

CHAPTER 1: NOAH

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania — Saturday, May 25, 2024

Noah rushed into the hospital. From a nearby parking lot, where he had left his aging Subaru, he ran into Philadelphia Medical Center like a fireman running into a burning building. He did so because he feared that time to see a man who had raised him was running out.

The recent graduate of Temple University had run from one place to another since his brother, Jake, had summoned him on Thursday. He had taken trains, planes, and automobiles to get from Budapest, where he had traveled with college friends, to Philadelphia, where he had lived for the last four of his twenty-two years. He had done so at warp speed.

Now Noah Maclean was here, in a sprawling urban hospital, racing up marble steps and striding down sterile hallways. He was doing what he could to reach his grandfather before his grandfather was no more.

When Noah reached Room 312 at six thirty, he knocked on a partially open door and gently pushed it open. He found his only sibling watching over a sleeping patient from a bedside chair. He found trouble in spades.

"How is he doing?"

Jake Maclean turned to Noah. With teary, vacant eyes, he looked more like a beaten man of eighty than a cheerful boy of fifteen.

"He's not doing well."

Noah grabbed a padded aluminum chair, slid it to the other side of the slightly elevated bed, and sat down. He gazed at his brother.

"What happened?"

Jake wiped away a tear.

"I don't know exactly. I just know Grandpa took a really bad turn after you left for Hungary. When he got so bad that he couldn't even get out of bed, I called for an ambulance. I didn't know what else to do."

Noah frowned.

"Has anyone run any tests?"

Jake nodded.

"A doctor did yesterday. He said Grandpa's cancer has spread like a fire to other parts of his body. He gave him less than a week."

Noah closed his eyes. Though he had feared that 2024 might be a difficult year for his family, he had not thought for a minute that May might be a difficult *month*. When he had left for Budapest on Sunday, he believed that Rory Maclean had at least several more months in his valiant fight against lung cancer. Now he wondered if he had several more hours.

Noah opened his eyes, looked at the patient, and noted everything from his nasal cannula to his morphine drip. He itemized the medical crutches of a once vibrant man who was living on borrowed time.

He took a deep breath, pulled himself together, and turned again to the boy who had carried a heavy burden for days. He spoke in a soft voice.

"Where is Uncle Doug?"

Jake eyed his brother.

"He's still on his trip. He's in New Guinea with Aunt Donna and all of the others in their group. He won't be back for at least a week."

Noah tilted his head.

"Have you tried to contact him?"

Jake nodded.

"I've called him, emailed him, and even messaged him, but I haven't succeeded in reaching him. I think New Guinea's off the grid."

Noah could believe that. He had heard from others that Papua New Guinea, a mountainous backwater with limited infrastructure, had some of the worst cell phone service and internet coverage on earth.

Douglas Maclean, a retired tax attorney, had left town three weeks earlier to explore the South Pacific with his wife, several longtime friends, and a senior tour group. He had left Rory, his ailing older brother, in the hands of his grandsons, who had insisted they could handle any emergency.

Noah frowned. For the umpteenth time, he regretted joining his friends on a hastily arranged graduation trip. He wished now that he had put the interests of his grandfather and brother ahead of his own.

He sank into his chair. Even as a lacrosse player who topped six feet and two hundred pounds, he felt small. Like he had when his parents died in a car accident eight years earlier, he felt hopeless and inadequate.

Noah looked at his grandfather. He wondered if he would ever again get an opportunity to speak to his hero, a recent widower who had survived a heart attack, a stroke, and years of bad health. He wondered if he would have a chance to even say goodbye. Then he got an answer.

As if prompted by God Himself, Rory awoke. He turned his head a bit and gazed at the new arrival with groggy eyes. He spoke in a faint voice.

"Noah?"

Noah perked up.

"It's me, Grandpa."

Rory furrowed his brow.

"I thought you went to Budapest."

"I did."

"Did you *see* anything?"

"I saw enough," Noah said. He chuckled. "I came home as soon as I tired of the weather and the Hungarian goulash."

