

# Chapter One

I've never liked surprises, and I've always thought life's transformative days should come with proper emissaries. Notifications. Alerts. Signs. But even now with the benefit of sixty years to plumb my memory, I can't recall anything unusual about the beginning of March 14, 1959. I didn't spot a butterfly emerging from its cocoon when I kangarooed from the bed. A wise boobook owl didn't alight in the mulberry tree below my window. And if I dreamt about a phoenix immolating and rising from the ashes—not that I'd have understood the symbolism then as a boy of eight going on nine—I forgot the vision the moment I awoke.

No, I'm quite certain the day began just like any other Saturday morning when my father was not on call at the hospital with him holering, "Let's go, Brose." I put away my model ship, pulled a polo shirt over my head, and clattered down the fourteen wooden steps to the kitchen. He pitched me an apple, and I followed him through the squeaky screen door. Although it was only a little after seven-thirty, the omnipresent and relentless Western Australia sun had already crested the house, flooding the driveway with golden light.

After a cursory survey of the sky, my father lowered the top of his sparkling blue Porsche 356 and slipped inside. Still clasping the apple, I wrapped my fingers around the passenger door handle.

"Ahem." He pinned his gaze on the half-eaten apple. "You know my rules."

I wolfed down the apple, wiped juice from my chin, and tossed the core in the rubbish bin. My father nodded, and mindful of the already hot leather, I eased into the car. He gripped the shifter and—

Stopped.

Backlit by the sun, a pail of shells swinging from her hand, my mother, wearing a sunhat and a one-piece swimsuit, came around the corner. She waved and called, “Drive carefully, Alec.”

Every morning my mother admonished my father to drive carefully, and every morning he cheerily ignored her, departing with screeching tires and a thunderous engine. Fate had ordained Alexandros Serafeim to be a meteor, a glorious shooting star that streaked splendidly, but too swiftly, through life’s firmament. He lived like he knew his lot, always sizzling with high voltage energy. He did not—*could not*—drive slowly.

Now, however, my father did everything except ignore his wife. Like all little boys, I considered my mother beautiful, but I failed to see why her squeezing seawater from her long sable hair and brushing white grains of sand from between her toes so captivated my father. I tapped my fingers on the seat. I watched an albatross riding the sea breeze, the bird’s snowy wings juxtaposing starkly against the cobalt sky. Finally, I blew out my breath and socked his bicep. “C’mon, Dad.”

“Your mother is a *witch*. She steals a man’s mind so he can contemplate nothing else.” My father grinned and playfully punched me back. “When you’re older, if you’re lucky, you’ll find a girl who casts a spell on you, and you’ll understand.”

He blew his bride a kiss and backed down the driveway. When we reached the street, he slipped me a sly smile and stomped the accelerator. Boasting a four-cam Carrera engine, his Porsche was a street-legal racecar. The car launched like a rocket, roaring to life and pitching me back against the seat.

My father zipped across the slender connector linking the tiny oceanside community of Halcyon Reef to the coast road and swung the car toward the south. The wind whistled past my ears as he drove the

winding and treacherous freeway like star-crossed Formula One driver Alberto Ascari, flinging the car into the curves and gunning the engine down the straightaways.

Ten miles passed in a heartbeat, the road narrowed, and my father turned into Perth's business district. Although 400,000 people resided in the burgeoning metropolitan area, with the Indian Ocean extending five thousand miles to Africa on the western side and a murderous seventeen-hundred-mile red desert stretching to the east, even the city center maintained the illusion of a frontier outpost on the world's ragged edge.

My father was a creature of habit, and as always, we dropped his suits at the dry cleaners before we strolled across the street toward a tiny brick bakery with a striped awning.

"Hungry?" My father glanced upward at the sky and shook his head. "Rhetorical question. You're *always* hungry. I should've named you, 'Hungry.'"

He opened the door, and the inviting aroma of fresh baked goods filled my nose. My stomach rumbled, and my father glanced sideways. "Swallow a dragon?"

Summoned by the door's jingle, a tiny dark-haired woman appeared behind the counter. She wiped flour-dusted hands on her apron and smiled broadly.

"*Buon giorno, Mia,*" my father said. "*Come va?*"

"Good, good. *Dottore,* today you try my biscotti?"

