeling fear and helplessness, he stretched his arms wide and then soared through the sky, escaping certain death if he collided with what would be the hard surface of the lake below.

Suddenly, Jack glided to a halt and floated stationary amid a swarm of scarlet red dragonflies. Fluttering around him, the dragonflies began to grow. 'Or am I shrinking?' Jack asked himself. 'No, the dragonflies are growing.' One of the insect's colors transformed from red to violet, and he grasped onto its back. He straddled the dragonfly — his boots hanging on either side — and clutched the shoulders of its wings. Right before his eyes, the surface of the insect's back appeared to melt in a swirling motion and then transform into a mixture of iridescent colors. A center sphere formed, and the color turned black as coal.

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Jack gasped! It was the lone eye of Morpheus the cat! The pupil continued to expand, even larger than Jack. He peered at his own reflection on its shiny surface and gently touched it with the tip of his finger; with a centrifugal force, the surface created circular ripples from the center to the circumference of the large eye. Suddenly, gravity pulled Jack deep into the pupil. It was as if he was falling into a black hole.

Disturbing shrills and muffled screams echoed continuously. The darkness turned to light when thousands of fireflies swarmed and lit their tail lanterns simultaneously like stars. The fireflies converged to create a comet-like ball of fire before emitting a blinding burst of white light.

Water rose above Jack's toes, to his knees, to his waist, and then to his chest. It kept rising. Snap! Crack! The water froze into a solid block of ice. He was entombed up to his chin in ice, held captive to what was about to unfold. The white light subsided as the clustered swarm of fireflies morphed into a human skull taller than Jack; it consisted of steam, gasses, white ash, and red embers. Teeth chattering and eyeballs ablaze with fire, the skull moved closer to Jack until...

“NOOOOOO!” Jack startled himself with his own voice.

Jack was abruptly awakened, yet he had not been sleeping. He had once again let his imagination get the best of him while realizing he was not at home in Kasko. In fact, trouble had found Jack again. The heap of round boulders he had landed on following the avalanche was on a remote tropical island. A warm tropical breeze brushed Jack's face, and waves gently lapped the edge of the rocks where he was sitting. The island was so small he could see it in its entirety while perched on the rocks. It was more like a remote sandbar with a sand dune and a few coconut trees — no land in sight.

Jack stumbled off the rocks onto the beach. He took off his boots and rolled up his pants to wade in the warm ocean water. It was a relief since his feet were still cold from his snow expedition. He walked the beach and came across footprints, which was impossible because, as far as he could see, there was no animal life on the island. Examining the footprints closer he realized they were of a human. He followed the footprints around the island until they disappeared into the surf. Jack looked to the horizon. ‘This is the loneliest place in the world,’ Jack thought.

Sitting on the water's edge, each wave rushed speedily toward Jack's feet and then retreated with as much vigor.

“OUCH!”



A crab emerged from the sand and pinched Jack's toe. More crabs surfaced, and he began smashing them with a stone. Dozens more crabs materialized from the sand and then hundreds surrounded him. They marched toward him like an army with their

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pincers opening and closing. Jack swatted them as they climbed up his legs. Thousands then congregated, so he quickly pulled his boots on again and ran down the beach, but there was no escaping. With every step, more and more crabs latched onto him, and with every swipe, the crabs flung into the air leaving him covered with swollen bumps on his face and hands. He dropped to the ground and rolled around thrashing his arms and legs frantically to rid himself of the pesky crabs.

The crabs that were relentlessly scratching Jack's skin suddenly felt creepy crawly. He brushed his face and then looked at his hand. He was covered in spiders! Large and small! They hovered around his eyes, nostrils, and ears, and buried themselves in his hair. As he felt their tiny legs crawl up his sleeves and pant legs, he ran to the water and flopped face-first. He swam down well below the waterline. While submerged, the spiders released their grip and just floated to the surface.

Jack pushed off the mucky bottom through the yellowish brown murky water to the top and swam away from the floating mass of spiders to the edge of the swamp. He was in disbelief.

"A Swamp?! What is happening?!"

Out of breath, he peered through his telescope, looked at his map, and then his compass.



"Nope, nope, and nope!" Jack said, shaking his head. "Nothing is working. I'm lost and will probably never get home!"

Jack crawled to a rotting log to sit on. He took off his boots and poured water and pungent smelling muck out of them while plucking another spider from out of his ear. The water was murky and brown but walking through it was the only way to go, even if he couldn't see the bottom and what lurked below. His imagination ran wild in yet more unfamiliar surroundings. What if he was eaten by a bale of alligator snapping turtles? Or what if a fry of giant eels with long razor-sharp teeth ate him, or a mischief of hungry river rats? Jack's thoughts continued to whirl. 'Maybe a murder of crows would finish him off.'

Jack tip-toed, sinking into the muck with each step, wondering how he could move more quickly should he need to escape. He couldn't move any faster, but he entertained the thought to feel better and persevere. He trudged on, navigating through the water. With the telescope and compass in their places, the map in his knapsack, and his boots under one arm, he used a long stick to test the depth of the water with every step. Looking for solid ground, he came upon a mound that sprouted a dense mass of reeds, so he climbed on top. Jack pulled his boots back on and maneuvered through the reeds, which were razor sharp and seemingly infinite until he finally reached open marsh. It was still tough walking on the damp ground.

Suddenly — **Grrrrr! Grrrrrrrrr!** A deep, frightening growl startled Jack! Coming from nearby, hidden in the reeds, the growl was followed by heavy panting. Jack walked backward in what he thought to be the direction away from whatever was lurking. A young but full-grown tiger showed itself! Jack swallowed hard and

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continued walking backward. The tiger circled Jack with short growls and moans showing his teeth; he drooled as if he hadn't had a meal in days. Jack picked up his long stick from the ground and waved it high.

“NO! NO!” he yelled.

The tiger continued to circle Jack while keeping its distance. He stopped when Jack stopped.

“Hello, Jack,” Jack heard in a low register tone. He froze, looking around as if the voice was coming from somewhere else, but it wasn't. It was the tiger.

“So, we finally meet,” the tiger said, putting emphasis on the letter “t”, which made Jack wonder if he was referring to dinner meat rather than offering a pleasant greeting. The tiger followed with a deep-throated purr while licking his teeth and lapping the drool dangling from his lips. He approached Jack and sniffed his face, then his hands, and finally the blood on his pant leg where Morpheus the cat had punctured his skin with his double paw hooks.

“You were sent to me, and you wonder why. Don't worry, Jack, I'm not going to eat you,” the tiger said before a deep throated purr.

Unexpectedly, the tiger swiped his claws at Jack's arm, shredding his shirt and slicing his skin, leaving a gash. Then he ROARED! “Or perhaps I will eat you,” he said, sniffing at the blood on Jack's newly opened wound.

“Are you afraid, Jack? Is this real? Or are you letting your imagination get the best of you, once again?” Jack nervously nodded yes, and then no, and then yes.

“I can read all your thoughts, Jack. I can help you or I can wreak havoc in your life. I'm reading all your thoughts at this very moment. I can communicate through images. Isn't that nice?” Jack nodded yes, then no again. The tiger continued to circle Jack, channeling his thoughts. Jack was so frightened that he stared straight ahead so as not to make eye contact.



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“Ah! You’ve figured it out! You’re a smart young man, Jack. You are correct, I am the incarnation of Morpheus, the god of dreams. Your grandfather told you I come in many different forms, even cats,” extenuating the sound of an elongated letter “s”. “At your grandfather’s estate, I am a mere feral coon cat and we’re unable to speak to one another there. I thought we could use some quality time together.”

Jack took two steps back, hands trembling and his knees shaking. The tiger continued to circle Jack as if sizing him up for a meal.

“At this very moment I am sending you messages to assist you in conquering your fears. You can’t touch fear but you can certainly feel it, and sometimes it hurts terribly. It’s been said many times, Jack, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

The tiger sat uncomfortably close in front of Jack. He could no longer avoid making eye contact with the beast. The tiger raised his massive paw slowly, then pressed it on Jack’s chest.

“Your heart is thumping so hard, Jack. I could almost clutch it with my claws. The ultimate sign of fear!” the tiger said in a sinister growl, pushing him back a step, as if taunting him.

“We’re going to play a little game, you and I,” the tiger said as he pushed Jack back another step. “You will run and I will give chase. First, I will give you some time to run away. If you outrun me, you’ll be eternally free of fear. Isn’t that delightful?” he said, still licking his teeth and catching his drool with his tongue.

“If I catch you, I’ll eat you, or maybe not. I have yet to decide,” the tiger said with his frighteningly low register, and then followed his words with a deep throated growl.

“Run Jack, RUN!” the tiger shouted, shoving Jack one last time. “I SAID RUN JACK!” and then the tiger ROARED! Jack turned his back to the tiger. He was not a fast runner, but he felt then that he was sprinting at great speed. The tiger was at his heels like a cat chasing a mouse. He swung its paws at Jack and knocked him off balance, though he was able to steady himself and continued to run.

The tiger let out another roar, and swiped his paw across Jack’s back again. His claws tore his knapsack and the back of his pants. He continued to scurry as the tiger quickly caught up to him and lunged through the air. He pounced on him and pinned him down, his face in the mud. Out of breath, Jack began to give up.

Suddenly, a rotten apple bopped Jack on the side of his face. The tiger lowered his head, sniffing the rotted apple and then licking Jack’s cheek. This time, the tiger’s moan sounded more like a yowl. It was Morpheus! The pesky cat was sitting on his back with his lone bulging eye fixated on the monkey. Smiley threw more apples at Morpheus so he might scatter.

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“I’m home!” Jack yelled happily while wiping the rotten apple off his face. His arm hurt terribly, but his shirt wasn’t torn and there was no open wound where the tiger had slashed him with its claws.

This time, Jack was happy his adventure was cut short. It was a terrifying nightmare. He had always preferred daydreams to nightmares.

Smiley continued to taunt Morpheus until the cat gave chase to him through the tall grass. Jack’s latest adventure began under the apple tree and ended under the apple tree. There was no gaping hole in the ground where he had fallen into the mineshaft. Was it a dream? Jack retreated to the treehouse unaware that the ground was still shaking. He also did not notice that the ground was blanketed with apples; not even one was in the tree.





CHAPTER 10

Jack began his explorations early the next morning. His map simply labeled his destination of choice on the estate as “KWAI POND”. He decided that Smiley would make a good companion should another adventure happen. They made their way to the pond along a winding path through a mature forest of Cedar, Birch, and Pine trees. At the water’s edge, a rope dangled from a leaning Sugar Maple tree.

“A ROPE SWING!” Jack said out loud, enthusiastic but tentative.

He had never swung on a rope before, but then again, he had never confronted a warthog in Africa before this summer either, or rode an avalanche, or escaped a tiger — among other things. He clutched the rope nervously with both hands and mustered the courage to swing over the water. He was not a confident swimmer. Smiley leapt out of Jack’s knapsack and held onto the rope above him.

Jack walked backward to the top of the embankment holding the rope tightly, inhaled deeply, and made a running start before lifting his feet off the ground and securing them on the knot at the base of the rope. Then he SWUNG!

“Here we GOOOOOO!” Jack yelled. Afterall, Grandfather had encouraged him to yell with joy on the ferris wheel and to always make his voice heard.

Jack and Smiley swung past the shoreline high above the water and then back toward the bank.

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“WOOO HOOOOOO!” yelled Jack as they made their way high above the water again.

Jack forgot his giddiness to nervously look at the water below when the rope stopped swinging. To his surprise once again, he was no longer holding onto a rope swing at Grandfather’s estate but rather to one of several vines hanging from a far-reaching limb of a Kapok tree typical of a tropical forest. He and Smiley hung far above a waterfall that cascaded over a cliff and dropped into a gorge.

Jack was astounded to realize he didn’t have to peer through his telescope to manifest an adventure. He simply needed to identify a desired area on his grandfather’s estate for a new experience to unfold.



Clinging onto the vine with one hand while his feet secured his weight, Jack reached into his coat for his world map. The amber glow on the map pinpointed his location: The Amazon! Jack peered through his telescope at the gorge below. The waterfall flowed through a maze of large boulders and into a river. Smiley leaped from vine to vine. This was his world.

Even if he were able to climb up the vine, Jack knew he would never be able to shimmy across the tree limb to the trunk back down to solid ground. He heard a humming noise coming from his chest.

His compass — still snapped in his harness — was vibrating. The needle spun wildly before it slowly came to a stop and pointed down.

“I’m doomed!” Jack’s voice echoed throughout the gorge and over the roar of the falls.

‘There’s no way out of this situation except to let go of the vine and fall into the basin below.’ Jack thought with trepidation. He wondered if he had the courage to do such a thing. ‘Perhaps I’ll fall into the basin below and be swept over the waterfalls only to be eaten by crocodiles and piranhas.’ His legs went weak, he began to sweat, and he felt that all too familiar pounding in his chest.

Jack took a deep breath. Watching the monkey, he concluded that his only solution was to navigate his way to the longest vine that touched the water below. He would need to swing from vine to vine, and he did. Just feet above the current of the deafening falls, he waited patiently until a log toppled over the waterfall and passed directly below them. He let go of the vine and landed, straddling a log as if riding a whale. The log maneuvered through boulders before cascading over a small waterfall into the river below. Jack rode the log for quite some time until the current slowed. The water became shallow, and Jack waded ashore. He laid down — on his back on the bank, looking above — to catch his breath.

The tree canopies were so dense that the blue sky was barely visible. Only small and scarce breaks in the coverage allowed sunlight to illuminate the dark jungle floor. Rested, he walked along the riverbank and

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stumbled across a weathered wooden sign nailed to a tree stump. It read: “River of Doubt.” On top of the tree stump was a bright yellow and black tribal mask carved to look like a jaguar. The eyes glared in anger and the mouth was wide open bearing sharply carved teeth. It was a warning from an Amazon tribe. Below the mask, initials were carved into the stump — the initials: JSB! But, along with these initials were the initials KR.

“JSB! Grandfather! He must have traveled here!”

Jack entered the jungle; it was impossible not to hear the rich screeches and squawks of animals in the treetops.

He followed his compass, noticing several trees along the way with the same carved initials, until he came upon one that only had Grandfather’s initials.

“Was Grandfather traveling alone? He must have gotten lost. I will follow my grandfather’s path. He is a very smart man,” Jack whispered.

Hungry, Smiley ran ahead into the jungle. Jack stayed where he was and sketched his surroundings. The jungle was lush with plants and wildlife. Smiley returned carrying an assortment of fruit and flowers to eat. They sat together — happy while savoring every bite.

When their stomachs were full and they were well rested, they resumed their excursion. Jack’s compass continued to direct him through the jungle, and, occasionally, he passed his grandfather’s initials carved in trees. Eventually they ended up further down the river. The faint sound of a small riverboat approached them. The bow turned a corner of the river: “Putt, putt, putt”. A boy was steering the boat with a long pole that was attached to the small engine. As it neared closer, the motor stalled to a halt, and the boy beached the boat ashore.

“Are you lost?” the boy asked.

Jack thought for a moment. He and Smiley were indeed lost, though he did sense he knew where he was going.

“We are exploring,” Jack explained.

“Come aboard my boat. I’ll help you explore. My name is Percy.”

Percy reached his hand out to help Jack aboard. Smiley hopped into Jack’s knapsack.

“Jack, Jack Barrelbottom.”

Percy explained that his grandfather had traveled from Europe to the Amazon many years ago. He worked for a museum, and for years, he sent specimens of plant and animal life to be studied there.

