

CHAPTER 1

Ryan Webster stared at his iPhone. The text arrived at 12:01 a.m.

*Come now and don't tell anyone else.*

He reread the message, hoping its meaning would magically change. It didn't. He jammed the phone back into his jeans. Getting messages at midnight on Saturday wasn't unusual. At seventeen, he looked forward to late-night texts and weekends that tested total irresponsibility. But it was the sender that made this message so strange. It came from the only person for whom he'd drop everything, including his girlfriend Sarah. And it signaled an end that he didn't want to come—and a beginning he didn't want to face.

Despite the hammering thunderstorms pounding South Florida, he made it to the parking lot of Saint Paul's Hospice in ten minutes. He cruised past the few cars in the lot and parked his pickup next to the steps leading to the front doors. The wipers stopped, and sheets of rain soaked the windshield. Saint Paul's Hospice was the place to go for end-of-life care and spiritual and emotional support. At least, that's what the brochure sitting on his dashboard said. A bolt of lightning exploded above the trees and provided a brief snapshot of the building. They'd done a great job making the hospice look like someone's sprawling ranch home. A long porch ran the entire length of the building. White wooden rocking chairs added to the deception. But the place always had a haunting glow at night, and the sheets of rain blurring Ryan's view made it even more unsettling.

He shook his head. He'd rather be anyplace but here. The man had done so much for him. He opened the door and got out. Immediately drenched by the warm Miami rain, he pivoted around the railing and bounded up the steps, three at a time. Then he waited at the glass double doors until the night attendant spotted him. Ryan was no stranger here. Six hours earlier he'd made his daily visit to Phineas Barnum Webster.

The magnetic lock clicked, and Ryan stepped inside, pushing back his wet hair and dripping water on the tile. He was sure he looked like he'd just finished his training session for the 4x100 freestyle.

“Thanks, Maggie.”

He'd grown friendly with Maggie while coming here each evening for the past two weeks. She was younger than his mom, but not young enough to stir any romantic interest.

“Hi, Ryan. I didn't expect to see you back so soon.”

He remembered the text. Still, he thought an explanation for his return was in order.

“Grandpa looked a little worse than usual this afternoon, so I thought I'd check in on the way home.”

“That's kind of you. Your mother must be proud to have such a good son.”

His jaw tightened, and he looked toward the entrance to the ward. He was always uncomfortable with compliments. Maggie pressed the magnetic release and the door quietly vibrated. He eased it open.

Ryan crept down the hall. Pale green wallpaper attempted to hide the sterility of the place, but the white linoleum floors, bright fluorescent lights, and smell of disinfectant reminded him this was the ass end of a glorified hospital. The last stop before you crap your pants then check out for good. Most doors were open, and the rooms were dimly lit. He tried not to look inside but couldn't help himself. Some patients lay on their inclined beds with their mouths open—asleep, he hoped. Others were awake and stared at the silent TV mounted on the wall. One of the residents offered an expressionless stare as he passed. He looked ancient to him. He consoled himself with the fact the man had lived a full life and this was just part of the process. But then he passed a child with a shaved head and tired, sunken eyes. He hung his head and cursed every childhood disease he remembered.

He stopped at the end of the hallway. The intersection formed a T. He scanned the hallway to his left and then turned right. He slowed his pace and approached his grandfather's door. The lump in his throat took up more permanent residence.

For a moment he stood in the doorway and looked at his grandfather. He lay on the bed with his eyes closed. Despite the ravaging cancer inside him, he was still an imposing figure. Ryan knew he got

his rugged square jaw and chiseled cheekbones from his grandpa. And despite living under fluorescent lights for the past two weeks, his grandfather still held a tan. Ryan assumed all of the adventures as a zoologist for the Smithsonian in jungles, deserts, and tundra around the world had tattooed his skin.

His grandfather had lived seventy-four years and seen more beauty and tragedy than anyone else Ryan knew. He'd spent hours telling Ryan about the modern discoveries he'd made and the expeditions that resulted in identifying and cataloging hundreds of new species. He'd built natural history exhibits around the world to share his love of animals with those who did not have the good fortune to see them thriving in their own habitat. Along with his father, Ryan's great-grandfather, he'd started the most successful wild animal park outside of the San Diego Zoo, the Webster Primate Park, and made his fortune on that business. But as far as Ryan was concerned, the greatest accomplishments of his life weren't the discoveries, the awards, the dinners with heads of state, or the fame. They were those years he'd spent mentoring and encouraging his grandson.

"I can feel you burning a hole in me with that stare, Ryan." Phineas never opened his eyes.

Ryan chuckled. Grandpa always had a sixth sense. "You always know when I'm around, Grandpa. You're kinda scary."

They both laughed.

"Not scary, Ryan. It's a gift. A gift you have, if you choose to develop it."

Ryan just grinned.

"What's up with the midnight text message? I didn't know you even knew how to text, let alone after midnight."

"Never too late to learn."