"Not today. The usual, *per favore.*"

I flattened my nose against the display case filled with mouthwatering Italian delicacies: fancy cakes, overstuffed cannoli, and anise biscuits smothered in white icing and colorful sprinkles. My father's eyebrows slanted downward, and he hauled me back by my collar. "Keep that beak off the glass, mate."

Mia's black diamond eyes twinkled as she smiled down on me. "No worries. My Dominic does the same. Brose is getting big, no?"

“Ambrose won’t get *too* big, Mia.” My father tousled my hair as I returned to admiring the cakes. “Ambrose will stay small like me. How is Natalia?”

Mia made the sign of the cross.

“You’re now giving her the *full* pills I prescribed?”

“*Si.*”

“No more cutting the pills to make them last longer. Natalia needs the *full* pill to stay well. I’ll get more when she needs them. Don’t worry about the cost. *Capisci?*”

“*Si.*” Mia crossed herself again. “*Dio ti benedica.*”

“Good. Next time you bring Natalia to see me, I expect she’ll feel well enough to run around my office.” My father’s high wattage grin illuminated his whole face. “I like when children run around my office. Means I did a good job.”

Mia ducked into the back and handed him a brown paper bag. “Your usual. *Buona appetito, Dottore.*”

“*Mille grazie, Mia. Until next Saturday.*”

I shadowed my father as we walked past tables adorned with fresh flowers in hand-painted glass vases out to a bench shaded by an ancient gum tree. He withdrew four cookies and a roll from the bag.

“*Chew. Don’t inhale,*” he said, passing over the cookies. “I’ll never hear the end of it from your mother if you choke.”

I sunk my teeth into the first cookie. Still warm from Mia’s oven, it had a crispy, sugary exterior and a delectably gooey chocolate center. My father handed me a fistful of paper napkins.

A policeman, strolling his beat, hailed us. “G’day, Alec. How’s the heart repair business?”

“Plenty busy.” My father whistled, and three ravens swooped down. He broke open the roll and pitched the pieces, scowling when the largest bird tried to steal from the smallest. “O, beware, of jealousy, Othello. You’re as green-eyed as your namesake, my feathered friend. And you steal beneath the watchful eyes of the law.”

The policeman tapped his baton against a polished boot. “You and your birds. Heard any good jokes lately?”

“No, but a patient yesterday complained of insomnia. I explained insomnia is common, and she shouldn’t lose sleep over it.”

The policeman chuckled and sauntered away while I rolled my eyes. “Dad, you shouldn’t lie to the constable. He asked if you’d heard any *good* jokes. *That* was terrible.”

“I reckoned that was one of my better ones.” My father ensured each bird received a final share of the roll before reaching over and filching the last cookie.

“Dad!”

He stuffed the cookie into his mouth. “Sorry, Brose.” He swallowed, plucked a napkin from my fingers, and flashed his teeth in an unrepentant grin. “The ravens aren’t the only ones who are ravenous.”

I huffed. “Biscuit bandit.”

He laughed, stood, and stretched. The ravens rose with raspy squawks, settling in a vacant lot beside a barbershop. I smeared chocolate from my fingers onto the napkin and peered up at my father. “Will we visit Grandpa now?”

My father crumpled the paper bag and tossed it into the rubbish bin. “No. Grandpa is teaching biochemistry this morning, and I must stop at the hospital to review a case.”

My face fell, and I booted a pebble, flecking my white sneakers with red dust. “Dad, the hospital is *boring*. It’s worse than school. And you *promised* to spend time with *me* today.”

“I *am* spending time with you.” He sounded wounded like I’d rejected a gift. “I won’t be long, and then we’ll go fishing or sailing this afternoon. All right?”

Not only was the hospital mind-numbingly boring, but it was also over a mile away, and the ruthless sun blistered us as my father, who always walked too fast for me to keep up, led the way up the street. When we finally reached the edge of the botanical garden, he halted

beneath a gum tree to let me catch my breath and pointed to the scorched grass. “See the echidna?”

I’d only ever seen the spiny, egg-laying anteaters from behind a screen at the city zoo. I blinked away stinging sweat, seized a long stick, and inched forward, hoping to probe the bizarre creature, but my father yanked me back by my shirt collar.