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“My grandfather never left the Amazon; he married my grandmother, who was from an Indigenous tribe. Our family has lived in the jungle ever since.” Percy was not shy. He continued, “I was named after him. Colonel Percy Fawcett was his name.”

Jack could see that Percy was proud to be his grandfather’s namesake.

‘Colonel Percy,’ Jack thought. ‘That’s the name on my toy telescope at home. Coincidence? I don’t think so. Perhaps Percy knows of Sir Jonathan’s travels!’

Jack told Percy that he was named after his grandfather too. The two had a lot in common; Jack felt an instant bond between them.

“Where do you live?” Jack asked.

Percy pointed ahead.

“That’s our home on the island.”

The island was small, barely larger than the footprint of the house. The house was constructed of wood with a roof made of straw and large tropical leaves. There was also an adjoining boathouse. Birds flew in and out of the windowless home freely.

Percy beached the boat alongside the boathouse. “Imagine That” was painted in large letters on the stern. Jack followed Percy onto the dock and then climbed a ladder to a room above the boathouse. The room was Percy’s clubhouse. It was very much like Jack’s tree house, including two canvas hammocks hanging from posts.

“My parents are not here,” Percy said. “My mother and father are visiting my grandmother’s family tribe nearby,” Percy explained as they entered the clubhouse.

Jack scanned the room with a scrutinizing eye. There was an old black-and-white photo of two men and a boy thumbtacked to the wall. President Roosevelt was standing in the center.

“Is that your grandfather in the photo, Percy?”

They both stood while examining the photo more closely. “That’s him, on the end with fellow explorers.” Percy gasped, “Jack the boy in this photo looks just like you!”

“It must be my grandfather! I do look just like him! And he’s with your grandfather, Colonel Percy!”



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Jack rifled through dozens of photos that Percy had placed in an old photo album with black paper pages. The binding was cracked from years of being opened and closed. He found a similar photo of the one thumbtacked to the wall of the treehouse, although this photo showed Grandfather, Colonel Percy, and a young man resting their feet on what looked to be a 30-foot-long Anaconda snake. They were smiling while holding blow dart guns. Poison darts could be seen embedded in the snake's side.

Percy could see Jack's excitement. "You can have the photo if you like Jack. I have plenty." Jack tucked the photo carefully in his knapsack.



A large blue, green, and yellow Parrot sat on a perch in the clubhouse. As Jack approached the bird, Smiley reached his hand out of the knapsack and pulled on the bird's tail feathers and then poked her to taunt her. The Parrot, with its sharp bill, snapped at the monkey, letting out a terrible squawk. Smiley quickly retracted his hand back into the knapsack.

"Mercy!" Percy yelled to the Parrot. "Sometimes she bites but she doesn't mean anything by it. She's not fond of strangers."

"Mercy? That's a funny name," Jack replied.

"My mom always says, 'Oh mercy, Percy, what sort of trouble are you in now?' So, I thought it was the perfect name for her. She also seems to find trouble."

Jack and Percy really did have a lot in common. Aunt Melba always said, "Trouble has found you again." And Jack certainly knew Smiley to uncover trouble.

"Where are you from, Jack?"

Jack showed Percy his map and pointed to Kasko, Grandfather's village.

"What are you hoping to discover during your travels?" Percy was inquisitive.

"I'm not sure — just adventure, I guess." Jack shrugged his shoulders with a look of bewilderment.

"Well then," Percy exclaimed. "There's plenty of that here! Follow me."

Percy handed Jack a blowgun and feathered darts. Percy's was extra-long.

"Let's do target practice," Percy said. "Have you ever used a blowgun?"

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Jack shook his head.

The two crossed over a floating bridge constructed with vines, rope, and logs; it connected the small island to the shoreline of the jungle. The current of the shallow murky river surrounding Percy's island was slow moving and thick with weeds. Percy crossed the bridge effortlessly as Jack stepped cautiously, each log bobbing up and down. Jack was halfway across when the head of an enormous Anaconda rose above the water line and slithered onto the bridge, watching Jack with its beady black eyes. Jack froze. The snake's tail followed out of the water from behind Jack and cornered him in the middle of the bridge. Ever so slowly, its head approached Jack. Its tongue slid rapidly in and out of its mouth making a "thip, thip, thip" sound. Snakes are unique in that their sense of smell is in their tongues. It was apparent that it thought Jack smelled delicious. The snake wrapped its tail around his ankles and his legs gripping tightly. Jack was so scared that he was unable to yell to Percy. The snake's head rose just inches above Jack's head as the constrictor's grip on his legs tightened. Blood rushed to his head as the snake opened its mouth preparing to swallow him whole, head to toe.

"Poof, thud. Poof, thud!"

The snake recoiled, letting go of Jack. Percy had blown two darts into the snake's side so that it released Jack and slid back into the water.

"Awe... don't worry about her, Jack. That's Anna. She's lived here for as long as I can remember. A couple of darts in her side sends her right back into the water. We don't blow poisonous darts at her, though, because we like having her around. She keeps the Piranhas away."

Jack gulped. 'Snakes? Piranhas?' he thought as he maneuvered even more slowly and carefully across the bridge.



Percy led the way down a winding path — Jack and Smiley right behind. They weaved around enormous *Coccoloba gigantifolia* trees with leaves that reached eight feet in length! The leaves were dripping with water collected from the dense moisture in the forest. Orchids grew freely amongst the flora that blanketed the jungle floor.

As interesting as the monkeys were and as colorful as the birds were in the treetops, it was the insects and amphibians that were so prevalent on the forest floor that intrigued Jack the most. It was clear Grandfather found collecting insects and frogs from the Amazon irresistible as he displayed many in glass enclosures in the great room. 'Poisonous dart frogs,' Jack thought when recalling a display at the estate. The poison golden dart frog was missing from the display, which made the description beneath it even more frightening: "One of the most toxic animals on earth. It has enough venom to kill ten grown men." Jack shuttered at the prospect of coming across one and moved even closer to Percy following him step for step.

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Finally, they came to a rope ladder with wooden steps. Jack guessed that it reached 100 feet high, hanging from a Kapok tree. Smiley scaled the tree effortlessly and waited for Jack at the top, all the while making the sounds that monkeys make, and Percy followed. Jack climbed the rope ladder tentatively but gained confidence the higher he ascended. At the top was a wooden platform. From the platform, the tree rose another 100 feet tall. There was a maze of bridges stretching from one treetop to another covered in flowering moss that dangled several feet down. The V-shaped canopy bridges had handrails constructed of vines and a much thicker vine at its base to walk on.

When they reached the end of the series of bridges, Percy said with pride, “My father and grandfather built all the canopy walkways.” He pointed to a cliff and explained, “They constructed this last bridge several times to connect to the top of that cliff over there. Each time they finished the bridge, though, the handrails would be cut down a tribe from the other side in the middle of the night. Even after my grandfather died my father made several attempts to fix the bridge but finally gave up.”

The handrails were dangling from the thick footing vine laden with long flowering moss, which was evidence the rails had been cut many years ago.

“It’s a very mysterious part of the jungle on the other side of this bridge,” Percy continued. “I was told by a cousin in the village where my mother came from that my grandfather led a group of explorers over there looking for a secret City of Gold. Each one of them perished except my grandfather. He never talked about it, not even to my father.”

Percy gazed across the gorge to the cliff where his father had not yet crossed.

“If it’s adventure you’re looking for, Jack, let’s give it a try.”

Jack pretended not to hear Percy, but then said, “It’s impossible. Let’s go back.”

Percy put his foot on the vine to test its strength. “C’mon Jack, we’ll shimmy across! I’ll go first.”

With his knife clenched in his teeth, Percy lowered himself down, hanging from the connecting vine with his arms and legs. He began to inch his way across while cutting remnants of the rotted handrails where needed.

“This is plenty strong, Jack,” Percy yelled, his boyish but eager voice echoing throughout the gorge.

Jack watched as each section of the cut rail fluttered down the 100-foot descent to the dry riverbed below. Remnants of fallen trees had been tossed about like sticks in swift river rapids when the water rose high during the rainy season.

Percy reached the other side and yelled, “C’mon, Jack! It’s your turn!”

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Jack thought for a moment, recalling what his grandfather had said when they first met: “It is a boy’s heart and imagination that will take him on the best of life’s journeys.” Then he reflected upon how grandfather had encouraged him to be adventurous and to deviate from a map every now and again, as this is how a boy truly finds his way. With these recollections, Jack took a deep breath and nervously climbed on as Percy had — upside down, hanging from the vine with his hands and feet. Trembling, he was worried that the sweat on his palms would cause him to slip off the moss and fall. Smiley leapt in front of Jack with ease as if coaxing him to forge on, then retreated to Jack’s knapsack while wrapping his arms around his neck. Jack was not sure of himself, especially since his compass wasn’t moving; he was fretful that this was a sign he should not be crossing. But while he struggled, Grandfather’s words echoed in his head again, and he found the strength to persevere.

Jack shimmied out far enough that there was no turning back. He heard a creak from the platform behind him and the vine dropped slightly. The support post below the platform, which the vine was tied to, leaned toward him. The platform was old, and the nails were rusty.

Percy knew what was happening. “Hang on, Jack! Don’t let go!”

The support creaked again and **SNAP!** The end of the vine attached to the support detached, taking the platform with it. Jack hung on for his life, swinging downward toward the bottom of the gorge until the vine became tight and swung toward the side of the cliff, below the platform where Percy was standing.

CRASH! Jack hit the side of the cliff with incredible force. He was dazed but still hanging onto the vine to the best of his ability.

He could not let go to jump on the ledge below and he didn’t have the strength to climb up the vine. Fearful the vine would detach from the platform on Percy’s side he reached for a small limb of a single tree growing on the side of the cliff just above him. He pulled himself up on the limb while letting go of the vine which swung out of reach. With his eyes closed, he suspended himself from the limb until he could hang on no more.

Jack was dizzy, his vision blurry from the collision with the side of the cliff. When he was finally able to focus, he found himself clinging to branches high up the mighty Oak tree, growing through the floorboards of his tree house. He was just above Smiley’s perch, which was constructed of Jack’s belongings. The monkey leapt out of Jack’s knapsack onto his perch and carefully placed three feathers amongst the collection of relics he stole from the treehouse — one blue, one green, and one yellow.

“Smiley! You’re a thief!” Jack said with a hint of anger, noticing feathers he had plucked from Mercy the Parrot.

Smiley continued to unload his treasure trove of colorful and shiny keepsakes from the knapsack: polished river stones, flower heads, and two dead iridescent beetles. He had absconded a few items from Percy’s clubhouse as well. A pencil, a coin, and a handful of colorful berries from Mercy’s seed bowl.

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Along with Jack's belongings of small coins, buttons, and anything shiny, the monkey had stolen Jack's toy telescope and magnifying glass. He had also stolen the brass monkey key. Jack entertained the idea that the key might be Smiley's most prized possession. Its beauty was too much to resist for the monkey. Reflective jewels, polished brass, carved ivory... And the letter "M" at its tip conceivably stood for the word 'Monkey'. Or perhaps he cherished keys in general for their purpose. After all, unlatching the steel lock that held Smiley captive at the carnival is what allowed him freedom — freedom from the confines of a denigrating, uninspiring, solitary existence.



Jack carefully placed them in his coat and lumbered down the tree to the boat's deck. He felt a wave of panic thinking about Percy. He was left on the other side of the gorge where a dangerous Indigenous tribe lived. The mysterious part of the jungle with no way of crossing back!

"I hope he's okay. So many explorers have perished there," Jack whispered.



CHAPTER 11

Jack awoke early as the sun shined through the porthole in his tree house. He decided that it was time to tell Grandfather about his travels. But was fearful he might say they were just in his imagination.

As Jack walked into the kitchen in the mansion, he heard Sir Jonathan yelling and then a **CRACK!** And then another **CRACK!** He made his way into the great room and was astonished to see Grandfather dressed in safari clothing. He was waving his arms — a whip in one hand — and shouting at a stuffed lion as Noseworthy stood by idly rolling his eyes.

“Try as you might to eat me you, old lion! I will wrestle you to the ground with my bare hands!” Grandfather yelled, cracking his whip — now frightening Jack.

He lunged at the dusty, old, stuffed cat and wrapped his arms around its scruff. The lion and its wooden stand toppled on top of Grandfather.

“Grandfather! Grandfather!” Jack yelled.

It took a moment, but Grandfather got back on his feet. He stared blankly, but his expression quickly turned to one of confusion and then embarrassment as he reacquainted himself with his whereabouts in the great room. He realized where he was, but for a moment, he looked at Jack like he didn’t know him. He cleared his throat, and then cleared it again, and then one more time.

Grandfather simply brushed off his clothes and then murmured, “I’m so clumsy.”

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“Good morning, Grandfather, how did you sleep?” Jack asked in a nervous but exaggerated, upbeat tone.

It startled Sir Jonathan. Still perplexed, he dropped the whip and then noticed Daisy the bear had also tumbled over with stuffing escaping from her behind. He quickly composed himself and smiled at Jack.

“I was going to ask you the same question, Jack,” he responded as if his tussle with the stuffed lion never happened. “I’m sure the fresh air served you well! I never saw you yesterday! What sort of fun found you?”

Jack breathed a sigh of relief since his grandfather seemed to be himself again.

He thought for a moment, and then answered, still with an overly enthusiastic tone, “We — I mean I — found a rope swing by the pond in the back. It was great fun!”

“Jack,” Grandfather said, still getting his wits about him and brushing off his clothes. “By the tone of your voice it sounds like you have something you want to share with me.”

Jack’s hands began to tremble and sweat. He was very nervous about what he was about to tell his grandfather and equally worried about his grandfather’s behavior, though he understood he was a very old man.

Jack cleared his throat. “Grandfather, I do have something to tell you.”

Morpheus the cat’s crooked tail twitched under the table. He leapt on top of it and stared at Jack with his one bulging eye and a look of skepticism. Jack’s heart was pounding. Telling the truth about things is often not easy, especially when you feel you have been deceptive or not completely truthful regarding circumstances.

“Yes, my boy, what is it?”

Jack decided to start by asking his grandfather a question instead. “You have been on many explorations around the world, right? What was your most harrowing and dangerous adventure?”

Grandfather thought for a moment.

“I’ve been on many dangerous explorations, but I would have to say one trip in particular was the most frightening.” Grandfather sat at the table and stared off in the distance, pondering further. Then he turned to Jack — with a glimmer of newfound trust in his eyes and an adoring smile — and continued. “Yes, I was just a boy — about your age. I traveled with another young man and his father. Kermit was his name, and he was my dear, dear friend who piqued my interest in world adventures.”

Grandfather took a deep breath. “We were exploring the Amazon jungle, Kermit and I. We were part of an expedition searching for the mythical river created by the deity Oceanus; it surrounded the world. We had

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hoped finding where the river began would lead to the discovery of the City of Gold. Both were myths I'm afraid to say. We separated for just a moment and got lost. I shouted out to Kermit but my yells were drowned out by the sounds of the jungle. I was alone and disoriented in the jungle for days, fearing I would never make it out alive. Fortunately, an explorer from another expedition found me. He was alone, too, and in a terrible state. His clothes were torn, and he had cuts across his face and a large gash across his chest. He didn't tell me about his skirmish, but it was obvious to me that he had faced a dangerous indigenous tribe in the jungle. The explorer's name was Colonel Percy Fawcett."

Jack could barely contain his excitement. Grandfather confirmed what he gathered from the photo in Percy's boathouse.

