

Thanksgiving
AT THE INN *ℳ*

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TIM WHITNEY



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*For my daughters Dominique and Gabrielle –
you remind me every single day
what's truly important in life*

CHAPTER I

Where There's A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

“Are you coming down for breakfast or sleeping away the whole damn day?” Dad barked from the bottom of the stairs. The echo of his hard voice ricocheted off the walls of the condo like a basketball in an empty school gymnasium, with such force it should have cracked the plaster.

Rolling over in his stiff bed, Heath groaned. *Yeah, Dad, that's my plan*, he thought. *Sleep away the whole damn day. Good morning to you, too.*

He was almost surprised to see “6:00” on the watch on his night table. He shouldn't have been. Dad woke him daily at 6 a.m.—it didn't matter if it was a holiday, a weekend, or even summer break.

And apparently, it also didn't matter if your grandfather had just died.

Yesterday had been, by any measure, a long day. Although Heath had dozed during most of the five-hour trek from New Jersey to Dad's boyhood home in Massachusetts, missing out on most of the beautiful October day and the fiery orange trees along the highway, it was still exhausting—

traveling a long way for an inheritance that didn't come. At least not the way either Heath or Dad had expected.

Dreams of his new family lifestyle had played in his mind for days. Maybe now Dad would buy him the iPod Shuffle he'd been wanting for months. They could finally get rid of Dad's beat-up Volvo wagon and get something better, maybe a BMW like Mike's dad had, or something with a Hemi.

Heath shivered as a small wave of guilt washed over him. Someone had died—someone who had his same name. His grandfather. Heath didn't really know him, so it was hard to miss him, but something had seemed wrong about counting on his fortune—seeing the death of his grandfather, the man everyone called “Senior,” as an opportunity and not a tragedy.

Now, today, Heath knew from the tone of Dad's wakeup call that he'd be on his case all week. Dad had taken the week off from his job to attend the funeral, but only used one day—the funeral was in a few days, but Heath had no idea if Dad was planning another trip. So that meant four days of chores, four days of listening to his father's relentless nagging and complaining, maybe as a matter of course, maybe as punishment for Heath's suspension from school. And that, in turn, meant Heath had to be silent—the best response to Dad's baiting.

As Heath reluctantly headed downstairs, though, he had

to admit he understood Dad's frustration.

The day before, Heath had struggled to remain still as the warped wooden slat of a very uncomfortable chair periodically jabbed his lower back, keeping him from drifting off in the attorney's tired-looking conference room. While only three days had passed since his grandfather had fallen from his roof and died, Heath hadn't seen Senior for seven or eight years, and it was strange to think those seven or eight years would now become forever. It was yet another part of their lousy life to blame his father for—when Senior didn't give his son a dime after selling the factory, Dad had stayed away for good.

It was a struggle for Heath even to remember what Senior had looked like. The last crisp memory he had was of the final Christmas they'd enjoyed as a family, at his big Whately, Massachusetts farmhouse.

And now the only thing left was the will, read by a short, bald lawyer named Lloyd Pierce.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Lloyd had said in a voice that sounded like he began each day gargling with gravel. Lloyd was the friend of his grandfather who'd called them from the hospital to let them know of Senior's death.

When Dad had stood to shake Lloyd's hand, the top of the lawyer's bald head barely reached Dad's shoulder.

Though Heath's dad sometimes spoke about the importance of hiring a short lawyer, Heath could never remember

the connection between skill and size. Lloyd's height made him wonder if it was coincidence, or if his grandfather had also been privy to this supposed tidbit of practical wisdom.

Lloyd shook Heath's hand with a firm squeeze and said, "Shall we get right to the reading?"

"Yes, please, Lloyd," Dad replied.

Heath watched the dust kick up as Dad plopped back down in his chair—he had very little patience these days.

Reading Senior's own words, Lloyd cleared his throat and began. "I, Heath Wellington, Sr.," read Lloyd, "being of sound mind—well, as sound as one may expect at my age—have spent the last several years reflecting . . . and contemplating the legacy I will leave my son Heath Wellington, Jr. I have recently come to the unpleasant realization that I squandered the majority of my life in the pursuit of material wealth. This lapse of judgment is something I deeply regret."

That's when Heath had begun to suspect that this will wouldn't be quite what they'd expected.

It sucked, all of it. Heath wished he could press the reset button on the last week, going back to before Senior's death, and before the suspension he didn't even deserve, for cheating on a history test he hadn't really cheated on, not that Dad would understand. No wonder Dad was on edge—Heath was in a lousy mood himself. Usually this happened when there were weekend chores to get through or

late-night homework assignments to finish, but now that he was suspended for the next two weeks, the schoolwork wasn't an excuse. He was just drained.