“Leave that poor fellow alone. He’s sleeping.” My father confiscated my stick and tossed it into the brush. “Do *you* like being jabbed with sticks when *you’re* asleep?”

Undeterred, I crouched in the dirt and prodded the echidna’s belly with my finger. The black pincushion grunted, unraveled, and waddled off; when I looked up, my father was half a block away.

“Didn’t I say leave that poor fellow alone?” My father slowed his pace, allowing me to pull alongside. “Perhaps I ought to check your hearing.”

At last, we ascended the final hill and Stirling University Hospital came into view. Massive palms and a manicured lawn kept emerald green by whirring sprinklers surrounded the unadorned and utilitarian red brick building; as we approached the entrance, I instinctively drifted toward the grass and the respite of the sprinklers, but my father steered me by my collar to the footpath’s center.

As Perth’s largest medical center and main public hospital, Stirling’s accident and emergency ward handled disasters large and small, but the department seemed relatively quiet as we passed through a set of glass double doors, took a quick left, and crossed the threshold into the surgeons’ lounge. A strange stew of smells, mostly disagreeable, attacked my nasal passages.

“Dad, this place stinks, and it’s hot,” I said, crinkling my nose. “May I wait on a bench outside?”

“What you smell is *clean*.” He signaled with his thumb to an uncomfortable vinyl chair. “Sit.”

I pointed to the refrigerator. “May I have—”

“No. The food and drink in the icebox are for the surgeons. You’re not a surgeon. Besides, I just fed you.”

I heaved a sigh and listened to a dull chat about a leaky mitral valve peppered with words like *anteromedial leaflet* and *left ventricular diastole*. Although the door was closed, I could hear a commotion building in the emergency room next door, and I willed my father to finish before someone came to the lounge and recruited him to help with whatever had happened. Just when it seemed my telepathing to him to finish had worked—he was shaking hands with his colleague and wishing him a good day—a nurse pushed open the door.

“Alec, we’re shorthanded and could use an opinion on a case which just arrived.”

“Wait here, Brose,” my father ordered.

Usually, I simply sat and twiddled my thumbs, but I was too hot and cranky to bear the lounge another minute, so I trailed them into the emergency department. A small group of nurses and orderlies had gathered in one of the trauma bays, surrounding an unconscious young man with an enormous purple bruise on his chest.

My father, now wearing a gown over his polo shirt and trousers, parted the crowd, stepped to the table, and placed two fingers on the man’s neck. John Drayton, a gray-haired general surgeon, advanced and offered his stethoscope. “I was evaluating a patient for appendicitis and know as much as you, Alec. Seems more your domain than mine.”

I pressed my spine against the tile wall, hoping to avoid my father’s keen eyes. He gently palpated the man’s chest and frowned. “Obvious blunt force trauma to the chest. Strong pulse, but he has at least two fractured ribs, and I don’t like the way he’s breathing. Get a respirator on him and see if anyone is available from anesthesiology to place an ET tube. I also want two large bore lines. What’s the history? Did anyone see what happened to this man?”

Several nurses leapt to obey my father’s orders as a balding man in a grimy blue work shirt shoved his way through the throng of onlookers.

Sweaty and pale, craggy face creased in deep lines of distress, the man gestured to the table. “That’s my boy, Luke.” The old man twisted his hat in his fists, and his voice fractured and broke. “We’re wharfies. Crane swung the wrong way, and the hook caught him square in the chest. We brought him here in my ute—”

The nurse standing at Luke’s head with a clipboard interjected briskly, “Patient is a nineteen-year-old male. He was stable with a pressure of 100/70 at admission and a pulse of ninety. We’re waiting on the trauma panel and the chest x-ray. No apparent injury except the obvious. Henry did a preliminary exam before he was called down the hall.” The nurse grimaced. “Two inebriated hunters mistook each other for rabbits. You’re on your own with John.”

“Bacchus always takes his tribute,” my father said drily, placing the stethoscope tips in his ears. “Let’s start—”

“Alec?” A second nurse grabbed my father’s sleeve. “His blood pressure is falling. Fifty over palp.”

My father placed the stethoscope’s chest piece below the young man’s left nipple. “Muffled heart sounds, accentuation of S2. The heart is in tamponade.”