"Colonel Percy led me to a nearby village where I was reunited with the rest of the explorers whom we had begun our journey." Grandfather tapped his fingers on the table and thought some more, as if it was difficult for him to recall the story. "Colonel Percy and I would cross paths again — years later, on a different expedition in the Amazon. It is believed that, soon after, he died along with his fellow explorers while searching for the Mythical River and City of Gold. A relentless search ensued, but, sadly, he was never found. Colonel Percy was a good man."

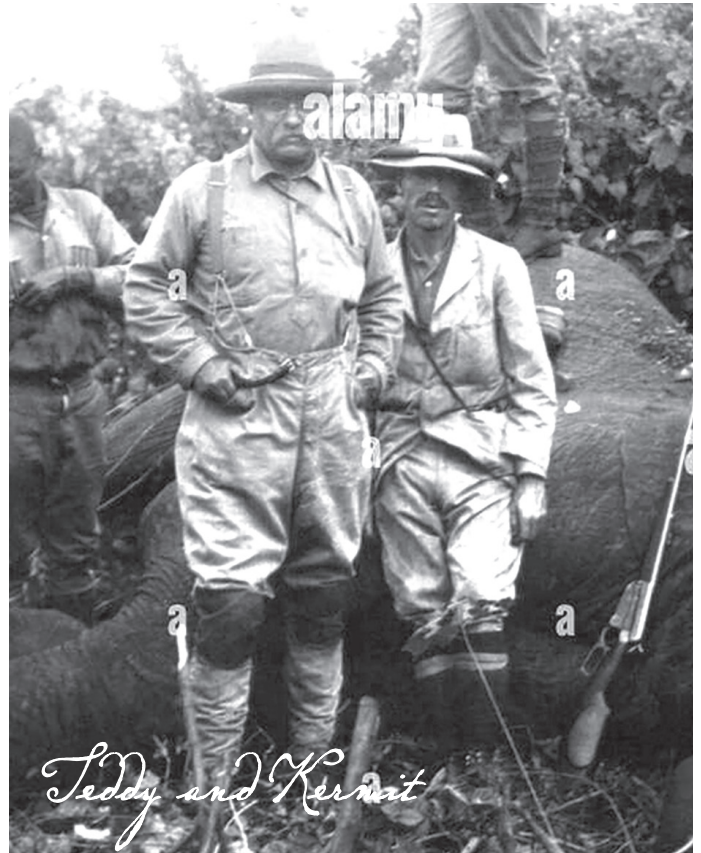
Jack was dumbfounded. He knew Colonel Percy hadn't died. It was Colonel Percy's fellow explorers who perished searching for the lost City of Gold. He escaped! But he couldn't tell Grandfather, not yet.

"My friend Kermit and his father had already reached the village where our group of explorers had congregated. His father was ill from the start of the excursion, and Kermit championed numerous heroic feats making certain his father persevered in the jungle."

Grandfather breathed deeply again, exhaling slowly before finishing his story.

"It was a treacherous trip down the River of Doubt in the Amazon. Kermit's last name was Roosevelt, and his father was, of course, Teddy."

Jack recalled the initials carved in the trees when he traveled through the jungle: JSB and KR. 'KR must stand



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for Kermit Roosevelt,’ Jack thought, excited yet overwhelmed by what Grandfather was revealing. He searched in his knapsack for the photo Percy had given him.

“Grandfather, I — um — well — I came across this photo. Is that Colonel Percy and you with the Anaconda snake?”

Grandfather took the photograph in his hand, which trembled with age, and scrutinized it closely. Sir Jonathan smiled, the photo had taken him back to an adventurous time in his life with friends — fond memories.

“Why yes, it is, Jack. Look behind you — on the wall is a similar photo. That’s me as a young boy with my friend, Kermit, Teddy, and yes, Colonel Percy on the end.”

The former president did look ill just as Grandfather had said. ‘Perhaps this is my opportunity to tell Grandfather about my own adventures.’ Jack thought.

Grandfather began clearing his throat repeatedly, as he tended to do when he was nervous or confused. Jack noticed this to be a trait they had in common. Grandfather looked concerned that he had said too much. Jack started to speak but was quickly interrupted.

“That was long ago, Jack. At my age, my mind sometimes wanders, and I don’t recall stories properly. Looking back, my adventures might sound untrue to most. But remember, Jack, it doesn’t matter what other people believe. I believed in myself, my boy; that’s what matters most.”

Jack inferred that it was difficult for Grandfather to discuss his explorations. He looked uncomfortable, so Jack decided it was not the right time to tell him about his own adventures.

“Now run along, young man. The world is waiting for you.”

Jack dashed back to the tree house. He was disappointed he had not had the opportunity to tell Grandfather about his own adventure with Percy in the Amazon. He lay down on his hammock and sighed. He felt more confused than ever while glancing toward the corner of the tree house at the pile of clothing and relics he had found in Grandfather’s attic. Neatly tucking Percy’s photo in his sketchbook with the photo Kalulu had given him of Batutta, Jack felt a sense of hopelessness.

Suddenly, though, Jack’s melancholy turned into surprise and then inquisitiveness. His compass hummed and spun. He followed the direction of the compass, and it led him through a field, along a stream, and into the forest. He walked toward monumental sized split rocks stacked high upon one another. It was an entrance to a cave. His compass was spinning wildly.

Just inside the cave was a rusted lantern on the rocky floor, so he lit it. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like

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monstrous sharp teeth. He wondered if bears lived there. ‘Certainly, I’ll run into bats,’ he thought. He made sure his helmet was on tight as he recalled the common wife’s tale that bats get tangled in your hair. Taking a deep breath, he drew on his newfound courage and forged on. Darkness, wild animals, heights, swimming — none of these would scare Jack now. He had already crawled into a dark and scary tunnel, meeting his friend, Kalulu at the end. Marching forward, he maneuvered through a labyrinth of holes and passageways that surrounded interesting rock formations while the compass kept him on course. Water dripped from the ceiling and trickled down the walls as he navigated puddles and occasional subterranean springs.

The lantern began to dim. When Jack shook it, the flame wafted into its original glow as he approached the end of the cave and stood before a large crack that created an opening. His compass hummed and spun again while his telescope retracted into its coin shape and fell to the ground. Perplexed, he picked it up and snapped it into the coin satchel on his harness above the holster.

Jack squeezed through the crack sideways. It was a tight fit, but he inhaled, sucking in his gut, and continued toward a dim light ahead.

“This must be the other end of the cave,” Jack whispered.

Once through the opening he found himself in a large ancient temple lit by candles. Immense and intricately carved sandstone blocks were stacked into impressive columns. Even the floor and ceilings had complex patterns.

“Jaaack, Jaaaaaack,” Jack heard in just a whisper.

He followed the soft voice.

“Jaaaaaack.”

He navigated his way through a maze of columns toward the whisper, which continued.

Suddenly, Jack stumbled upon a gold statue of the most hideous and scary creature he had ever seen. He was startled as he gawked at this larger-than-life statue of a man in a sitting position surrounded by gold treasures, precious stones, ancient relics, and symbolic statues. Four arms thrashed while the statue, with a look of rage, spewed fire ferociously. Soon the bursts of fire stopped, and the arms halted. Jack was mostly troubled by the empty space for the statue’s larger third eye on its forehead surrounded by tiny human skulls.

“It’s my imagination again,” Jack whispered in a frightened yet discouraged tone. “It’s only a statue after all.”

The left eye had a coin identical to his placed in its socket. Upon further scrutiny, Jack realized that his coin would fit perfectly into the other.



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“Jaaack, Jaaaaaack.”

Jack stood before the statue. The voice came from behind along with a shadow. The whisper grew louder, echoing through the passageways of the temple as the shadow crept closer. He didn’t dare turn around. After all his expeditions, Jack was still not accustomed to the way his heart pounded in this very moment.

“Jaaack.”

The voice was now directly to his back. Draped in the shadow, Jack clenched his fists and teeth. In a single motion, he spun around with his arms swinging to battle the origin of the unidentified voice. He turned so erratically that he fell on his back with his legs pointing straight up.

“I’m so clumsy,” he whispered nervously.

The dimly lit enigma loomed over him with its arms reaching toward Jack. He froze.

“Jack! Jack! Are you okay? It’s me, Sierra!”

Jack was stunned, as he stood up quickly.

“Sierra!” he shouted.

Embarrassed, he looked at the ground and then his shoe pretending something had tripped him.

Sierra hugged Jack tightly, and he was momentarily speechless.

“How did you get here, Sierra?”

She reached into her robe for her map. Meanwhile, Jack noticed that she was dressed just like him beneath her robe. She wore a leather cross-shaped harness with a compass and holster for a telescope and a coin satchel just like he wore. Only her harness was bejeweled with colorful stones where Jack’s harness had brass snaps.

“Do you have a map like this, Jack?”

He reached into his knapsack and unrolled his map. The maps were very similar but hers had different handwriting in a different language. Each had an amber glow exactly where they were standing.

“We’re in Tibet, Sierra!” Jack said, bewildered. “How are we here?”



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“I have traveled to far-off places in the world just as you have. I can travel from this temple directly to the cavern in my village where we last saw each other. I have been here twice before,” she said. “I felt in my heart I would meet you here this time.

“This is a statue of Mahakala,” Sierra continued. “He is viewed as a supreme but fierce being. He looks frightening but his powers are for the good of humanity, for those who have fallen victim to lack of confidence, inner strength, with an inability to change and grow. He’ll help you find the most positive place of happiness, and enable you to flourish in life’s journey in this world.

He is considered the god of time. My coin represents the present, yours represents the past, and the third larger coin on his forehead, which is missing, is the future.

Sierra paused, “Mahakala is also the adversary of evil. He will crush those who approach him with evil thoughts and misdeeds. He comes to life with his fury, it is real, and not that person’s imagination.”

One of his many powers temporarily takes away our imagination and confusion, enabling us to think clearly and with focus. This temple will help us find answers to our questions. Did you see him breathing fire and his 4 arms moving?”

Jack, listening intently, nodded yes.

“It was your imagination,” Sierra explained. “Just in this short period of time, our imaginations have waned, which is why his movement ceased. I find if I stay at the temple for too long, I am unable to travel for a period of time.

Sierra removed the gold coin in the left eye of the statue and said, “This is my coin, Jack; when I secure it in the left eye socket, it summons the compass I gave you. You can do the same with your coin to summon me.”

Sierra’s compass was identical to the one she had given Jack.

“Why are we here, Sierra?” Jack asked, still puzzled.

“I’m not sure, Jack. Sometimes my intuition tells me I’m searching for something or someone. Other times I feel I might discover something. Most of the time, though, I think I’m dreaming. In fact, I wonder if what’s happening right now is real, though it must be since Mahakala has taken our imaginations away and you are still here. Though we always have physical evidence when we return home. Our travels are not dreams, Jack.

“I’m curious in the same way, Sierra,” Jack said. “I’m still unsure if this temple is real, or this scary statue, or even you. I have been finding clues to something but I’m not sure what purpose they hold for my travels.” Jack wasn’t comfortable telling Sierra he was searching for clues to find his father, especially since he had only found clues to where his grandfather had traveled many years ago. His father has been missing for six years. He knew that was not in his imagination. Some might even perceive his search for his father as hopeless.

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The two friends talked for quite some time and discovered they had a lot in common. She was a year older than Jack and didn't have any brothers or sisters. She felt different from the other children in her village, and she was very close to her grandmother like Jack was to his grandfather.

"Where did you find your telescope?" Jack asked.

"I was riding my camel. My beautiful gold coin snapped into the center of her leather harness; I had not noticed it before. The leather straps we are both wearing are camel harnesses. I unsnapped the coin from its leather compartment and held it in both hands while riding my camel and I fell off. Thankfully, I landed in soft sand. My coin turned into the telescope, though, and when I peered through it, I found myself in a far-off land."

Jack thought about his first journey — falling out of the tree house and then finding himself in the crow's nest of a ship off the coast of Africa.

"Where did you go?" Jack asked.

"To a desert island," Sierra said with an uncertain expression on her face.

"I was on that desert island too, Sierra. I came across footprints in the sand along the shoreline, but I was the only person there. They led into the water with no sign of return."

"That was me," Sierra said with surprise. "I walked into the surf to cool off and was swept away by a rogue wave. An undertow pulled me far offshore. Eventually I ended up in my cavern."

"I want to give you this, Jack. Perhaps it's a clue," said Sierra as she handed him a rectangular leather satchel with two straps and buckles to hold it shut. The arm strap had broken off of the satchel, which was old, well worn, and weathered. Jack opened the satchel and found a tin box closed tightly. Jack guessed it was meant to protect whatever was inside from the elements. When he opened the box he found a book.

Jack's heart stopped for a moment. The cover of the book was identical to the journal he had found in his father's bedroom. With great anticipation, he opened it and flipped carefully through the yellow and tattered pages. It was a sketchbook filled with drawings. But it was not his father's sketchbook. The pages were all signed JSB, not JSBII.

"This was my grandfather's, Sierra. Sir Jonathan Stout Barrelbottom — the man who you said taught your village our language."

Jack briefly flipped through some pages again and then closed it, feeling discouraged. He had hoped it would be his father's sketchbook.

THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

Sierra was aghast. “Another coincidence! Our friendship has meaning, Jack. Together we are searching for answers for something. Perhaps it will help us better understand our journeys.”

“I found it on the desert island, Jack, near a crevasse in a dune dug by a massive sea turtle. She was sleeping while standing guard of a large trunk, or perhaps a treasure chest left by pirates. Gold coins were strewn about in the sand. Leather straps held the trunk shut. It had a large lock with intricate patterns and gems embedded around the keyhole. I didn’t dare approach it for fear I would wake the sea turtle.”

“Sierra, let me open the back of your compass,” Jack said, holding out his hand.

Sierra did not realize the compass opened. Jack used his jack knife to carefully open it. Her compass also held a small drawing of the same two children holding hands.

“It’s another clue!” Sierra exclaimed. “The drawings look like us.”

“Jack, we can’t stay here any longer; we will lose the power of our imaginations and won’t be able to travel for a period of time. When you leave the temple your coin will return to its telescope form. When it retracts back to a coin you will be able to travel again. Perhaps, when we meet again, we’ll know more about the purpose of our travels and have answers to our questions, but we must go now.”

Sierra passed through a series of columns disappearing into the darkness.

Jack returned to the entrance of the cave leading back to Grandfather’s estate.

“This has been the most mysterious journey of all,” Jack whispered.



CHAPTER 12

Back at the tree house, Jack flipped carefully through the yellow and tattered pages of the sketchbook Sierra gave him. He was elated to have such a find; however, he was overwhelmed with a feeling of disappointment because it was not his father's. 'Grandfather is an artist, too.' Jack thought. 'He documented his travels just like me.'

Some of the drawings were of Grandfather as a young boy and some as a grown man. It appeared he had traveled just about everywhere in the world. In a drawing of his exploration of the Amazon, there was, sure enough, a depiction of his grandfather standing over an Anaconda with his friend, Kermit Roosevelt. Although the sketchbook was worn, he decided to fill the remaining pages with drawings of his own adventures rather than his own, especially since it was protected from the elements in the leather satchel.

Jack felt overwhelmed by all that had occurred in just days. He reminded himself that Grandfather had encouraged him to explore, that there was a great, big world waiting for him. He and Sierra had found many clues on their travels. Jack thought Grandfather might be able to help them but was still hesitant to tell him about the travels. He wasn't sure when they would resume; he and Sierra had never made plans to meet in the temple again. Sierra described them as having a 'friendship.' He hoped meeting her again would be soon.

THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

Time away from travels, for a few days, at least, gave Jack a chance to do chores for his grandfather on the estate and tidy the tree house. He painted an old tool shed for Grandfather with enough paint left to whitewash the boat hull of the tree house. The smelliest, and most disgusting part of cleaning the tree house was sweeping up the mouse poop.