Phineas smiled and opened his eyes. Ryan thought about how little time his grandpa had left to learn, and the lump in his throat choked off his reply.

"Come sit here next to me on the bed. I have something very important to tell you, and I can only do it once. You'll want to listen closely."

He certainly had Ryan's attention now. Ryan maneuvered past the IV stands and monitors and sat at his grandfather's side. The rhythmic traces of his grandfather's heart appeared on the monitor across the room as if they were some morbid countdown. "Okay, Grandpa, shoot."

His grandfather turned and gazed at him with bright blue eyes. They flickered with life and excitement, as always.

"What I'm about to say you can't share with anyone. Understood?" He wheezed and coughed. "Your great-grandfather wanted it this way."

Ryan nodded and leaned in a little closer. He recalled the hours of stories his grandpa had told him about how his great-grandfather had explored the world from 1910 until his death in 1976. He'd described how Zachariah Webster had encountered new species, scoundrels, and geniuses, but his most prized encounter was when he was a young boy and met P. T. Barnum. In honor of that man, he'd named his only son Phineas and made Barnum the family middle name, carried by three generations of Websters.

"In 1926 your great-grandfather made a discovery. He knew the world wasn't ready for it to be revealed. We would have destroyed it. So he kept it secret until he was on his deathbed and then he passed the clues on to me."

"What was it, Grandpa?"

His grandpa's wheezing got louder and Ryan leaned in closer. "He'd told me that there would be a Webster who had the right abilities and who would know how and when to share it with the world. He said I would recognize that individual, and when I did, it was my responsibility to pass it on to that person. He made me promise. Those were the last words my father spoke before he died."

Ryan was momentarily distracted by a thunderclap and glanced at the rain pelting the window.

"So who is it?"

Ryan was convinced it wasn't him. After all, he'd been barely pulling a B-minus average in school and had been sent to the office enough to know what each of the principal's family members looked like.

A lightning bolt flashed and the lights flickered. His grandfather grabbed Ryan's forearm.

“It’s you, Ryan. It’s you.”

Ryan pulled his arm back.

“No. No! It can’t be me.”

His grandpa yanked his arm closer.

“You and I both know the gift you have.”

Ryan stiffened. “But that’s not a gift. It’s a curse. And you promised never to tell anyone about it.”

“I didn’t and I won’t, but you need to know it’s not a curse.”

“I don’t want anyone to know—they’ll destroy me at school.”

“Don’t worry—you’ll only have to use it if you succeed.”

“Succeed. I have no clue what to do to even get started.”

“Ryan, I’ve told you before to rely on your intellect. You can figure this out and I know what that gift can do.”

He decided his protests were useless, and he felt guilty arguing with a dying man. He cut his eyes to the window as a bright flash of lightning lit up the room.

“What did he discover?”

“Monkeys.”

“Monkeys?”

“Not just any monkeys—swimming monkeys.”

Ryan glanced at the IV and wondered if the morphine drip had Grandpa high. They’d told him his grandfather’s mental faculties might falter just before the end, and now he was convinced it was here—the old man had lost it.

“Okay, Grandpa.”

Phineas’s eyes flashed.

“Don’t patronize me, boy! I’m not loopy. You’ll want to hear the rest of this. Don’t let your youthful impatience get the best of you. You have an obligation here.”

Ryan refocused on his grandfather.

“I don’t understand.”

“These monkeys *learned* how to swim,” Phineas explained.

“But the Java monkeys in the park wade and dive in the water.”

“Did you ever see them do the Australian crawl?”

“The what?”

“Boy, for someone who holds the state record in that event ... the freestyle!”

Ryan immediately had an image: a monkey swimming like one of his teammates. He chuckled.

His grandpa had always been a jokester.

But Phineas remained silent, and his glare intensified. Ryan saw it was no joke. He remembered all the time he and his grandfather had spent in the New World monkey exhibits. He’d never seen a monkey swim like a human. They certainly had the physical attributes and strength. He stopped smiling and squirmed on the bed.

“Not so funny now,” Phineas said. He gave Ryan a grin. Ryan had seen it a hundred times before when his grandpa knew Ryan had learned some abstract scientific point.

“There’s something else. Something your great-grandpa said would change the world forever, if and when we were ready for it.”

Ryan stopped squirming. “What is it?”

His grandfather released Ryan’s forearm, rolled onto his back and searched the ceiling for an answer.

“I can’t tell you,” he said.

“Can’t tell me?”

Phineas turned back to him and scowled. “Not here and not now.”

“Why not?”

Phineas opened his mouth to answer, but then wagged his head in frustration. “Because the world may not be ready now, and besides, you never know who’s listening.”

Ryan quickly scanned the room. No one was listening, except him.

“Not ready?”

“That’s what I said. My father said that because of what was going on in the world at the time of the discovery. When my father told me what I told you, he said we still weren’t ready.”

“What was going on?”

“The year before his discovery, in 1925, the State of Tennessee vs. John Thomas Scopes was happening.”