The mood in the trauma bay up until that moment had been one of mild confusion and concern, no one truly knowing the extent and gravity of the young man’s injuries. With my father’s pronouncement, however, a charged current coursed through the air and everyone stiffened as if jolted with electricity. Drayton pressed his lips together, his forehead puckered. “Bleeding into the pericardium, you think?”

Of all the memories I have of my father, the most distinct is how he was the rare man who could command a room, imbuing it with his spirit and energy although he was not himself a physically imposing specimen. He straightened his spine, so he seemed taller than his modest 5’5” height, and his tenor voice deepened. “Yes. I must crack this boy’s chest and find out where he’s bleeding. I need the thoracotomy

tray and someone from anesthesiology to place an ET tube. Let's go. Quickly, now. All hands on deck."

For a fraction of a second, it appeared as if no one moved. Then it was as if my father had cried, "Fire," in a crowded theater. Staff darted, the trauma bay transforming from a lazy Saturday morning to a frenzy of concentrated, but coordinated, activity. A nurse placed a manual respirator over Luke's nose and mouth to blow air into his lungs while the other nurses scrambled to start drips and pulled equipment from the cart. Luke's father, moaning and wailing for the staff to save his son, tried to push through the crowd to see, but an orderly murmuring reassurances held the old man back. My father, right in the middle of the chaos, rose onto the balls of his feet, fingers locked together, left hand on top of the right. With his full 130-pounds, he pushed the heel of his palm down hard on Luke's chest. After laboring a minute, my father wiped the perspiration from his brow and looked to the nurse.

"Anything?"

She shook her head. "No pulse. No blood pressure."

"You." My father pointed into the crowd at a newly arrived young doctor dressed in theater greens. "Take over compressions. John, we can't wait for an anesthesiologist. Tube him."

Drayton took up the shiny silver laryngoscope and a clear plastic tube and hastened to Luke's head while a nurse dumped a bottle of iodine onto the young man's chest and placed a green drape. My father rushed to the sink, rinsed his hands and forearms, pivoted on his heel, and sank his hands into sterile gloves as another nurse tied a mask over his face. Suitably accoutered, he hurried back to the table, brusquely muscled the young doctor doing compressions aside, and assumed the surgeon's classic and timeless pose: dominant hand out, palm up, fingers extended, eyes pointed downward.

"Number ten blade, please."

The nurse slapped the scalpel into my father's waiting left hand, and the little silver knife shone bright and sharp under the lights. My heart

heaved, and my stomach flipped. My old man wasn't about to perform surgery, was he?

"Once more unto the breach," he said, and bending over, as unruffled as if he was filleting fish, he slashed the left side of Luke's chest open to the bone. Blood bubbled in the chest cavity, and Drayton, who had dashed over to assist after placing the breathing tube in Luke's throat and handing off the respirator to a nurse, suctioned it away.

"Costotome," my father said. The nurse produced a frightful set of plier-like shears. My father leaned over again, and I flinched at the sickening snap of breaking ribs. Drayton took one edge of the wound while my father took the other.

"Ready?"

Drayton nodded.

"Pull."

They bent back with their full weight, neck and arm muscles bulging, and tugged the wound apart, creating a yawning maw. Blood splattered the green tile floor, the stinging odor of antiseptic wafted, and my knees weakened.

"Finochietto retractor," my father ordered. A nurse handed him the vise-like instrument, and he spread it to hold the wound apart. I stared into the cavity—my first look inside the human body—and my stomach lurched into my throat as my father shoved aside the lungs and exposed the heart. A nurse pressed past me waving a piece of paper and shouting numbers.

"Ring the theater and have whoever is on call for the chest service start scrubbing," my father said, taking up a pair of scissors. His tone was unnervingly calm and composed, as if poking about inside a man's chest was an ordinary occurrence like shaving or brushing his teeth. "And blood, blood, blood. He needs blood."

My father slit the pinkish translucent bag covering the heart with the scissors, widening the tear with his index finger. Bright red fluid spilled

out, and the heart quivered. Drayton craned his neck and pointed excitedly. “There, Alec. See it? He has a tear in the right atrial chamber.”

The best surgeons are fast, and the finest Singer sewing machine could not have outdone my father as the needle holder danced near-far, far-near. He eyeballed his stitches. “That should hold long enough to get him to the theater. Let’s see if we can bring him back.”