“I hate mouse poop,” he said out loud in more than a whisper.

Jack stood for a moment to admire his hard work, feeling a sense of accomplishment. He felt proud. He hung a clothesline from the tree house to a limb to air out musty blankets and sheets. He stood on the bow and admired the view of Lake Pennacook at the base of Mount Olegwasi.

“Click, click, Whirrr Whirrr.” Suddenly his telescope returned to its coin form and his compass hummed and spun. His grandfather’s estate was vast. Jack climbed high atop the wheelhouse roof to view in the direction in which his compass pointed, but it wasn’t in the direction of the temple. He climbed down the rope ladder and ran toward the old barn where his journey to the Sahara Desert began. Inside, the sun peered through a large hole in the roof spotlighting a bicycle that was worn and rusty though in good working order. He hopped on the seat pushing the pedal forward. He had never ridden a bike before, and it was wobbly.

“I can do this,” Jack whispered.

He somehow maneuvered the bike outside the barn toward a path with a slight incline. Jack peddled while struggling to keep the handlebars and front wheel straight. He tried to swerve around a rock unsuccessfully and flew head over heels over the handlebars. But he dusted himself off and got back on, which before this summer, he might not have done. In fact, he might not have even sat on the bike in the first place. Jack peddled fast and then faster — which seemed to be the key — and over the hill. The faster he rode, the easier it was to steer the bike and stay upright. He continued down the path over bumps and hills while splashing through puddles that covered him in mud. After coasting down one last incline, Jack purposely leaned to the right so the bike would tip over and land in the comfort of the tall grass.

“I did it on my very first try! I did it, I did it, I did it!” Jack felt very good about himself. He hoped a further adventure would start soon but his compass was silent.

He sat on a steep hillside — the somewhat eroded bike by his side — overlooking open pastures and orchards below. It was the most stunning view of Mount Olegwasi and Lake Pennacook he had seen. Turtle Island had moved considerably during the night. He became lost in thought, wondering how or when he might see Sierra again.

“It’s so confusing,” Jack whispered.

THE TROUBLES OF JACK BARRELBOTTOM

He mounted the bike once again, looking down the long steep walking trail leading to a footbridge that crossed a creek. The center of the bridge had been washed out by the overflowing creek during the winter thaw. But he knew what to do. He would pedal down the hill as fast as he could, using the closer portion of the footbridge as a ramp into the air over the creek, and then land on the other side of the bridge. He was confident he could do it.

Jack lifted his feet off the ground to pedal with speed. With the wind in his face, the bicycle reached a speed where it was no longer necessary to pedal and glided up the ramp.

“Woo Hoooooooo! I’m flying.”



CHAPTER 13

Sierra did chores in the village for her grandmother. She fixed the holding fences for the goats, swept out huts, and groomed the camels. Though busy, she thought about Jack almost constantly. ‘We have so much in common,’ she thought with a smile. ‘We could travel the world together.’ She anxiously awaited another adventure with Jack, but she had neglected to make plans with him while together in the temple. If only she had told him quickly when and where to meet to explain the rules of travel. ‘I shouldn’t have stayed in the temple so long,’ she thought. The lengthy visit to the temple was manifesting the pause in her travels since the statue — Mahakala — stalls the imagination. Waiting for her telescope to return to its coin form allowing her to travel again was more than frustrating.

All the children in the village revered Sierra. Her grandmother once told her she had an old soul and a wealth of wisdom. And she told her that her heart would take her to the most wonderful experiences in life.

She ran into the cavern where the village’s goat milk and provisions were stored away from the hot sun. She lit a lantern and walked to where there were wooden crates to sit on. They blocked the entrance to the long tunnel Sierra would need to crawl through to reach the temple. She sat quietly, waiting — hoping — for her compass to tell her if Jack was in the temple. All he needed to do was place his gold coin in the left eye of the statue of Mahakala. Then, Sierra’s compass would alert her that Jack was there.

Sierra had found the rules of travel and the powers of Mahakala written in script on a long, rolled-up parchment paper in the temple. She in turn explained them in a note to give to Jack. Her coin reflected the present, while Jack’s showed the past. She signed her name at the end of the note with a little heart above the letter ‘I’. She smiled again,

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thinking about Jack. Then, she crumpled up the note and wrote it all over again, word for word, but this time signing her name without the heart.

Sierra, who kept a journal about her adventures, spent most of the morning recording her meeting with Jack in the temple. Then she yawned and closed the journal. Soon enough: “Click, click, Whirrr Whirrr.” Her telescope retracted into the coin, and on cue, her compass hummed and spun.

“Jack!” she exclaimed while pushing the wooden crates aside to enter the tunnel. Her heart was racing. She was consumed with excitement as she finally found her way to the temple.

“Jaaack, Jaaack,” she whispered.

Sierra heard nothing. She quietly crept toward Mahakala to make sure Jack had placed his coin in its eye socket. He had not, but the large coin was secured in the statue’s third eye on Mahakala’s forehead. Sierra had never seen this coin in place before.

“Sierra!”

Sierra heard a whisper behind her. She turned to see who it was and gasped!

“Yes, it’s me, Sierra,” a woman said. “I didn’t expect to see you. I was expecting to see someone else.”

Sierra stood still, her heart warm and hands trembling.

“Mother!” Sierra said in disbelief.

Hinan ran to Sierra and hugged her as if she would never let go. They were both crying tears of joy.

“Sierra, we can’t stay long or Mahakala will temporarily steal our imaginations — though the temple does allow us to think clearly and find answers to what we are searching for,” Hinahn said, as if she was weighing the benefits of their time together in the temple. “I have the large coin from the statue — the eye of the future. It does not lead me toward adventures like your coin. The third coin only allows me to travel by land, but it allows me to travel only to this temple from where I am. I am currently exploring Australia.”

Sierra’s mother knelt and cupped Sierra’s face in her hands.

“Please meet me in Australia tomorrow, Sierra. I have much to tell you.”

Hinan kissed Sierra on the cheek and vanished into the darkness.

THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

Tears continued to stream down Sierra's cheeks as she made her way back through the tunnel to the cavern. She had not been with her mother or heard from her in years. She had only one photo of her sitting atop a camel. Hinan had sent letters to Sierra's grandmother when Sierra was a young child. She explained in her letters that she was consumed by her explorations, hoping to discover information of great importance. She had always promised she would return to the village to stay, but Sierra's grandmother was concerned for her mother's safety and wondered if her letters stopped because she did not survive her travels.

Sierra exited the tunnel and maneuvered the wooden crates to cover up the entrance. She had difficulty processing what had just happened but she was now certain it was real.



CHAPTER

14

Sierra awoke the next morning overwhelmed thinking about the prior day's events.

"Mother," she whispered wistfully. "And Jack."



Sierra unrolled her map, making certain she knew where Australia was located so she could meet her mother.

Her compass suddenly hummed and spun, pointing Southeast. She had walked a considerable distance when she finally came across a mysterious sharp-edged rock formation protruding up from the ground.

It was unusual because the land was so flat and barren. Even more unusual was the spring water trickling out from the rocks. It flowed off the rocks onto the hot sand, evaporating into steam.

She knelt to catch water from her cupped hands. She brought her hands to her mouth and tasted it. It was cool and pure. Suddenly, her compass hummed and spun again. Peering through her telescope, she scanned the barren land where she lived. She focused on a village on the horizon. It looked like hers, but it wasn't.

"Yes!" she said.

Sierra knew she wasn't in Africa anymore. She lowered her telescope as her compass stopped humming, and she looked at her map.

THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

“I’m in Australia!”

She stood ankle-deep in a stream, leaning against a different ledge. Unlike the spring water trickling out of the ledge near her village, this stream was wide but shallow. She heard the faint sound of a motor. It grew louder and louder, and in a split second, VROOOM! A motorcycle went airborne off a ledge above her head, clearing the stream. It came crashing down over the rock-hard dirt embankment with parts flying. The motorcycle came to a screeching halt in a cloud of dust.

Sierra ran across the stream to see if the driver was okay. When the dust settled, she heard, “I made it on the first try, only I’m not on a bicycle anymore; it’s a motorcycle!”

“Jack! Jack! It’s me, Sierra!”

Jack brushed dust off his clothes as he ran toward her yelling, “Sierra, what are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing!”

Both their compasses hummed and spun in unison pointing in the direction of a long straight dirt road that led to the horizon.

“Jack, we have to go! I’ll explain it to you when we get there,” Sierra beckoned with urgency.

Jack started the motorcycle. It ran fine despite its missing parts. There was an extra leather aviator helmet and goggles in a compartment for Sierra. She hopped on the back and, VROOOM! The rear tire spun kicking up dirt and stones as Jack twisted the throttle all the way. Off they went! Traveling at a significant speed on the endless, vast terrain, he followed his compass. Sierra, though excited about what awaited ahead, was not sure how to tell Jack.

Sierra peered through her telescope and saw the village ahead. As they rode closer so that Jack saw it too, he slowed the motorcycle. Huts made of large branches, bark, and brush stood before them. Now bringing the motorcycle to a screeching halt, creating a cloud of dust around them, Jack and Sierra dismounted and, as the dust settled, assessed their surroundings.

“They are Indigenous Australians, Jack,” Sierra said of the people in this village. “They are nomads and wanderers like me, and they are very friendly.”

Jack recalled researching nomadic tribes with Mr. Fumblebee for a world culture exhibit at the museum where he was the curator. He was knowledgeable about nomadic life and how cultures evolved over thousands of years throughout the world.

THE TROUBLES OF JACK BARRELBOTTOM

A young girl approached Sierra and gently grasped her hand, leading her and Jack to her mother, Hinan.

“Jack, this is my mother,” Sierra said softly.

Jack was confused. Sierra’s mother was also perplexed. She only expected to meet Sierra.

“How did you and Jack meet, Sierra?” her mother asked.

“Jack and I both travel, Mother, just like you do,” Sierra explained.

Sierra’s mother stepped toward Jack and knelt before him. She removed his leather helmet and goggles to look at him more closely and said, “Jack, yes of course. You must be Jack Barrelbottom. My name is Hinan.”

Now Sierra was confused. How did her mother know Jack?

“We have a lot to talk about,” Hinan continued while motioning for them to sit. She wanted to speak to them at their level. “Sierra, I want you to know I love you very much and have missed you profoundly. It saddens me that I have been searching for something — something that is still a mystery — for so long while losing sight of what is most important, which is you, Sierra. I am so sorry I have not been by your side over the past several years and I hope in your heart you can forgive me.”

Hinan had an expression of both regret and hope on her face as she continued, “I expected you to arrive in Australia alone. But, having both you and Jack here might make it easier for each of you to understand what I will share with you. I also have questions for both of you.

“You are both so young, but I believe you are old enough to hear and understand some important information about your families’ history. Sierra, I have been traveling the world looking for something. Jack, your father, Jon, and I were dear friends. We traveled together starting at a very young age, just like you and Sierra.”

Jack tried to hide his shaking hands. His mother had rarely discussed his father with him. She told Jack he loved him very much and that he was a gift to each of them. His mother also said that, at one time, they loved each other very much, but their lives diverged, and they decided they would remain friends but live in different places. Living with Aunt Melba, she said, made their family truly unique.

“Sierra,” said Hinan, “your father, Al-Idrisi, and your grandfather, Battuta, were of a nomadic family — generations of world travelers. Together they mapped their own view of the world. Deep-rooted conflict between their tribe and nomadic warriors historically disrupted their lives.

They captured Jon and me in the desert, hundreds of miles from our village. They took my camel and my belongings, emptied my canteen, and left me there to die.”

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Hinan held back tears as she continued, “They kidnapped Jon and I haven’t seen him since. His hands were tied and he was blindfolded, with my camel tethered to his.

“Another kind, local tribe rescued me just as I was near death. One of the villagers had seen Jon being led away.”

Hinan paused for a moment, looking beyond Sierra and Jack across the endless panoramic view of the flat, dry, barren surface of the Australian Outback that converged with the horizon. Heat rose from the ground causing the sun’s light to bend and create the illusion of reflective sheets of water scattered atop the landscape. It appeared real or at least possible, but it was not. It was simply a mirage. The vision dispersed just as quickly as it appeared.

Hinan was imagining what it must have been like for Jon to be led away from her in the unbearable heat of the Sahara. It was difficult for her to share such tragic events that she kept to herself for so many years. She questioned whether her expectations during her journey to find Jon were even realistic. Perhaps they were actually futile. Her hope was fleeting, diminishing before her eyes like the mirage they had just seen.

“When the villagers nursed me back to health, they shared some terrible news.” Hinan lowered her head and looked to the ground sadly. “Sierra, your father and grandfather were murdered by those wicked warriors. They were both remarkable men. I miss them both terribly. I was told those nomads thought Batutta had a precious artifact in his possession that they wanted. Whatever it is may unlock the mystery of the cause of the conflict between the tribes many generations ago. But what the precious artifact is still remains a mystery to us all.”

Now Sierra’s hands were trembling. She was aware her father and grandfather died at a young age but her grandmother had never shared the details with her. Sierra had not shared with Jack what Hinan told them, though. She was unaware her mother and Jon were close friends; if she knew, she would have. Nor was she aware Jack’s purpose of travel was to find his father. Her tribe still mourns the day her father and grandfather disappeared. Overwhelmed by the story being told by her mother, however, Sierra broke down and reached for her. They both cried, finding comfort in each other, and Sierra felt more connected with her mother than ever before.

Sierra shifted her attention to Jack, who had a look of horror and shock. She reached out her hand to his and stood by him while Hinan was revealing the most pointed clues yet on the whereabouts of his father. At that moment it occurred to Jack that the drawings inside the compasses were of Hinan and Jon holding hands.

Hinan redirected her words toward Jack.

“Jack,” she said, “I searched for your father for weeks, months, and then years, moving from village to village across the desert and finally the world. I am still looking for him. I have found some clues to his whereabouts but they don’t explain why or how he has traveled beyond the Sahara desert, especially when he is without the coin.”

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Once again Hinan bowed her head. Perhaps the clues she found were not clues at all, just wishful thinking and delusion. ‘Perhaps,’ she thought, ‘Jon has been dead all this time at the hands of the wicked warriors.’

Hinan gave Sierra and Jack a moment to process her words. Then she explained to Jack and Sierra that she searched throughout Africa, Asia, and India looking for Jon, and was now searching in Australia. She decided to travel to the temple for the third coin just weeks prior to meeting Sierra. She thought it might be her last chance to find Jon.

Jack’s eyes filled with tears at the thought of his father being alive, and of him being lost. He had known it was a possibility ever since he read his father’s note on the map: “I’m trapped! Please find me!” But the idea was more of an enigma than a reality until listening to Hinan.

“Sierra, I did not expect to see you in the temple yesterday. How did you come across my coin?” asked Hinan quizzically.

Sierra thought for a moment before she answered. “Mother, I ride your camel now. She is old and I love her. She must have returned home with the coin in her harness after the warriors left you in the desert. I only found the coin in her harness recently. This menacing tribe has been trying to steal her for as long as I can remember, but she is much too smart for them.”

“Ah, she is smart indeed,” said Hinan. “She must have escaped from being captured. When Jon and I ventured out we both had the coins snapped in the camel’s harnesses, on their chests. We left the compasses with your grandmother because we were in pursuit of finding your father and Batutta, not going on an adventure.

“Jack,” said Hinan, “where did you find your father’s coin?”

His hands shaking less now, he answered, “I found it in my grandfather’s attic.”