“What?”

“You saw *Inherit the Wind*, didn’t you?”

“Uh, I remember the title. I think we saw it in junior high.”

“What do they do in the schools these days?”

Ryan shrugged, as he always did when asked that question.

“Well, the movie is about what the papers at the time called the Scopes Monkey Trial. John Scopes was a high school teacher who intentionally violated a law on the books there called the Butler Act. Essentially, it made it unlawful for anyone in a state-funded establishment to teach any theory, such as evolution, that denies the story of divine creation in the Bible. Scopes taught a chapter from *On the Origin of Species* by Darwin.”

“So? They teach that stuff all the time now. I remember you and me discussing Charles Darwin and his work on the Galapagos Islands.”

“That’s true, but back then this was a very divisive issue in the US. Divine creation versus man from monkeys.”

“So that’s why Great-grandpa Webster didn’t want to announce his discovery?”

“Yes, partly. He thought the evolutionists would’ve used it to prove they were right, and some might have taken it as far as trying to prove there is no God. The radical Christians would have tried to destroy the monkeys to protect their literal view of man’s creation.”

“And now they’re ready?”

“No. There’s more. He said that there were two aspects of the discovery that would cause many people to do anything to get at the monkeys. Lie, cheat, even murder. He didn’t want to be part of that and said the world was not ready, so he put everything in a notebook for safe keeping.”

Ryan’s head was spinning. How could something that sounded as ridiculous as swimming monkeys have that effect on mankind? What was *he* supposed to do with this?

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it’s time, and you have the gift.”

“Why is it time?”

“Your great-grandfather did tell me they were in a rainforest. And I received a cryptic message from one of his old friends that said their rainforest was being destroyed to make room for some pipeline. The squatters following the pipeline were burning the jungle along the route. He said they won’t be around much longer.”

“So it’s time to tell the world?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s time to be sure they’re safe and ensure they survive. You’ll have to decide if it’s time to share them with the world.”

Ryan dropped his shoulders. There was the punch line. *He* was the one expected to find them and to make a decision that could change the world forever. He barely kept gas in his truck. How would he do this? Grandpa always expected more of him than he felt he had, and usually he delivered. But this was too much.

Ryan looked at the rain on the window again. “I can’t do it.”

Phineas raised himself on one elbow and grabbed Ryan’s arm. “You have to. There’s no one else.”

“But I’m just a kid. I have no money and no idea where to start.”

Phineas rolled on his back again, and Ryan heard his breathing getting labored.

“You’ll have a little help.”



“From who? Not Dad. He can’t stand to help me. The only thing he hates worse than helping me is the Primate Park. You know how he is. Everything by the book. Get through school, get into college, get a degree, and get out of the house.”

Phineas coughed uncontrollably. Ryan adjusted his pillows. Finally, the attack subsided, and Phineas drew in a short breath.

“He loves you, I’m sure. It’s me he doesn’t care for. He’s always been jealous of the time I spent away building my career and the park. You know I love him, but he’s of no use here.”

“Then who?”

Phineas began to cough again, and a nurse appeared in the doorway with a syringe. Ryan moved from the bed, and she injected the clear liquid into the IV. More morphine. In seconds the coughing stopped, and the excitement in his grandfather’s eyes disappeared.

“Mr. Webster, it’s best if you give your grandpa a little time to sleep.”

Ryan hovered and looked down at his grandfather. Phineas waved him away from the bed.

“We’ll talk again soon,” he said softly, and closed his eyes.

Ryan looked back at the nurse, and she motioned him outside. He squinted as his eyes adjusted to the bright lights in the hallway. His legs felt much heavier than on the way in, and he stared at the floor as he trudged down the corridor. He opened the double doors to the reception area and passed by Maggie without looking up.

“Goodnight, Ryan.”

He waved his hand but kept walking. Outside, it had stopped raining. He opened the door, got in and started his truck. He hesitated and looked back at the rocking chairs on the front porch of the hospice. He knew his grandpa was dying, and this was his last wish. He’d given him the love, time, and guidance that his father never did. Now, he’d be gone. Ryan felt more alone than he ever had. He jammed the truck into gear, turned out of the parking lot, and drove slowly toward home. In his side view mirror, he noticed a dark sedan in the lot turn on its lights. At first, it didn’t move. He drove to the corner and turned right and kept his attention split between the passenger’s side view mirror and the street ahead. Remembering

his grandfather's warnings, he slowed, looked back toward the hospice entrance, and saw the car race from the lot. He pulled behind a dumpster adjacent to the convenience store on the corner and turned off his lights. The sedan turned the corner and slowed. The two occupants' heads swiveled left and right. He slipped down in the seat as they passed. The passenger slammed his fist into the dash and the car accelerated out of sight. Convinced they were gone, he pushed himself upright. Maybe they'd visited someone in the hospice and were lost—maybe it was a coincidence. He didn't want to believe the alternative. Still, he pulled the truck forward and decided to turn left—take another way home—just in case.