The room was as hushed as the catacombs as the staff administered epinephrine and my father massaged Luke’s heart, pushing to eject blood from the ventricles and letting up to allow the organ to refill.

A minute passed. Then two. But Luke’s heart remained still.

A dark pall descended as two minutes stretched into five and onward to ten, the room’s energy shifting from hopeful anticipation to resignation. I was only a boy of eight, but I understood the basic biological law—when the heart stops, life stops. I bit my bottom lip and glanced around the room. Luke’s mates had clustered in the corner, their faces pale and drawn, while the boy’s poor father stood all alone, twisting his battered hat in white-knuckled hands, unable to curb the steady stream of tears spilling over his cheeks and rolling down his sunburned face.

My father had never stopped massaging Luke’s heart and calling for medications and updates, even as the other staff members not directly involved in the trauma and resuscitation began turning away in brow-beaten defeat. Finally, face contorting in pain from his cramped hands, my father canvassed the room.

“I’ve run out of ideas. Anyone else have something they’d like to try?”

Luke’s father buried his head in his hands and shook in silent and unspeakable grief. I swallowed hard and wished I’d stayed in the lounge like I’d been told.

My father lifted his eyes to the clock. “Time—”

Luke’s heart shuddered in my father’s hand.

“Belay that!”

Everyone in the room collectively held their breath. My father nudged the heart, and the battered but brave organ contracted and relaxed.

One beat.

Two beats.

Three beats.

The nurse standing at Luke's head beamed. "His blood pressure is rising."

My father removed his bloody hands from the chest cavity. Everyone smiled. Or, I should say, everyone smiled save my father. He scrutinized Luke with narrowed eyes. "The *time*," my father demanded, "How *long* was he down?"

Drayton eyeballed the clock. "Don't know, Alec. Certainly, long enough to glimpse the pearly gates."

Luke, color improving from the dusky blue-yellow of a corpse to pale pink, jerked a leg and groaned.

"But not to pass St. Peter," my father said, bowing his head. "Who is on call for the thoracic service?"

A nurse with the just arrived transport team replied, "O'Neill. He's scrubbing now."

"Then he shall meet 'Saint' Peter yet today." My father surveyed the room, making eye contact with everyone. "Good work. Thank you for your help." He snapped off his bloody gloves, removed his gown, and strode to the sink. Transport orderlies settled Luke on a gurney, and I stepped aside as they whisked past on their way to the operating theater.

And to think, an hour ago, I assumed hospitals were *boring*.

Mind aquiver, I leaned against the wall, drawing quick breaths until my father collided with me.

"Ambrose, *what* are *you* doing here? Didn't I say stay put?"

I gazed up at him. The careful observer would have noted his flushed face, the streak of brown iodine smeared across his right cheek, and the sweat beads glistening on his forehead, but I noticed none of those

human characteristics. Rather, I saw a god. Breathless, mouth as dry as aged driftwood, I squeaked, “Dad, that man was *dead*. *You* brought him back to life with *your hands*.”

The color drained from my father’s face, and the skin bunched around his eyes as he winced. “Tell me you just got here. Tell me you did not see all that.”

“I saw *everything*, Dad. That man was *dead*, and you brought him back to life.”

My father closed his eyes for a moment. “Yes, but that young man was down a long time.”

I tilted my head, not understanding, and swiped sweaty palms on my shorts.

“Life depends on a steady stream of oxygen.” My father tapped my temple. “After the heart stops for four minutes, neurons begin to die from oxygen deficiency. The mind collapses in levels. Personality. Judgment. Memory. Movement. After fifteen minutes, the brain dies altogether. Even if we restart the heart, if your brain doesn’t work, you aren’t you. You can’t think, walk, talk, or remember. I can extend that time by massaging the heart to circulate blood but not forever. Understand?”

I shoved my hands into my pockets; brain death isn’t an easy concept for an eight-year-old to grasp.

“Let’s try another way,” my father said. “Your brain is like a car’s engine, and your heart is like a fuel pump. Except instead of petrol, the heart pumps oxygenated blood. What happens if the car runs out of petrol?”

“Engine stops. The car won’t run.”