“Sir Jonathan’s attic?”

Jack nodded before Hinan continued, “I met your grandfather when I was a young child. He visited us often and taught us your language.”

Sierra smiled, remembering that she had told Jack this when they first met.

“Jack, the last time I saw your father, he was planning to return home. Sir Jonathan was on his death bed with malaria from his travels with only days to live. I’m sorry you never got to meet him. He was a wonderful man.”

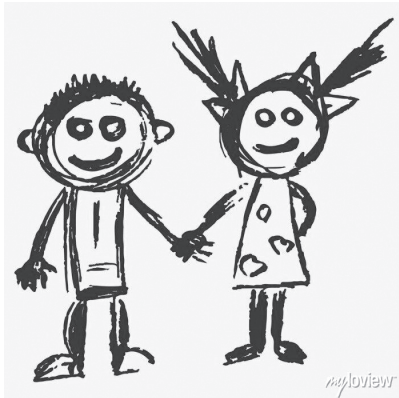
“He’s alive!” Jack exclaimed. “I have been living at his estate this summer. He’s 108 years old!”

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Hinan — startled — instinctively brought her hands to her chest. ‘Perhaps Sir Jonathan, all these years, could have helped me find Jon,’ she thought. ‘I’ve traveled almost the entire world!’

“We have to find out how your father’s coin ended up in Sir Jonathan’s attic, Jack! When you travel back to his estate, you must ask your grandfather. It is possible that it is my most poignant clue to find Jon — your father, I mean. Let’s plan to meet in the temple when you find the answer.”

Hinahh reached out, hugging and kissing both of them, and asked, “Are you two okay? I know some of what I have told you is difficult to understand.”



“I’m so happy to be with you, Mother,” Sierra said. “I love you, and that’s all I need to know. Jack and I have each other. We will never let harm come to one another. We shall stick by each other as long as we live.”

“The compasses, Mother,” Sierra said. “Grandmother gave them to me and I gave one to Jack. Jack and I found drawings inside.”

Sierra and Jack opened the compasses to show Hinahh the drawings, each with two children holding hands. Hinan smiled.

“I have not seen these in many years. That’s me and that’s Jack’s father when we were very young. We drew the pictures together and exchanged them,” she said, still smiling.

“And then there were Walt and Henry, dear friends of Sir Jonathan, both poets. Though they didn’t travel as we do, the three of them spent quite a bit of time together exploring the mountainous lakes region near your grandfather’s estate. Your father and I recited the engraved poem inside the compass often. Let me see, Walt wrote: ‘Will you come travel with me? Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?’ Not to be out done, Henry wrote, ‘This world is but a canvas to our imagination.’ Both sentiments are words to live by indeed.”



CHAPTER 15

Hinan introduced Sierra and Jack to several of the Aboriginal children. They were very interested in Sierra's nomadic life in Africa. Although they had two very different cultures, they shared much in common. Hinan also introduced them to one of her friends.

"Jack, Sierra, I would like you to meet Nancy Bird," Sierra's mother said enthusiastically.

The confident woman stepped forward and shook Jack and Sierra's hands firmly.

"Miss Bird has been helping me in my search during my stay in The Outback."

Jack and Sierra were listening but also admiring the biplane behind her— an airplane with two sets of wings, one above the other. It was bright yellow with red stripes. Letters along the side spelled "Gypsy Moth".

"So, you like my plane, aye? I can take the two of you for a ride if you like. I have to gas her up at the airport so I can take your mum to the outback tomorrow."

Jack and Sierra nodded in awe. Miss Bird fired up the plane and then stepped out to help them with their gear.

"We should hurry!" Miss Bird yelled over the roar of the engine. "There's a dust storm heading our way!"

Sierra ran to her mother to say goodbye.

"Be careful! Both of you!" Hinan yelled above the noise of the plane. "Sierra, I will summon you to the temple in three days to see if you have any news from Sir Jonathan!"

THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

Jack and Sierra climbed into the rear cockpit. Miss Bird put the plane in gear and pushed the throttle forward across the rough terrain, the plane taking flight. Neither Jack nor Sierra had ever flown before.

The storm was now enormous and moving closer. Miss Bird pushed the throttle further while pointing the nose of the plane upward toward the storm. Jack felt bits of sand pitting against his goggles as the dust cloud grew thicker and they could no longer see the ground. The dust had consumed them, and the wind currents were fierce. The plane rose and dropped in elevation several times, the engine sputtering continuously.



“The sand is clogging the engine! HANG ON!”

Though Miss Bird muscled the throttle with great strength, the yoke of the plane was stuck, not allowing her to fly up or down or left or right.

“We have to abort!” yelled Miss Bird. “Climb out slowly to jump. Then pull the cord attached to the front of your gear!”

She turned to direct Jack and Sierra to step onto the wing of the plane while clutching onto the side of the cockpit. “Jump Sierra, Jump!” Miss Bird yelled above the sputtering backfiring engine.

“We’ll be okay, Jack!” Sierra assured him as she leapt off the plane. Jack watched as Sierra’s parachute opened below.

“Jack, It’s your turn!” Miss Bird yelled while still muscling the yoke of the plane.

Without hesitation Jack leapt from the plane. He pulled the cord opening his parachute, floating downward through the blowing sand. He was close enough to Sierra, but it was difficult to see each other through the haze. He watched Sierra’s chute collapse on top of her as she landed. Jack was zeroing in on the ground fast. He closed his eyes as his legs hit the ground hard. His parachute fell on top of him too.

“Jack! Jack! Are you okay?”

Jack heard Sierra but he was more concerned about her when he said, “Yes, I am!”

Flustered, he found his way out from beneath the parachute, only to realize it was just a sheet that hung on the clothesline outside the tree house. He helped to pull another sheet off Sierra, too.

“We’re home, Sierra,” Jack said in a gentle, relieved tone. “We have a lot to tell Grandfather.”



CHAPTER 16

Jack and Sierra ached from their descent from the sky.

“Miss Bird! I hope she’s okay!” Sierra said while still trying to gain her balance.

“I hope so too, Sierra. I worry about all the people I have met on my travels. Hopefully, we’ll meet them all again on future travels. C’mon, Sierra, let’s climb up to my treehouse.”

Jack and Sierra climbed the rope ladder and leapt onto the deck of the treehouse. He proudly showed her where he had been living that summer when not traveling. She had never seen a place like Jack’s hideaway in the mighty Oak tree. He led her to the estate map hanging on the wall and the few clues he had into his grandfather’s travels while looking for his father’s whereabouts.

Sierra had admired Jack’s clothing, and was delighted when she noticed Jack’s collection of costumes.

“All these costumes Jack! Where did they come from?”

Sierra rummaged through the pile of clothing and chose a hat, a coat, and boots similar to what Jack wore. ‘Well these are more practical for adventures’ she thought as she changed into the newfound explorer outfit. She also uncovered a smaller knapsack just like Jack’s. ‘This will definitely come in handy,’ she thought, feeling even more equipped for her next adventure with Jack.

THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

Jack invited Sierra to rest on the hammock below his. This was their first chance to spend time together and share their stories of travel and adventure. Like Jack, Sierra spent a short time in Africa with Kalulu, but she had championed a wildebeest, not a warthog.

Sierra reached into her robe and said, “I have something for you. I wrote down the rules of travel and a list of Mahakala’s powers. As I told you before, he can see the past, present, and future. Although he looks fierce, he is a compassionate protector of good and adversary of evil. “

“Thank you, Sierra. Our travels are so confusing at times. I’m sure this will help us both.”

Jack folded it neatly and tucked it in his sketchbook with the photos he had been given. Then he invited Sierra to meet Sir Jonathan. “I would like you to meet my grandfather, Sierra. You will love his home too,” Jack said with pride.

Jack and Sierra ran to the mansion as children do when they have an intended destination. Upon entering the kitchen, they heard a racket in the great room. There they found Grandfather and Morpheus the cat standing high on the long table in the great room. Grandfather was wearing a window drape as a cape and wielding a sword.

“I will duel you to the death!” Grandfather yelled, swinging the sword up and down and ferociously slicing through several candles set on the table.

Morpheus was more interested in the tassels on Grandfather’s cape as they swayed back and forth. This was a similar incident to the one earlier in the week — when Grandfather thought he was fighting a vicious wild animal when in fact it was a dusty old stuffed lion. For an instant, Jack was embarrassed, but just as quickly, he smiled, reached for one of Sir Jonathan’s canes from a nearby umbrella stand, and waved it back and forth as if he too had a sword. Jack had come to know his grandfather in all his deep wisdom and fearlessness and in all his challenges indicative of age, and he loved him so.

“And I will help you, Grandfather!” Jack said enthusiastically and with a playful growl, and then held the cane straight in the air as if victorious in a duel.

Grandfather drove the tip of his sword into the table leaving it in a standing position and wobbling from side to side.

With his hands on his hips, He smiled at Jack and said, “My boy, isn’t imagination wonderful?”

He carefully stepped down onto a chair so Jack could help him to the floor. Morpheus was still mesmerized by the tassels on his cape.

THE TROUBLES OF JACK BARRELBOTTOM

“Now then, who is this lovely young lady, Jack?” Grandfather asked.

“Grandfather, I would like you to meet my friend, Sierra.”

Grandfather gently put his hands on Sierra’s shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes without speaking, until he whispered, “Hinan.” He spoke so quietly that Jack and Sierra were unable to hear him. Grandfather had met Sierra’s mother Hinan when she was a young child. Sierra looked just like her mother when she was young.

“Grandfather, Grandfather, did you hear me? This is my friend, Sierra.”

Grandfather blinked and nodded his head while clearing his throat, and then he said with a smile, “My dear, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Jack was relieved as he had begun to wonder whether Grandfather was confused again. He was 108 years old after all.

“If you don’t mind, Grandfather, I would like to show Sierra artifacts from your world travels.”

“Absolutely, my boy, take your time,” Grandfather said, still looking at Sierra. “I have to go see an old acquaintance in the village. I expect to be there quite a while. Again, it is nice to meet you, young lady,” he said to Sierra with his smile.

Jack and Sierra immersed themselves in Grandfather’s collections and keepsakes from his world travels as he guided her on a tour of the mansion. She was intrigued by all that she saw. Afterwards, they explored the entire estate, which occupied most of their afternoon. Sierra, having never walked through a forest or grass fields before, was mystified by the beauty. She especially enjoyed the animals they saw along the way. As much as she relished being in this far-off land, she might have even delighted in Jack’s company more. They rested together on the highest of hilltops overlooking Lake Pennacook and the grand Mount Olegwasi. Sierra had never been so excited.

“The animals in the forest are the most beautiful of all, Jack,” said Sierra.

“Do you have a favorite animal?” Jack asked.

“I would have to say the two bear cubs we saw in the wooded area, Jack.”

“Why the cubs?”

“Well, they seem like they are seeking adventure together while having fun along the way. They are curious, they explore, and they discover together with their mother nearby. They truly enjoy each other’s company, and they protect each other. What is your favorite animal?” Sierra asked.

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“I guess my favorite animals are toads because they’re cold and bumpy, and they catch bugs with their tongues.”

Sierra stood up quickly. Annoyed, she exclaimed, “Jack Barrelbottom! How could you say such a thing?”

She folded her arms and turned away from him. Jack was dumbstruck, unable to comprehend what had happened.

“How could you compare me to a toad?” Sierra asked Jack with a furrowed brow.

Still confused, Jack answered, “I’m sorry, Sierra, but I was talking about a toad, not you.”

“Well, I guess I will have to choose my favorite animal more carefully next time,” Sierra said in a frustrated tone and followed it with a huff.

It was clear to Sierra that Jack was unaware of the symbolic picture she was painting of the two bear cubs. She and Jack also enjoyed each other’s company and young adventurous souls. They played and explored together. And when necessary, they protected one another. The only difference was that, while the cubs had a mother nearby, Sierra’s mother had been missing and Jack’s father was still missing. But this, perhaps, strengthened their bond.



Both Jack and Sierra sat silent and sad about what had just transgressed.



“I’m sorry too, Jack.”

Jack was still bewildered, but grateful that, whatever the disagreement was, it was over.

They continued to sit side by side while watching the sun begin to set. It was beautiful.

“Olegwasi, Sierra,” Jack whispered. “Olegwasi is the ancient First Nation Abenaki word meaning ‘dream well’ and embracing what the future may hold for you.” It’s a Barrelbottom tradition to say “Olegwasi” rather than “good night” or “farewell”.

“Ah, I see, Jack. The cliffs on the right side of the mountain look like the face of a wise man looking toward the sky as if dreaming.”

It took a moment, but Jack saw how the formations of the granite created the forehead, eye, nose, cheek,

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mouth, and chin. “I have never noticed it before. ‘This world is but a canvas to our imagination,’” he whispered.

“My grandmother once told me,” Sierra said wistfully, “that — sometimes — what is most wonderful in life is right in front of us. We miss it when we are too busy to appreciate when several unique qualities come together to create beauty, which comes in many shapes and forms.”

The sun continued to dip closer to the horizon washing the mountain in stunning red and orange hues. The shadows on the granite darkened, making the profile of the ancient First Nation leader more prominent, especially as the moon began to rise.





CHAPTER 17

Jack and Sierra woke early the next morning. Sierra had never slept in a hammock before; that along with being in an unfamiliar place and sore from the parachute landing made sleeping difficult. Jack still ached also, so they walked gingerly to the mansion for breakfast. Morpheus the cat greeted them with a mouse, and Jack wondered if Morpheus was going to eat it. 'Perhaps he had yet to decide,' he thought.

"Jack! Sierra!" Grandfather said with excitement. "I am told I am needed at the museum to identify the origin of several world artifacts. Some of the records were lost in a fire two years ago. I have even made arrangements for us to meet with your mother and Aunt Melba, too."

Jack had noticed in the great room at his grandfather's mansion that there were similarities to the relics and castoffs found at Fumblebee's shop. So, he had already figured out that the museum Grandfather spoke of was the one where Mr. Fumblebee was a curator and that he had donated the worldly items in its exhibit. He also knew that the fire-damaged records were a result of the fire at Curator Fumblebee's shop.

"C'mon my boy, another adventure awaits us!"

Jack was unsure whether he wanted to return home for the day. He was anxious to see his mother and even Aunt Melba; He was also excited to see Mr. Fumblebee, but his adventures of late were much more intriguing than researching world artifacts at the museum. He dreaded happening upon the popular boys in town who bullied him. But perhaps they wouldn't bother him if he was with Grandfather, he thought.

It was a long trip, but they finally arrived at the museum. Jack and Sierra stepped out of the car and followed Grandfather to the entrance. Jack's heart was in his throat, realizing there could not be a worse time to be walking into the museum. All the children had just been dismissed from summer school and were walking toward them.

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The popular boys stood on the entry stairs to the museum and, while pointing at Jack, walked toward him. Jack and Sierra stopped as Grandfather continued up the stairs. His hands began to sweat as they surrounded him. Jack was prepared to be picked on and bullied. It would be very embarrassing in front of Sierra, though he told her about them before.

“Hey, Barrelbutt, who’s your girlfriend?” All the boys snickered. They had always taunted him and called him names.

“First of all, Jack’s last name is Barrelbottom, not Barrelbutt!” Sierra responded as she stepped between Jack and the boys. Giving the loudest boy a shove, she continued, “Secondly, if you want your little friends to see a girl give you a black eye, I’m happy to do so!”

The boy turned red and was trembling. No one had ever confronted him about his shaming. Sierra marched forward, pushing the boys aside, making way for her and Jack to proudly walk up the stairs to the museum. When they reached the entryway, Sierra turned to Jack and whispered, “I will never let harm come to you, Jack Barrelbottom.”