"You're lying."

"I am."

Rory mustered a smile. He clearly appreciated his grandson's attempt to hide his disappointment over cutting short a meaningful trip.

"Perhaps you can see Budapest again."

"Perhaps I can."

"Have you spoken to the doctor?"

"I haven't," Noah said, "but I know—" He turned away for a moment to hide tears that had started to well in his eyes. "I know about your test results and your prognosis. I know that time is short."

"It is."

"How are you feeling?"

Rory grimaced.

"I'm feeling all right."

"Now *you're* lying."

"It's my prerogative."

Noah took his grandfather's bony hand, gave it a gentle squeeze, and held onto it for several seconds. He did not know if he could possibly comfort a man who was racing toward death, but he at least wanted to try.

"Can I get you anything?"

Rory shook his head.

"I have everything I need right here."

Noah smiled through fresh tears as he digested a kind and gracious answer from a kind and gracious man. He had expected his grandfather to ask for a cheeseburger or a milkshake or some other unhealthy concoction he could slip past the oncology nurses on a Saturday night.

"I guess you do."

"Trust me, I do."

"Can I at least *do* something?"

"You can."

"Oh?"

Rory nodded.

"You can contact Doug and Donna."

Noah frowned.

"Jake already tried."

Rory turned to Jake.

"Did you call the hotel?"

Jake nodded.

"I called the tour company, too, but I couldn't get a hold of a real person or even a messaging service. I got busy signals."

"I see."

Noah jumped in.

"I'll try to contact them. I'll do it as soon as we leave. I'll call the embassies and local authorities if I have to. I'll get it done."

"I know you will."

"Is there anything else I can do?"

Rory winced.

"There is, as a matter of fact."

"What's that?"

"You can let me clear my conscience."

Noah reclaimed Rory's hand. He could see that the conversation was taking a toll on the patient. He did not want to push him too hard.

"Can't you wait till tomorrow?"

"No, Noah, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I have to *speak*, that's why. I have to tell both of you something while I still can, something I should have told you years ago."

"What's that?"

Rory paused to catch his breath. He seemed determined, if not able, to blurt out something he had withheld. He spoke in a raspy voice.

"I'm not who you think I am."

Jake snapped out of his stupor. Suddenly engaged by a loaded comment that came from out of the blue, he stared at his grandfather.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm a fraud."

"You're a what?"

Rory struggled again.

"I'm a fraud, fellas. I'm someone who has lied to you about who I am and where I came from. I need to come clean while I can."

Noah jumped back in.

"You don't need to do anything except rest and take care of yourself. You can save your stories and confessions for another day."

Rory grabbed Noah's arm.

"I don't *have* another day!"

Noah leaned forward.

"Then what is it? What's this all about?"

Rory grimaced and sighed. Once again, he seemed to struggle to find the strength to even speak. He glanced at Jake and then at Noah.

"It's about a violation of trust."

"I don't understand."

"You'll find the answers and more in a letter, a long, detailed letter I wrote and put away shortly after your grandmother died."

Noah stared at Rory.

"Where *is* this letter?"

"It's in my desk at home."

"Does Uncle Doug know about it?"

Rory shook his head.

"He doesn't know about the letter, but he knows my secret. He knows it because he's a part of it. He's been a part of it since the start."

Noah glanced at Jake. He could tell by the look on his brother's face that he was as puzzled and confused as he was. Gripped by everything from curiosity to frustration to fear, he turned again to the patient.

"Just tell us what this is about."

Rory struggled to speak.

"I'm a man from the past."

"You're a what?"

"I'm a time travel—"

Noah watched in horror as Rory's head dropped and steady blips on the patient monitor became a steady tone. He turned to Jake.

"Get the nurse! Get her now!"

Jake ran out of the room. Rattled by all he had seen and heard, he raced to a nurse's station that was only fifty feet away.

Noah placed his hands on Rory's shoulders and tried to shake life back into his old, frail body, but he shook in vain. Mere minutes after entering a dying man's hospital room, he knew the man was gone.