“Spot on. If your brain runs out of oxygen, you don’t run.” My father sighed, suddenly weary. “And that man has a significant injury. But he is young and has a chance. Even a *small* chance beats *no* chance.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder, but before he guided me out, Luke's father, his face red and soaked with tears, approached us. "Doctor?"

My father shuffled back in surprise. "Sorry, mate. I forgot—"

"Will my son be all right? Luke is saving money for university. Wants to be a teacher. He's my only child." The old man's trembling hands flew to cover his sun-blistered lips, and he choked back a sob. "I don't know what I'll tell my wife."

"Alec Serafeim," my father said, extending his hand.

Luke's father scrubbed soiled and calloused hands on filthy jeans. My father kept his hand out until the old man shook it.

"Ian Taylor."

"Ian, it's rare for patients with Luke's injury to even make it to the hospital alive. Pete O'Neill is a young surgeon like me, but he always does his best. We must leave the rest to a mightier hand." My father reached out and patted the old man's shoulder. "But Luke has a chance."

After showing the old man where to report for information about his son, my father steered me outside. The temperature had risen fifteen degrees and the sun blazed, but I buzzed with energy and kept pace with my father, my mind replaying what I'd just seen. I would only learn much later how desperate and last-ditch an emergency thoracotomy is; even today, with far more aggressive interventions available, less than ten percent of patients survive the procedure. Still, instinctively, I knew I had observed something marvelous. I was not so much fixated on the surgery itself—although that had certainly been thrilling. Instead, I found myself awed by how my father had made such quick decisions and how he had remained calm and collected, never raising his voice or panicking. It was a lot to process, and only when we were in the car and leaving the business district did I distill my hurtling thoughts into a coherent question.

"Dad, do you ever get used to that?"

He kept his eyes, hidden behind his black Wayfarers, set on the road. “Used to what?”

“Touching another man’s heart.”

My father glanced at me.

“No.”

Once we reached the coast road, the wind’s swish became a deafening whistle, rendering further conversation impossible. The panoramic views from the motorway were always breathtaking, and the scenery was filled with exciting things—swooping seabirds, boats of all sizes, and even occasionally a majestic humpback whale—but all I could think about was what I’d witnessed at the hospital.

We turned off the causeway into our neighborhood, and my father slowed the car and patted my knee. “That was a lot for a young boy to see. You all right, mate?”

I nodded, and he tipped his sunglasses down and studied me like he suspected I was not telling the truth.

“You’re sure?”

“Uh huh.”

He considered me for another long moment, shrugged, and pushed his Wayfarers back up his nose. “How’s school?”

“Boring,” I said, making a face. “I already have homework.”

“Oh no,” my father said, even adding a little gasp for good measure. “Homework? Already?”

“Uh huh. I’m to write a whole page about the job I want when I grow up.”

“And lemme guess, sport. You’re writing about becoming a rugby star.”

“No.” I grimaced and tugged at a loose thread hanging from my shirt. “I thought about that, but you’re small, and Grandpa is small, and Mum is small, so I reckon I’ll always be too small to be a rugby star—”

“You could become a jockey,” my father pointed out, sounding amused. “You could write about winning the Melbourne Cup.”

I pulled in my brow and frowned. “Horses are your thing, Dad. I’m going to write about becoming The Flash.”

“The Flash,” my father repeated, shaking his head. “You want to be The Flash when you grow up? The comic book hero?”

My frown deepened. “I’m the best runner in my class and figured—”

“Even John Landy and Roger Bannister cannot run as fast as The Flash, Brose. The Flash’s speed violates the laws of physics. If you ran as fast as The Flash, your body would burn up like a meteor.” My father tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “I fill the house with Shakespeare and Hemingway and Keats, and you read comic books.”

Leave it to my old man to ruin the magic of comic books with science. I released my breath in a sulky huff and crossed my arms. “You don’t understand. I don’t want a *boring* job. Everyone else is writing about becoming a solicitor or a farmer or a banker—”

“A banker? A farmer? A solicitor? How *tedious*.”

“Joe wants to be a spaceman—”

“Then Joe must move to America or Russia. Space programs are beyond humble Australia’s means.”

“Right,” I said. “And even if Australia had a space program, he’d just travel to the moon or Mars. That’s exciting, but it helps no one.”