Jack recalled meeting the children in Sierra’s village. They looked to her as a leader and admired her, all because of her charismatic personality and kindhearted demeanor. She had all the attributes of what should make a person popular — not one of which the so-called “popular” boys had. ‘They were just bullies,’ Jack thought.

Grandfather and Mr. Fumblebee were standing in the center of the circular lobby where Teddy Roosevelt’s rifle was on display.

“Hello Jack!” Mr. Fumblebee said, reaching out his hand.

Jack shook his hand and introduced Sierra.

“Very nice to meet you, young lady,” he said while taking an extra-long look at her.

Grandfather and Mr. Fumblebee continued talking as Jack read Teddy Roosevelt’s quote inscribed in the plaque at the base of the display case: “We despise and abhor the bully.” Jack’s grandfather once described the quote as being quite poignant. Now it was even more meaningful to Jack after his encounter with the boys outside.

He heard the familiar sound of high heels click clacking across the lobby. It was Mother and Aunt Melba. As usual, Jack could sense that tension had risen between them and they were most likely squabbling about something insignificant.

“Jack!” shouted his mother gleefully. She ran to him and knelt to hug him and kiss him on the cheek. Jack introduced his friend Sierra. Mother and Aunt Melba stood silently and stared at Jack and Sierra. They both gasped, and Mother looked at Grandfather with disdain.

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“What is going on here?!” his mother asked Sir Jonathan angrily directing her tantrum squarely on Sir Jonathan. “Why is he dressed like that? What have you done to my son?!” Then she turned back to Jack and asked, “Where are your school clothes? And where did you meet this girl?!”

Aunt Melba clenched her teeth. “**FOOL!**” she snarked, waving her crooked finger just inches from Jack’s nose.

Jack lowered his head, again looking at the quote engraved into the plaque beneath Teddy Roosevelt’s rifle. A tear streamed down his cheek. Suddenly, he erupted for the first time.

“MOUSE POOP, AUNT MELBA! MOUSE POOP, MOUSE — POOP! YOU ARE A BULLY AND I DESPISE BULLIES!”

Aunt Melba gasped, but Jack did not cower at the thought of his outburst. It was clear to him at this moment that he was not the same boy as the one who had never known he had a grandfather. He liked the clothes he was wearing, even if they appeared to be costumes to others. They weren’t. Even more so, he liked himself, and he was ever so grateful for his friend, Sierra. Aunt Melba put a hand on her forehead while looking behind her for a comfortable sofa on which to faint. Jack knew she was faking because she opened her eyes to be sure everyone was watching before closing them again.

“Jack, you apologize to Aunt Melba this second!” his mother demanded. “Sir Jonathan, look what you’ve done to Jack! I knew it! Leaving a young boy in the hands of a shriveled-up eleventy-one-year-old man was not a good idea!”

Mr. Fumblebee stood by quietly until he realized museum visitors were gathering around them. He cleared his throat and said, “May I remind you that we are in a museum? Please, everyone, let’s take this matter into my office.”

Mother stomped her foot on the floor. “Mr. Fumblebee! You have no business including yourself in our family matters,” she said angrily.

Grandfather was visibly upset when he said, “Bettina!” He raised his voice and looked at Jack’s mother with disappointment. “Your behavior is not in Jack’s best interest. Please stop this behavior at once! We agreed we would handle this matter slowly and quietly and planned it to be an important and memorable day for Jack.”

Jack, once again, was befuddled as his mother grew furious. She continued her tantrum and said, “Mr. Fumblebee, the entire village knows that you left your family behind to live in an imaginary world.”

“A crazy man, I would say.” Aunt Melba chimed in while still laying on the couch she had sought out. **“FOOL OF ALL FOOLS!”**

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Mr. Fumblebee was embarrassed and lowered his head, looking to the floor.

Furious, Jack's mother approached Mr. Fumblebee and poked her finger into his chest.



"Shall we call you Mr. Fumblebee or Mr. Bumblebee? Perhaps we should call you Mr. Beeeeeeeeeee.
'B' as in BARRELBOTTOM!"

The room fell silent as everyone looked at Jack. Even Aunt Melba stood slowly after feigning faint. Jack was so flustered that he couldn't comprehend what was happening. Sierra put her hand on Jack's shoulder and wiped away his tears. "Jack, we have found your father," she said softly.

Jack looked at Mr. Fumblebee, who nodded, confirming the claim. "Jack, my real name is Jon Barrelbottom. It's true, I'm your father," he said quietly.

Jack wondered if he was daydreaming again, only this was more like a nightmare. But it was not his imagination; it was real. He ran to his grandfather, still in tears, and hugged him. This information seemed more than he could handle. "If none of you mind, I would like to go home with Grandfather," Jack said softly.

"You will not! I am your mother!"



Grandfather cleared his throat and said, "Bettina, the boy can make up his own mind now. He has made a very mature decision. Let some time pass so Jack can think about all that has transgressed. He will decide when he's ready to share his feelings with us."

Grandfather turned toward Curator Fumblebee and said, "Son, you and I have much to discuss."

Jack's mother was crying now too. She knelt again, hugging Jack. "I love you so much, my little Jack. I'm so sorry." She then kissed him on the cheek and turned angrily toward Aunt Melba.

"And you Melba! Youuu! You will never talk to...!" and then she paused. She realized enough had been said in front of Jack. "Goodbye Jon!" she said sternly to Jack's father while briskly exiting the lobby toward the door with Melba behind her with her indignant look of shame.

"I'm very sorry this happened this way, Jack," Grandfather said. "They are all acting like children," he murmured in a disappointed tone. Jack and his grandfather walked out of the museum with Sierra following just behind to return to Kasko.





CHAPTER 18

The ride home to Kasko seemed extra-long. Sierra sat with Jack in the back seat. He was still confused with a lot of questions for Grandfather. But while perplexed, Jack and Sierra also knew that their most recent paths were ones of discovery. Sierra had reunited with her mother, and Jack had found his father, though both were unexpected encounters. Still, they felt as though more adventures lay ahead, ones that might uncover things even more poignant.

When they returned home, Jack and Sierra followed Grandfather into the mansion. In the kitchen, Grandfather mustered a meal for the three of them. They sat quietly at the dinner table, Grandfather waiting patiently for Jack to speak.

“Grandfather, a lot has happened during my summer with you. I have been traveling around the whole world. That’s how I met Sierra. At first, I thought my encounters in different lands were in my imagination, but now I know they are real. I feel bad that I did not tell you before, but I wasn’t sure if you would believe me. Sierra has traveled too, and we both suspect that there are still adventures ahead that will lead to even more discoveries.”

Jack looked at Sierra and said, “I have never been so happy and would not trade the past few weeks for anything, but I am still so confused, especially about what happened today — with Curator Ftumblebee or... my father.”

Grandfather exhaled slowly. “I know about the three coins, Jack. And I know you found the one you have in the attic. I found the coins on an exploration in Tibet with my good friend, Battuta — your grandfather, Sierra. I met him in your village, and he led me on many explorations. We traveled the world together extensively, discovering much from Africa to the Far East. I’m certain you and Sierra have been to the temple, too.”

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Jack and Sierra both nodded.

“I extracted the two smaller coins from the statue of Mahakala and Battuta took the third — the larger one — located on the forehead. Soon after, Battuta returned his coin. He believed it was served better in the temple, and that it was not rightfully his.”

Grandfather had been leaning over the table, resting on his elbows. But, before he shared his next thought, he sat back in his chair, rubbing his face in his hands. “Sierra, unfortunately, shortly after he returned the coin, Battuta and your father were murdered by the nomadic warriors.”

Sierra nodded, gesturing that she already knew they had been murdered.

Jack had his sketchbook handy, and quickly flipped through it to find the photo with two safari hunters sitting on a downed water buffalo.

“Is this Battuta with President Roosevelt?” Jack asked while pointing at the man wearing a white shirt, a turban, high boots and a robe.

“Yes, it is Jack. I took that photo while traveling with them on a safari. I have been looking for that for quite some time. You must have found it in my library.”

Jack showed the picture to Sierra. It had actually been given to him by Kalulu on his African safari.

It was becoming increasingly more difficult for Grandfather to tell Jack and Sierra this story. “Rather than doing what was right, I kept the two coins I had taken from the statue of Mahakala.” Grandfather looked down, shaking his head. “My boy, we all go through life searching for something — whatever it might be. We chase dreams. There are times though, in our pursuits, that we lose sight of what we were even looking for in the first place.” He paused, and then said, “Sierra’s grandfather and I eventually realized we had missed what was most important and most meaningful in our lives: our families.”

In a regretful tone, Grandfather continued, “When I grew too old to travel, Jack, I passed the coin I carried on to your father and asked him to use it wisely. Sierra, I gave the second coin to your mother.” Grandfather reached out and grasped Jack’s hand before he said, “The map, Jack, is simply a tool to enable us to follow our dreams and pursue our aspirations in life. And, Jack, what is most important is that you followed your heart — every step of the way. You are, for certain, the Jack-of-Hearts, my boy, the Jack-of-Hearts.”

The expression on Grandfather’s face made it clear that he had more to say while he repositioned himself in his chair. “You have made good choices — and, at times poor, choices. Through your successes and failures, Jack,



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know that you have tested your boundaries, found your voice, proved your inner strength, and conquered your fears. Your journey this summer, Jack, is one of self-empowerment — a great story of courage and bravery. It's a boy's imagination — an imagination that he sets free — that can take him to the most wondrous places in life. Ingenuity combined with real-life experience is what truly makes a man, and, of course, a woman." Grandfather gave Sierra his wink. Then he leaned toward Jack and said, "Your adventures have led you to an abundance of discoveries, the greatest one of all being you, Jack. You have found yourself — the most poignant find ever for a boy! Always, always follow your heart and dreams."

They both hugged Grandfather. He hugged them back and said, "Olegwasi, Jack and Sierra."

Jack and Sierra returned to the tree house. They decided to wait until morning to tell Grandfather about their trip to Australia. So much had happened that day, and Jack was exhausted.

Meanwhile, Smiley was hanging from the ceiling peering through Jack's telescope.

"No Smiley, please don't touch the telescope!" Jack was concerned he would break it or lose it.

He retrieved the telescope from Smiley and put it in his bureau where it would be safe after the monkey ran out of the galley and up to his perch. Both yawning, Jack and Sierra decided they would document their trip to Australia in Jack's sketchbook before taking to their hammocks for the night. It was teamwork: Jack drew the pictures and Sierra wrote the captions. Typically, she would detail her travels in her journal, but this was a welcome change.

"Jack," Sierra said, "My mother will want to know that your father is safe and Sir Jonathan placed the coin in his attic after your father stopped searching for her." She can finally stop looking for him. She said she will summon us to the temple soon. My compass will alert me."

"Sierra, I feel so very lucky to have you as a friend. I have never been happier."

"And I have never been happier either, Jack Barrelbottom."

They climbed onto their hammocks.

"Olegwasi, Sierra."

"Olegwasi, Jack."



CHAPTER 19

Jack and Sierra awoke to a **CRASH!** Smiley was hanging from the ceiling twirling Jack's telescope. He had found it once again. Before Jack could ask him to put it down, he ran out the door of the tree house. Jack and Sierra leapt off their hammocks and followed him. He ran up the trunk of the mighty Oak tree to his perch that he created with some of Jack's belongings.

"No, Smiley! That's my telescope! Drop it now!" yelled Jack to the mischievous monkey above.

Sheepishly, Smiley dropped the telescope down onto the deck. Clink, clink. Once hitting the deck, the telescope returned to its coin form.

"We don't need the telescopes or harnesses for now," Jack said. "Being called on an adventure right now won't help us. Your compass will alert us when your mother summons us in two days."

Jack recalled the trap door below the hammocks that he found when he first entered the tree house. He opened it and hid the harnesses, coins, and other keepsakes he cherished inside, including his sketchbook, photos, toy telescope, and brass monkey key, and then slammed the door shut.

Jack and Sierra walked through the tall grass to the mansion. As they entered the great room, Grandfather was already drinking his morning tea, peering out the large picture window at the statue of Oceanus.

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“Jack, Sierra, good morning!” Grandfather said. “What brings you here so early?”

Jack and Sierra were very comfortable talking to Grandfather after he had been so open about the origin of the coins. They still, though, had several questions.

Jack organized his thoughts and said, “Grandfather, we traveled to Australia to meet Sierra’s mother, Hinan. She told us that she and Curator Fumblebee, I mean my father, had been very close friends.”

Grandfather choked on his tea with a look of surprise.

“Sierra, your mother is alive?” Grandfather asked quizzically.

“Of course, she is!” Sierra said with a confused look on her face.

They had told Grandfather something he was unaware of. Jack and Sierra assumed that he knew.

“How Sierra?” Grandfather asked. “When did you see her? Where has she been all this time?”

Sierra went on to tell Grandfather what her mother told her and Jack, and Grandfather put the pieces together.

“So, your mother is alive and has been looking for Mr. Fumblebee — I mean Jon — all this time? We thought that she quite possibly perished when she was abducted by those immoral and malicious warriors.”

“Yes,” she answered. “She has been traveling the world looking for Jon; it was thought that he had died as well but, in her heart, she felt there was a chance he was still alive.”

Grandfather stood up and turned away from Jack and Sierra. Jack could see that Grandfather’s face had turned red and that he was wiping tears from his eyes. This news had overwhelmed Grandfather, and he held his hand to his chest as he lowered himself back into his chair.

“Grandfather, Sierra has come here because she is my friend but also to find out why the coin was in your attic. Hinan thinks Mr. Fumblebee is either dead or lost.”

Jack was finding it uncomfortable calling Mr. Fumblebee his father. He had not yet had the time to process how he felt about this revelation. Meanwhile, Grandfather was at a loss for words. Though stoic, he was visibly overcome by the good news that Sierra’s mother was alive. He was, however, still breathing heavily with his hand to his chest.

Grandfather collected himself and said, “Jack, generations of our family have been consumed by wanderlust, a deep desire to travel. It truly enriches our lives; however, it can be viewed as a curse as well. Tragic events and

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heartbreak have been common in the legacy of the Barrelbottoms. For centuries wanderlust has been a common thread in your family too, Sierra, and perhaps even more tragic. When tragedy strikes, Jack, it can bring a family together or break them apart. In our case it's the latter, I'm afraid."

"I traveled by plane to Sierra's village as soon as I received word that your father and Hinan had not been seen for quite some time. Sierra, your grandmother was quite concerned as well. Their camels returned without them somehow. I spent months on Jon's camel searching for them in the desert. I visited several tribal villages along the way but to no avail.

"However," Grandfather continued, after a long pause during which he appeared to catch his breath. "I did find something important: Jon's zebra-hide map. I found it in a village hundreds of miles away from yours, Sierra. Unfortunately, the map shows only the location of the person holding it. I finally gave up. I traveled home by way of the temple with the map and the harness from Jon's camel with the coin inside. I returned several times through the temple to visit your grandmother, Sierra, hoping to find that they somehow made it back to your village. Even your mother, Jack, had spent all her life savings to hire a group of nomads to search for your father and Hinan when they first went missing."

"Three years had passed when, unannounced, Jon returned here to the estate. I was overwhelmed with joy and saddened at the same time. He had been held captive all that time by those deplorable warriors but finally escaped. I thought I was looking at a ghost. He was a shadow of the man he once was — quite thin, wearing tattered clothing. Frankly, it was apparent to me that he wasn't thinking clearly, or making sense in conversation. That's what horrific years like those will do to a man. I told him the harness and coin were in the attic. He changed his clothing and strapped on the harness. I pleaded with him to stay but he left in the middle of that night to find Hinan.

