

## Seventy Cents

“Is that another tattoo?” Gramps voice growled from his bed. David paused in unpacking the weekly bag of goodies and flexed part of his forearm for him.

“Not exactly,” David said. “I have an entire design for my arm, but I can only pay for parts of it at a time. This is just the next section of it.”

“What is it?” Gramps sat up on one elbow trying to study his arm. The young man held it closer for his inspection.

Gramps grunted and leaned back into his pillows. “Still a Tolkien fan, I see. You know he doesn’t hold a candle to Lewis.”

“You really want to have that argument today? I brought the fourth Irving book for us to finish today.” David shuffled through his bag, looking for the novel.

Gramps ignored the question, instead asking, “Have you seen your mother lately?”

David’s lips pressed thinly for a moment, but he answered, “No, not for about two months. I heard she’s back over at West End, with that bunch of yahoos.”

“Still using then, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Think you could find her? Bring her over to see me?” Gramps asked.

“Really? Why?” David stopped what he was doing to stare at his grandfather.

“That doctor came by to visit this morning.”

“Which one?”

“The Indian one. The one I like.”

“What did he have to say?” David asked. He felt a sudden nausea.

“Getting close to that time, boy.” Gramps eyes slid away from David’s and he picked at his blanket, studying the paisley print.

“They aren’t going to try anything else?” David asked. He scooted the chair closer to the bed with a loud squeak of wood on tile and sat with a thump. His large brown eyes never left his grandfather’s face.

Gramps pursed his lips and gave a slight shake of his head.

“I don’t know what to say,” David told him.

“We don’t need to say anything, boy,” Gramps said. “You and I, we’ve always been good. I was always working, I know. But we shared the books, right?” He raised his eyes and smiled at his grandson.

“Yeah, yeah, we did,” David said as he returned the old man’s grin.

“Don’t you dare go getting my name tattooed on your arm after I’m gone, you hear me?” Gramps pointed one gnarled, arthritic finger in David’s face.

David’s grin widened and he thrust his chest forward, pulling aside part of his t-shirt, “No, old man, not my arm. I’ll put your name right here. Frederick, in nice curly letters.”

“You do that and I’ll haunt you to the end of your days,” Gramps barked.

David laughed but the joy quickly faded. “Do you really want me to find Mom? You two will just get into an argument. Especially if she’s high.”

Gramps exhaled slowly and he looked around the antiseptic room. “That’s true. Maybe better to remember what she used to be like, before all that.” He looked back over at David. “And at least, she did one thing right, bringing you into the world, even if Grandma had to take over.”

“I don’t remember her any other way,” David said.

“No, I guess you don’t.” Gramps reached forward and patted David’s hand. “But we both have great memories of Grandma. And for me,” Gramps pointed at the backpack, “you’ll have memories of all the books we’ve read.”

David’s eyes glistened for a moment and seeing them, Gramps said, “Get out the book, boy. I’m not dying today. Let’s see what happens in book four, even if I never get to finish book five.”

David pulled the thick book from his backpack and read the next chapter, pausing after sections for them to argue over the book. The discussions were the favorite part for each of them. By the end of the visit, he had read through to the end of the book.

“Not a bad read,” David said. “I like his style, even if he’s a bit long-winded.”

“He’s not long-winded. You’re just from the impatient generation,” Gramps replied. “I do wish we could get through the last book of the series. It’s going to feel odd not to finish it.”

“I can pick it up at the library tonight,” David told him. “Maybe we can finish it.”

Gramps shook his head. “Boy, those books run more than 500 pages each. You won’t have a voice left if you try to cram in that much reading.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that?” David asked. “I can come every evening and read a chapter.” David clung to the possibility of doing something for the old man.

Gramps grunted a response, and then coughed with a painful hacking sound. “Dammit, that hurts,” he said, waving at the water bottle on his tray table. David handed it to him, helping him to maneuver the straw to his mouth. Gramps sipped and nodded at his grandson when he finished. David set the bottle back on the table. Gramps said, “The medicine dries me out. I feel like I’ve been on a three-day bender.”

“Do you need anything else?” David asked.

“No, the hospital’s taking care of everything. But, if you want to come by tomorrow, we can start the book.” Gramps closed his eyes. He murmured, “That might be nice.”

David patted his grandfather on the hand and said, “Then I’ll see you tomorrow.” He gathered up his things and left the room on quiet footsteps.

That evening, he stopped by the library and was pleased to find the fifth book of the series on the shelf. He waited in line, his mind sifting through all that his grandfather had meant to him. When it was his turn, the librarian took his card and the book, entering it into the system, and stamping the book with a loud thwack with the due date. “It’s due back in two weeks,” she told him, as she handed it over with a smile. “Enjoy it.”

Two weeks. David clenched his teeth at the thought, but he nodded politely to the librarian and accepted the book and his card.

The next day, David visited the hospital room and began reading the book to his grandfather.

Every day, he would go. Some days, he would read two chapters. Other days, as his grandfather struggled with the pain, he would read only one or two pages. When they talked, it was always of the book.

At the end of each visit, Gramps would grin as David packed away the book for the night. “I might just hear the end of it, David.”

“That’s the plan, Gramps.”

Every day, chapter, after chapter, David read out loud.

The discussions became shorter.

Gramps would listen with his eyes closed, and sometimes his fists clenched in pain.

“Keep reading, David,” Gramps would say, anytime his grandson would pause.

David would bow his head and pick up reading the next sentence.

It was a Tuesday, David noted, as he stood in line to return the book to the library. He handed it over to the librarian, who punched it up on her computer. “Must have been a good book,” she said. “You look like you stayed up all night to read it.”

David wiped at his red-rimmed eyes and gave her a twitch of lips in an attempt to smile.

“Oh dear,” she said, “The book is overdue. I’m afraid you’ll have to pay a fee.”

David nodded, not surprised.

She studied the screen for a moment and then said, “Looks like that will be seventy cents.”

David pulled change from his pocket and counted out the coins. Handing them over to her, he said, “Worth every penny.”