At the bottom of the steps, Heath looked left and right, as if his dad was a monster to be avoided. He tried to savor these last few moments before he was berated, or put to work, or whatever else his dad had planned. He tried to remember the look on Dad's face when Lloyd had read the will.

"Just how much pain I have caused has become more evident over the last few years," Senior wrote, "when I tried time and time again, unsuccessfully, to reconcile with Junior." Heath's grandfather had gone by the shorthand of Senior, his dad had always been Junior, leaving Heath, and Heath alone, with the name they all shared. "I've written letters asking him to bring my grandson to my house for the holidays," Senior's will continued. "I've sent cards, presents, and even money in hopes that he would visit and find it in his heart to begin to forgive me."

Heath had stared at Dad then, wondering why Heath had never received any of the cards and gifts. He could understand why Dad would keep the money, but why would he keep gifts and letters?

It was a shock, for sure, but not as big as the one Dad got a moment later when Lloyd read that Dad would receive his father's estate if, and only if, he took "a new direction in

life”—by successfully managing Senior’s Bed and Breakfast, with Heath, for the next three months.

“*Ech-em*,” Dad had interrupted. “Help me here, Lloyd. Bed and Breakfast?”

Lloyd nodded. “That,” he replied, “would be your family homestead on Cheshire Lane. I believe it’s been in the family since 1862 and, if I am not mistaken, it’s where you grew up. Senior began renovating it three years ago, with a man named Winsted. They turned the old place into a modest Bed and Breakfast. It’s been catering to mostly unfortunate souls ever since. At present, there are three tenants, plus Winsted, living there.”

“Oh . . . this keeps getting better. Just what I need—a house full of strays.” Dad’s chair screeched on the wooden floor as he pushed it back and he began pacing the office. With each turn, the scowl on his face became more severe, the furrows of his brow deeper.

Lloyd had asked Dad then if he wanted something to drink, which was a loaded question, but Dad, fortunately, only asked for water. So did Heath.

Shortly thereafter, cracking the cap on his water and swallowing noisily, Dad had said, “All right, what other nonsense did the old bastard have lined up for me?”

The “other nonsense,” Heath remembered, was a laundry list of stipulations. Dad couldn’t sell the place—if he did, the entire inheritance would go into a trust. He couldn’t

be rude or inconsiderate or nasty to the current tenants—indeed, if the four, and only four, tenants were unsatisfied, the inheritance, again, would be lost.

Dad had started pacing then. “Lloyd, you’ve got to be kidding,” he said, running his fingers through his blond hair, tugging at it in frustration. “Is this some kind of sick joke my father is playing on me from beyond the grave? One final slap in the face?”

“I assure you, this is your father’s will, just as he intended. I was by his side when he drafted it.” He paused. “While I’ll admit it is a tad unorthodox, this is truly his final legacy. During the last few months, he spoke more and more of his desire to reconcile with you.”

Without thinking, Heath blurted out, “What was Senior like?”

Dad glared. But Lloyd smiled.

“He was tough as aged hardwood,” said Lloyd, “and driven by a single purpose: to retire a rich man. His own father had died a pauper. While he had just a third-grade education, your grandfather reached his goal: He became a savvy businessman and a millionaire many times—”

“Can you skip the history lesson?” Dad said. “We have to get back on the road in order to make Jersey by this evening.”

Heath had sunk into his seat then. It was like Dad was keeping Senior from him in death as much as in life. *And*

you called him an old bastard? Heath thought. *Look who's talking. You kept gifts and cards from your own son.*

But Lloyd ran through the rest of it quickly—the weekly \$250 stipend to provide breakfast, pay expenses, and provide Heath a suitable allowance. The \$200 weekly rent paid by all four tenants combined. And the requirement that all chores and everyday tasks be completed by Junior and Heath, and no one else.

And, finally, Lloyd had withdrawn a lime green envelope from a pile of papers, tapped it twice, and slid it across the table to Dad. “He also wrote you an apology.”

Dad had snatched up the letter, grimacing at something written on the envelope, and placed it into a side jacket pocket, shaking his head.

Within minutes of departing the attorney's office, Dad had decided to return to New Jersey, determined never to set foot in that inn. Forever a creature of habit, he'd chosen to drive late into the night rather than sleep at the nearby Whately Hotel. They'd left town after grabbing a greasy burger at a fifties-style diner. During the first hour of the drive to New Jersey, Heath had crashed hard into a dreamless sleep.

But now, forced awake and in the kitchen, Heath spotted several travel-weary banana boxes lining the kitchen counter like used books on a shelf. Heath yawned as he pulled the milk from the fridge and sniffed it to be sure it hadn't

soured.

“Putting some stuff in storage?” Heath asked.

“Not quite,” said Dad. And what came next, Heath would never have expected—not after his dad had so clearly, and so angrily, made up his mind.

“Get your things,” said Dad. “We’re moving out.”