"Jon and Hinan had promised each other as children to never let harm come to one another. They pledged to stand by each other for as long as they live. He loved Hinan as a dear, dear friend and he loved your mother, too. Had your mother been in similar danger, he would have done the same for her, Jack. Eventually, I told your father that he should give up looking for Hinan. Sierra, I feel bad about that now."

Grandfather took another moment to compose himself, and then said, "I put the coin in the red trunk in the attic when your father returned two years ago, Jack. He was exhausted from his travels around the world looking for Sierra's mother, especially having run out of clues. And as you know, not long ago he survived that terrible fire at his shop. His hands were disfigured so severely it was impossible for him to travel ever again.

"He had followed his heart to locate Hinan only to find he had broken another's heart. He realized he had made the same mistake I did. He had lost sight of what is most important, which is, as I told you before, family. What is most devastating is that he missed out on years with you, Jack. He requested the curator position at the museum after the fire had destroyed most of his shop, so he could be close to you.

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“He thought, in time, he could tell you his story and explain why he had not been there for you. He felt you were just too young to understand. Your parents were trying to protect you, Jack, and they both love you very much — more than anything in this great big world of ours.”

Grandfather winced and coughed several times. Noseworthy, having heard Grandfather struggle from another room, walked briskly and arrived just in time to catch grandfather as he started slumping over.

“Sir, you need your rest. Let me help you upstairs.”

“Let me help, too, Mr. Noseworthy!” Jack said, panicked.

Grandfather took a deep breath, “I’ll be okay, Jack,” he said in a whisper. “Like Noseworthy said, the old man just needs his rest. He’ll let you know when I’m feeling my good old self again.”

Slowly grandfather regained his strength and stood with Noseworthy so he could assist him. They entered the foyer and ascended the grand staircase while pausing at each step for Grandfather to take a deep breath. He looked Jack and Sierra’s way and gave them a wink with a smile.



CHAPTER 20

Jack was flustered for the rest of the afternoon. Sierra suggested that they spend a bit of time alone to process all that had transgressed and all that they had heard.

“Perhaps we could explore, just the two of us,” she said, and Jack agreed.

They returned to the tree house where Sierra opened the trap door beneath the hammocks. She retrieved the harnesses and coins, beginning to fill their knapsacks.

“But we don’t need the harnesses until tomorrow when your mother summons us, Sierra,” Jack said firmly. “We’re exploring today, not traveling,”

“Oh Jack, you never know what the future holds. I would rather be safe than sorry,” she answered with a smile while pressing the black marble of her coin to extend it to its telescope form and place it securely in her holster.

So, with knapsacks filled to the brim, lanterns, and walking sticks, they navigated their way back to their favorite spot on the shore of Lake Pennacook. It was peaceful and featured the best vantage point from which to marvel over the magnificent mountain. The water was remarkably calm with just a hint of fog settled over its surface from the crisp cool air rolling down from the mountain top.

“I hadn’t noticed that island before, Jack,” Sierra said, pointing the telescope toward the base of the mountain.

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“That’s turtle island. It moves ever so slowly around the lake, following the moon’s nightly path and returning to where it began following the sun each day. Tonight will be the phase of the full Thunder Moon. Some First Nation tribes believe a turtle carries the world on its back. Cultures in the far east and India also believe it’s true. I saw a statue in the temple of the world turtle, only the weight of the world is held up by four elephants on the turtle’s back.”

Sierra pondered what Jack had just shared with her, and then what Sir Jonathan had said: “It’s a great big world out there.” ‘In the end,’ she thought, ‘the world is not so big after all. Our cultures have so much in common.’

“C’mon. Sierra,” Jack said, “let’s go explore the island.”

The twosome hiked down the winding trail. Jack took the lead to a weathered Birch-bark canoe at the water’s edge. They hopped in and paddled toward the island. As they neared their destination, they could see the immense mountain much more clearly. Water was cascading down several points of the mountain’s facade and plunging into the lake. A current pulled the canoe forward as they approached the island.



Along the way, Jack paused to admire an array of waterfowl — a commotion of common coots. Yes, a group of coots is called a “commotion” because they are so noisy when they gather. Jack delighted in the way they bobbed up from beneath the water’s surface like corks before swallowing morsels of freshly caught minnows.

Jack’s personal favorite bird was the silliest — the Dodo Bird. Now extinct, the Dodo was flightless, stout with short legs and thick in the ankles. It had accentuated features on its featherless face and short, stubby wings positioned as if they rested on its hips.

Aunt Melba once referred to Grandfather as an “old coot”, meaning foolish old man. ‘There’s nothing foolish about grandfather,’ Jack thought. ‘At times, Aunt Melba could be such a Dodo.’

“This is beautiful! Let’s explore!” Sierra said as they stepped onto the island. She ran with her arms held high through a swarm of red dragonflies, meanwhile stepping gingerly so as not to disturb bright orange newts hiding on the wet moss under the ferns.

Not a very large island, its ground was covered with large egg-shaped boulders as if they were carefully placed, and wild blueberry bushes, saplings, native flowers, and moss grew in-between. Yellow Shafted Flickers, Northern Orioles, Cardinals, Bluebirds and Hummingbirds flew freely from tree to tree.

At the center of the island was a perfectly circular mound approximately 30 feet in diameter and 15 feet tall. It was sparsely covered with lichen and moss on the northern side, but still exposed was a circular mosaic pattern of large, intricately laid, rectangular, slate-like stone from top to bottom.

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“This must be Sacrifice Rock,” Jack pondered as they climbed atop. “People have heard about this legendary site but its whereabouts has always been a mystery. It’s a closely kept secret between of a First Nation tribes.” Jack stood in awe. “The name is misleading though. There was nothing sacrificed here, Sierra. Legend says it was simply a place where tribe members laid sticks and branches on top as they left the area to travel.” The small branches on top of the mound were sun-bleached like driftwood. They had been there for quite some time.

“Where would they go from here?” Sierra asked. “Or perhaps we will find out now.”

Sierra and Jack placed their walking sticks on top of the branches. Their compasses immediately hummed and pointed downward. As they descended the mound, they came across a massive highly polished, white standing stone.

“There’s no entrance, Sierra,” Jack said.

They walked around the other side and gasped. They were standing in the moon-lit shadow of a Tyrannosaurus-sized skull of a snapping turtle sunk halfway into the Earth. Its mouth was wide open with a razor-sharp beak. The tall mound they had been standing on was actually an enormous turtle shell. “This is definitely not Sacrifice Rock,” Jack said, half frightened and half in awe.



Sierra entered the large open jaws.

“No Sierra! We had agreed to explore the island, not travel,” Jack pleaded. It was clear to him this was another entrance to another world.

“But, Jack, even though we have found my mother and your father I feel we are still looking for clues to discover someone or something. My intuition feels the same as when we first met. However, that something may be more like a circumstance beyond our control, perhaps several circumstances, rather than something physical we can touch or hold — possibly a substantial reality difficult to accept. We must embrace what the future holds, Jack.”

Jack listened and found himself trusting Sierra, the way he trusted Grandfather when he shared important life lessons. He didn’t completely comprehend Sierra’s thoughts and ideas but he believed her the same way he believed in Grandfather.

Passing the opening, Sierra reasoned, “We have to go in, Jack.”

“Well, okay, Sierra. I’ll be right behind you,” he said with great trepidation.

A cold wind blew out of the entrance as Jack and Sierra proceeded inside. They lit their lanterns and walked for

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some time toward a subterranean stream flowing their way in a winding, round tunnel. Water even fell from the ceiling in cold drops. They trudged forward until the stream was knee high. Suddenly the wind subsided, and the current stopped.

“I told you, Jack,” Sierra said. “We are walking in the right direction. It will be easy from here.”

Suddenly, a faint sound of thunder echoed throughout the tunnel. It grew louder and more frequent until it became a constant roar. A strong wind and current returned and pulled them forward like a vacuum. Attempting to cling on to the sides of the tunnel, Sierra lost her grip and plunged into the stream.

“Jack! Jack!” she yelled as she was swept away. Her lantern sank to the bottom, and she disappeared into the darkness.

“Sierra! Sierra, can you hear me?” The roar of the thunder along with the wind and the reckless current was deafening. Without a thought, he let himself be carried through the winding tunnel in what now seemed to be more like a swift underground river.



CHAPTER 21

Jack felt hopeless as he was tugged to the river's floor, tumbling and continually hitting his head and arms on the sides of the subterranean river. He fought for brief gasps of air when he surfaced, each time yelling "Sierra!" Plunging into the bottom of this mysterious river, he was confused and nearly unconscious when he was suddenly thrust into midair. He crashed into a different body of water — a small pond in a spacious cavern. As the thunderous roar subsided, Jack lay face down in the middle of the pond, not moving.

"Jack, let me help you!"

It took quite some time for Sierra to swim to the middle of the pond, and when she did, she was unable to turn Jack over so he could breathe. Gripping his leg, she was eventually able to tug him backward and pull him onto a large flat stone. Bright moonlight shown through an opening above, lighting up the spacious cavern. He lay there motionless and blue in the face with blood seeping from his nose and ears. He wasn't breathing. Sierra held her ear to his chest to discover his heart had stopped.

"Jack, can you hear me? Jack!" Sierra was frantic as her telescope retracted into the coin and fell out of her holster.

"Please Jack, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up," she whispered over and over. She picked up her coin and placed it in Jack's hand. She held onto his hand tightly with both of hers. Suddenly, she felt warmth return to his skin as the coin began to glow. Jack's color returned with a deep inhale and exhale, spouting water from his lungs while rising to a sitting position. With his eyes now open and a blank stare, he handed Sierra her coin.

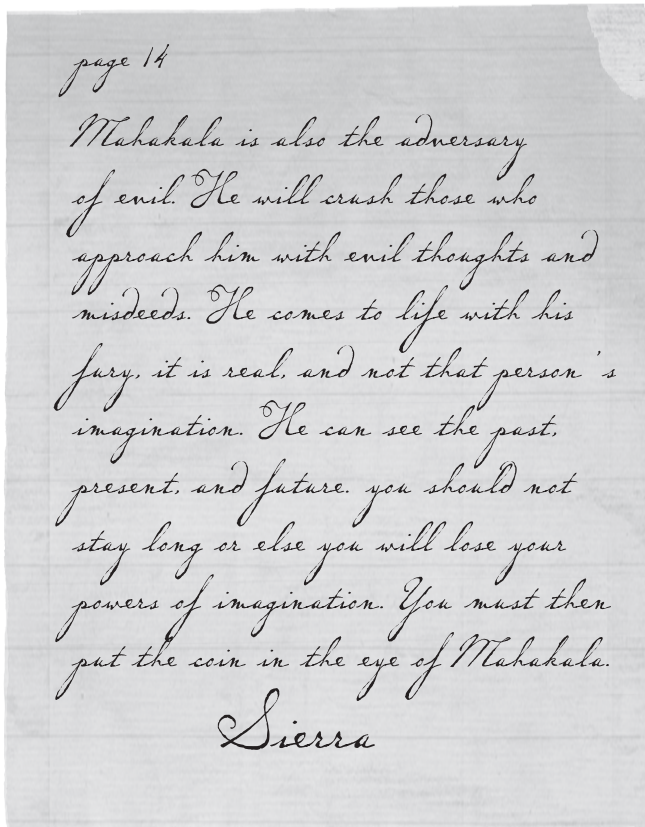
"I'm sorry, Sierra. I must have fallen asleep. I had a very long dream."

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THE TROUBLES of JACK BARRELBOTTOM

“You drowned, Jack! You were lifeless and breathless. You were dead.” Sierra said as she wiped tears from her eyes. “Mahakala’s coin of the present brought you back to life — or my coin. Yours is the eye of the past.”

While drowning, Jack’s entire life flashed before him like a movie. In a dream-like state, he saw — in black and white — a rapid depiction of shadows and blurred images, mostly of people and occurrences that included the most mundane to the most frightening circumstances. It was both a pleasant and abhorrent journey back in time. A few memories pictured him as a small child with his mother and father — happy recollections, ones that he might not have otherwise remembered since he was so young at the time. Most flashes were single images of him performing daily tasks like folding his clothes or sweeping the front steps of Aunt Melba’s brownstone. Others pictured him sitting on the floor alone in his bedroom reading or climbing through the secret door in his ceiling to examine the artifacts that he had taken a liking to at Mr. Fumblebee’s shop. Just before regaining consciousness, Jack’s recollections burst into vivid color with more clearly defined shapes. The last depiction was of Grandfather staring into his eyes, mouthing two words over and over, but his voice was silent.



“The rules, Jack! Do you remember the rules?” Sierra asked Jack intently, like she needed to truly underscore her words. “I wrote down the rules for you on travel and an explanation of Mahakala’s powers — his ability to see the past, present, and future. He is a compassionate protector of good and adversary of evil. He protects those who are falling victim to deception, or those who lack confidence, or those searching to find their most positive place in the world. My coin brought you back to the present, Jack!”

“Sierra, I don’t know what to say. How can I thank you?”

“Oh Jack,” Sierra said warmly. “Of course, I would do whatever possible, or even impossible, to save you. After all, you only landed in the pond because you bravely fought the current of the river to save me. We have plenty of dangerous travels ahead, and we might have to save each other again. We agreed that we will never let harm come to one another, Jack Barrelbottom.”

“We have to leave, Sierra! Let’s climb to the opening where the moonlight is shining.”

They scaled the wall of the cavern using crudely made chiseled granite steps that were perhaps carved by an ancient First Nation tribe.. They reached the entrance, and they were greeted by a spectacular moon-lit view of Lake Pennacook and mountain ranges in the distance.

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“Olegwasi, Sierra. We’re on the peak of Mount Olegwasi. The waters of the mountain give knowledge and wisdom to the land and beings.” In that moment he felt confidence and clarity in his heart and mind.

“There’s Grandfather’s estate!”

Jack spied the estate with his telescope. The grounds were dark but he could see his tree house emitting just enough light through the portholes from his lantern inside. He couldn’t recall lighting it but nonetheless he did. For a fleeting moment he felt fearful the treehouse would meet the same fate of Mr. Fumblebee’s junk shop, a fire.

Upon scanning grandfather’s mansion, Jack saw that Sir Jonathan’s bedroom light was on, as was the light in Mr. Noseworthy’s sleeping quarters. Light was emitting from a window at the far end of the mansion also, where there were several closed-off sleeping quarters. ‘That’s odd,’ Jack thought. ‘Perhaps Mr. Noseworthy was tidying up the mansion and left the lights on.’

“We have to go back and wait for your mother to summon you, Sierra,” Jack said. “She’ll be so happy to know my father is still alive! And we can tell my father that your mother is still alive!”

Sure enough, their compasses vibrated and hummed, pointing back to the cavern. They descended to the water’s edge at the base of the stairs.

Then it began again: the thunderous roar. Water spewed from portals on all soaring walls of the cavern, causing the pond to quickly rise while turning into an expansive whirlpool. Sierra was shouting to Jack, but the noise inside the cavern was deafening. She tried pushing Jack up the granite stairs, but it was no use. The water swallowed them into the vortex of the whirlpool feet first. Off they went, downward into an abyss with no air to breathe. They tumbled, hitting all sides of the underground channel.

What seemed like minutes had only been seconds when Jack and Sierra exited the subterranean river and landed hard on the ground. They both gasped for air while on their backs, gazing above at the sky. Jack came to the realization that they were at the base of the majestic statue of Oceanus — the Greek deity, God of the mythical river that circles the earth — at Sir Jonathan’s estate. Crystal clear cold water was flowing over the walls of what had been a dry fountain choked with leaves and weeds when Jack first arrived at the estate.

“Oceanus Sierra! Lake Pennacook, streams, ponds, waterfalls, flooded plains, the River of Doubt and subterranean rivers. We have discovered Oceanus’ mythical river and have been following it all along, And it all starts here, at Mount Olegwasi. Many years ago Sir Jonathan went on an exploration looking for its origin hoping it would lead to the City of Gold. It must somehow connect our journeys.”

It was now dawn. Soaking wet, scratched, and bruised, Jack and Sierra trudged through the tall grass returning to the tree house for a change of clothes.

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Jack paced on the rear deck, impatiently waiting for Sierra to change into dry clothes while also contemplating how to tell Sir Jonathan about his latest travels. With his hands now firmly on the gunnel, he peered at the ground below and then upward at Smiley's perch. Smiley peered back under some of Jack's clothing attempting to make himself invisible, but his tail twitched back and forth above his head.

Several minutes passed when Sierra finally emerged from below.

"How do I look?" she asked while hurrying to fix her hat just right and tying on her magenta scarf. She tried to dress as similar to Jack as possible. Jack stood silent still looking at the perch and then trotted down below.

"Smiley," he murmured.

Jack pried open the trap door below the hammocks and carefully placed the harnesses inside with his other keepsakes and then slammed the door shut.

Upon returning to the rear deck, Sierra stood with a scowl and her hands on her hips while tapping her toe. She was waiting for Jack to respond to her question about her new, mismatched, adventurous ensemble.

"My stomach's growling, Sierra, I'm starving. Let's go to Grandfather's and get something to eat."

With a huff, Sierra took the lead with a scowl still on her face and marched her way back through the tall grass to the mansion as Jack clumsily scurried behind her trying to keep up.



CHAPTER 22

“Grandfather! Grandfather!” Jack called out as he entered the kitchen.

There was no response. They ran to the great room, the dining room, and then the library. Grandfather was not in any of these rooms either. Noseworthy walked quietly down the grand staircase and greeted Jack and Sierra in the foyer.

“Shhhhhhhhh,” Noseworthy said as he held his finger to his lips. “Sir Jonathan is still ill. We were hoping it’s just another bout with malaria, but it seems more complicated this time. I have attempted to wake him several times, but to no avail. Morpheus is lying right next to him as he does every night. Your grandfather has been continually talking in his sleep. Hopefully he is having pleasant dreams. I heard him say your name several times, Jack.”

‘Morpheus,’ Jack thought. ‘The god of dreams. The tiger had communicated messages through images to me while I slept.’ This thought conjured up the vivid images Jack saw of his grandfather looking into his eyes when he was drowning, mouthing just two words without a sound. ‘But what were they?’ Jack wondered. He was concerned. When Grandfather first met Sierra, he was clearly not feeling well. He had trouble breathing and was in severe pain.

“But I need to see him, Mr. Noseworthy. Sierra and I have so much to tell him.”

“Sorry, young man. He asked not to be disturbed and orders are orders. Follow me and I’ll prepare lunch.”

They sat at the kitchen table as Noseworthy arranged an impressive array of fruits, vegetables, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches — Sir Jonathan’s favorite.

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“Sierra, we discovered the origin of the mythical river at Mount Olegwasi. It must somehow be another key to the purpose of our travels. I think we should stay here until we can talk to Grandfather.”

Jack and Sierra entered the great room and lay down on a pair of comfortable overstuffed zebra skin couches with matching goose down pillows. Not long after, they were sound asleep.

“Eh hem,” Noseworthy had entered the room quietly to wake them. They had been sleeping for several hours.

“Your grandfather has woken up. I told him you were waiting, and while he is anxious to see you, he still insists he not be disturbed. He asked that you enjoy the day and said he will visit with you when he’s back on his feet. Then he fell back to sleep.”

“Thank you, Mr. Noseworthy. Please tell him we wish him well and we will be at the treehouse for the rest of the day. Let us know when he is feeling better.”

“I will sir,” Noseworthy said as he ascended the grand staircase to tend to Sir Jonathan.

“Jack! We left our compasses in the tree house. Mother is supposed to summon us today!”

Once aboard the tree house, Jack noticed things were not right. The contents of the wheelhouse were strewn about the deck. Down below, chairs were knocked over and the shelves were emptied and thrown to the floor. His neatly packed bureau was also toppled over, and all that was inside was spread all over the room. And then, Jack noticed the trap door below the hammocks was open. Sierra’s harness was intact with the compass and coin. Jack’s coin was missing. He was devastated, “SMILEY, HE DID THIS! HE TOOK MY COIN!”

Smiley’s habit of stealing from Jack and his insatiable desire to collect shiny objects for his perch in the mighty Oak tree drove him to search frantically for the coin.

Jack’s sketchbook was torn to shreds as were the photos; they were scattered all over the room, and Sierra’s rules of travel were missing. He attempted to gather the tattered pieces of his sketchbook together, but it was futile.

“We have to search for him, Sierra,” Jack said. “He might have already left on an adventure!”

He called up to the monkey’s perch, which had grown significantly larger with Jack’s belongings, but he was nowhere to be found. Together, they searched the estate for most of the afternoon.

“Smiley! Smiley!” They yelled over and over.

‘The ultimate antagonist and thief,’ Jack thought. Morpheus is probably chasing him somewhere.’

THE TROUBLES OF JACK BARRELBOTTOM

Sierra had never seen Jack so upset, even after all they had been through together.

“I’ll help you salvage all that we can in the treehouse,” Sierra said.

Jack was distraught over his missing coin, but also over what Smiley had done to his sketchbook. He wished he had never befriended the monkey.

“I know how much you treasure it; we can puzzle it all together the best we can. But try to remember that possessions are only reminders of the past. We have to live in the present and embrace what the future holds, good and bad.”

Nonetheless, Jack was hopeless and sad.

Sierra was suddenly startled. She put her hand on her compass. It was humming and her telescope had retracted into the coin. “Mother! Come with me, Jack. Mother is summoning me to the temple. We can tell her your father is still alive!”

Sierra was running so fast that Jack could barely keep up with her, but, in her excitement, she was going the wrong way. He knew they should be going to the entrance of the cave that leads to the temple, so he redirected her to the large crack in the cave wall that they would need to squeeze through.

“C’mon Jack, we have to hurry!” Sierra said excitedly.

“Sierra, I need my coin to enter the temple. You will have to go alone.”

“You can still enter, Jack! I wrote about it in the rules of travel!”

Sierra grasped Jack’s hand, pulling him toward the crack, and she was right. They could travel together with one coin. Upon entering the temple, Sierra ran so fast that she dropped her coin. Trailing behind her, Jack picked it up and continued to run as fast as he could.

“Mother, Mother!” Sierra cried out. Her voice echoed throughout the maze of passageways.

“I’m here, Sierra. I’m so glad you summoned us,” she said as she and Jon appeared from the shadow of darkness. Both Jack and Sierra were confused to see Hinan and Jon together as they had not yet shared with them that the other was alive.

“But I didn’t summon you, Mother,” Sierra said, befuddled. “I thought you summoned us.”

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Mahakala was most animated, breathing fire with his four arms waving erratically. Sierra and Jack were aghast to see that his coin had been placed in the right eye, from where it originated.

“That’s my coin!” Jack said with surprise! “Smiley stole it and put it there! SMILEY! SMILEY! WHERE ARE YOU?”

“I PLACED THE COIN THERE!!!” These words ricocheted off the corridors of the temple.

They were astonished when Aunt Melba emerged from the shadows. In one swoop, she grabbed Sierra from behind with one arm and wrapped her other arm around her neck.

“Don’t you dare try to help this little one. Do you think I don’t know the rules of travel? I have them right here,” she warned as she waved Sierra’s note on travel rules and the powers of Mahakala in Jack’s face. Though he was shocked, Aunt Melba’s threatening tone was quite familiar to him.

It was not Smiley who ransacked his tree house; It was Aunt Melba!

“There is something none of you know. Many years ago, I found a journal in my father’s attic — that retched, old, good-for-nothing, prune-faced man! The journal said that one who places all three coins in the horrid-looking statue of Mahakala will assume all its powers! I will wield my new power to outlive all of you and inherit the riches of my father and all the gold in this temple!”

“And you, Jon! Or shall I call you Mr. Fumblee? Either way, you are a weak-willed namby-pamby! What a poor excuse for a half brother and a man you are. A first-rate fool’s-fool. I will never know how you survived the fire I lit at your horrid junk shop. But today will surely be the end of you!”

“Let my daughter go!” Hinan yelled.

“Stand back, Hinan, or I will break the little girl’s neck! Give me the large coin, now! Roll it over to me and then, Jack, you little fool! You’re nothing but trouble! Roll the girl’s coin over to me.”

“Don’t do it, Mother!” Sierra beckoned. Aunt Melba tightened her arm around Sierra’s neck so that she was struggling to breathe. Hinan and Jack had no choice. They rolled the coins toward Aunt Melba’s feet. She bent over and picked them up, moving backwards toward Mahakala and constricting her arm around Sierra’s throat even tighter.

“I have to do something,” Jack whispered.

With all his might, he charged Aunt Melba to save Sierra, but he stumbled head-first and tumbled into Aunt Melba’s ankles. With the blow, she fell to the base of the statue, releasing her grip on Sierra, who ran to her mother.

THE TROUBLES OF JACK BARRELBOTTOM

“You fool!” screamed Aunt Melba. She stood up quickly and placed Sierra’s coin in the left eye of the statue. Mahakala unleashed his fury, spewing fire, all four arms thrashing about and displaying boundless, unrestrained terror.

“Aunt Melba, NO!” Jack pleaded. You don’t understand the powers of Mahakala. His fury is not your imagination! Those who possess all three coins at once enable Mahakala’s imaginative vengeance to become a reality. This is really happening. It’s in the rules, Aunt Melba!” Despite her actions, Jack showed compassion for her.

“Don’t you tell me what to do! I read the rules! You’re trying to trick me. — Well, it won’t work, you’re all evil! Mahakala sees the good in me. You will be the last to go, Jack, after watching me rid the world of Hinan, your father, and your endearing little friend, Sierra!” Melba’s eyes grew large as she clenched her teeth. “And finally, your grandfather, that old coot. I will rid the world of him too along with that repulsive cat, Morpheus. It has always given me nightmares just looking at him.”

Aunt Melba positioned the third large coin that held the power of the future in the empty eye socket at the center of Mahakala’s forehead. The deity roared, spewing fire upward. Aunt Melba’s hand was attached to the forehead like a magnet to steel. Mahakala clutched her with his four arms and burst a ball of fire upon her. Aunt Melba let out a shrill and then a roar. Her skin became translucent, exposing pulsating veins in her temples with bright red larva rushing down through her arms and legs.

Aunt Melba roared again, and fire now billowed from her mouth. She attempted to grab Jack with her white-hot hands, but she continued to shriek as Mahakala lifted her high above his head.

“YOU DID THIS TO ME, JACK!” Aunt Melba screamed while shaking her hot lava-laden crooked finger at him.

Her limbs caught fire as she spewed red lava from her mouth. With one more ball of fire thrust upon her from Mahakala’s fury, he released his grip as she burst into a cloud of burnt embers and white ash falling to the temple floor.

All were aghast at what happened before their eyes.

Jack ran to his father and whispered, “Mahakala is the protector of good and the adversary of evil.”

He was trembling and weak in the knees. It was his aunt after all, as well as his father’s sister and Sir Jonathan’s daughter. He couldn’t make sense of it all. At the same time, with the powers of knowledge and wisdom from the waters of Mount Olegwasi and the ability to think clearly in the temple, Jack had never felt more confident and empowered. He knelt toward the mound of ashes that was once his aunt Melba.

“Poor Aunt Melba,” he said with a heavy heart.

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“It’s not your fault, Jack,” his father said. “Aunt Melba chose the wrong path in life. She was alone, angry, and vindictive, and she lived in the past. Then she chose the future while unable to embrace the present. She resisted following her heart and her own moral compass for selfish reasons.

They all stood silent waiting for Jack to speak as a slight breeze fluttered into the temple through the columns, blowing out candles one by one through a corridor. It escalated into a strong wind blowing the ash and ember — the remains of Aunt Melba — gently across the floor. To Jack’s dismay, the jewel encrusted brass monkey key that Jack had hidden in the tree house appeared, the one that Grandfather had sent him in the suitcase. Aunt Melba had stolen it from the tree house.

They were all silent while waiting for Jack to speak,
“We should take our coins but leave the large coin of the future,” Jack said with clarity, reacquainting himself with the key. “We should all meet with Grandfather.”



CHAPTER 23

Recovered from his illness but still feeble, Sir Jonathan stood, peering out at the statue of Oceanus as he often did through the large picture window in the great room with Jack's mother at his side — both completely silent — with Morpheus sitting on the sill before them. Water was still flowing over the walls of the fountain surrounding the standing stone looking as if the deity had just risen from the deep waters of Lake Pennacook. They both had expressions of utter disbelief as Jack took the lead heading inside with his father, Hinan, and Sierra in tow.

"Hinan," Sir Jonathan said, choked with emotion. "Jon, you found her."

Hinan approached them slowly and reached her hand out to Sir Jonathan. Then, she embraced Bettina, their eyes gushing with tears.

"Hinan, we all thought you had perished at the hands of the nomadic warriors. How are you here today?" asked Grandfather, his voice quaking.

Jon stepped in and said "I borrowed Sierra's coin from the treehouse for a short time while they were sleeping here in the mansion. I went to the temple and saw that the large coin was missing. When I placed Sierra's coin of the present in the appropriate eye socket on Mahakala, it summoned Hinan. I was unaware that she was the one who had only recently taken the large coin in a desperate attempt to find me. I returned your coin, Sierra, shortly thereafter. Jack, Aunt Melba must have followed me to the treehouse and stole your coin."

Hinan then spoke: "The third large coin only allowed me to travel by land, but I discovered many entrances — around the entire world — that lead to the passageways of the temple. These entrances, however, can only be seen through the telescope lens of the large coin."

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Sir Jonathan was overwhelmed and started to collapse. Noseworthy helped him to a chair so he could sit and regain his composure. “I had dreamed this day would come. I had given up hope, I’m afraid.”

“Grandfather, we have some very sad news,” Jack said, trembling. He was quite flustered about what had happened to Aunt Melba at the temple, but he found the strength to stammer, “Aunt Melba is gone.”

“Yes, I know Jack. Your mother came here because she was concerned; Aunt Melba has been missing for three days. Noseworthy informed me this morning that it appeared as if she stayed here last night in one of the many quarters. But I have yet to see her.”

Jon knelt in front of Sir Jonathan and looked up at him with sad eyes. “Father, she’s gone. She perished at the temple. She’s dead. I’m so very sorry.”

Sir Jonathan was consumed with grief. He trembled and turned ashen gray. Holding one hand on his chest, he was gasping for air and in excruciating pain.

“This has been happening often as of late,” Noseworthy said as he lay a blanket on Sir Jonathan. It’s his heart I’m sorry to say. Morpheus leapt onto the arm of Sir Jonathan’s chair and rested his double paw gently on his shoulder. The cat raised his head and yowled while locking his bulging eye directly into Jack’s.

Sir Jonathan reached for Jack’s hand and stared at him blankly as if he was looking right through him. He continued to gasp for air. “Jack —” he said in barely a whisper. “The key, the key.” He winced in pain, and with one last gasp he closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. “The keeey.”

“Olegwasi, Grandfather,” whispered Jack. 