My father rotated the steering wheel to enter the driveway, and my gaze fell upon his hands. They were not pretty and soft like my mother’s hands. They were not the strong and calloused hands of a lifelong laborer like Luke’s father. My father’s hands looked ordinary, like any man’s hands. They looked like a bigger version of *my* hands.

“Dad, what is *your* job called?”

“Cardiothoracic surgeon.”

“*Cardio*...

“Cardiothoracic surgeon. That’s a fancy title for a doctor who specializes in operations to repair heart and chest problems.”

“I will be a cardiothoracic surgeon,” I said, nodding with emphasis. “Someday, I will bring sick people back to life with my hands.”

Equal parts pride and dismay flickered in my father’s eyes.

“Brose, what you saw today...” He pulled the car up to the garage, shifted into park, and raised his eyes. “I have no idea what’s awaiting me, or what will happen when this life ends. For the moment, I know only this: I am ambitious of doing the world some good, and there are many sick people, and they need curing.”

Only when I was much older would I realize he had paraphrased Camus and Keats, blending the existentialist and the romantic into a philosophy of my father’s very own. At the time, however, I followed him through the oversized garage and into the yellow stucco house overlooking the Indian Ocean, awaiting an explanation; my widely read and deep-thinking father spoke in riddles so often he ought to have worn a green suit covered in question marks like the Riddler. He kicked off his boat shoes, slipped his shirt over his head, and filled a glass from the tap, drinking long before addressing me again.

“Medicine is a calling, not a *job*. Medicine is about serving others, not yourself.” My father swept his gaze around the spacious kitchen, taking in the polished terracotta floor, shiny appliances, and the picture window overlooking the Indian Ocean. “Nonetheless, a man can do *well* while still doing *good*. Understand?”

Callings? Jobs? I didn’t understand, so I shrugged.

“A good doctor lives and breathes medicine. It becomes his life’s theme. His passion. What he lives for. It’s why sometimes I come home late and miss things.” He refilled the glass and drained it again. “I promised to spend time with you today. Would you rather take the boat out or go fishing?”

“Sailing,” I said.

“Good choice. The wind is light. We’ll take *Firefish* and work on jibbing. You may practice steering as helmsman, and I’ll trim the sails. Did you study the diagrams I made for you?”

“I learnt them.”

My father grabbed a wrench to tighten the squeaky door hinge, and I followed him outside. I often took for granted where I grew up, but for a moment, I held still and enjoyed the warm sun on my shoulders and scalp, the splendid ribbon of white beach, and the bay’s sparkling waters as they broke over the bar in ever receding and approaching lines of white foam. My father must have been of like mind for he looked up, the sunlight glinting off his black curly hair, and smiled as if all the world was his.

“Today is a good day to be.”

I nodded, but then my mind drifted to Luke and how he almost ceased to be.

“Dad, you’re like The Flash. Or Superman. Only your superpower is your hands.”

Concern stole over my father’s face again, and he set down the wrench. “Those are comic book characters. They aren’t real. People don’t possess superpowers.”

“But—”

“Lemme tell you a story. I heard it from an American anthropologist when I visited the States, so it isn’t *my* story, but it makes the point. A man walks on a beach and discovers thousands of starfish stranded by the outgoing tide. He gathers the starfish and tosses them back into the sea. Another man points out the exercise’s futility—”

“Dad, what does ‘futility’ mean?”

“Meaninglessness. Pointlessness.”

I eyed a marbled gecko skulking through my mother’s flowerbed and waited for my father to continue.

“The second man says, ‘What you’re doing doesn’t matter. Miles of beach and thousands of stranded starfish exist. No one could ever throw them all back.’ The first man stops to ponder this conundrum before throwing another starfish into the ocean. He says, ‘It mattered to that one.’ Understand?”

“I understand the story,” I said. “But not what it has to do with being a surgeon.”

“A surgeon can’t save everyone, Brose. What you saw today was rare. When I must open the chest under those conditions, ninety-eight times out of one hundred, the heart never beats again. The person dies. When that happens, I wonder could I have done something different? Doctors make mistakes like everyone. But we make our mistakes on living beings.” My father’s shoulders sagged. “And when you make a mistake, you must live with it.”

I narrowed my eyes. He was being modest. He *never* made mistakes sailing. He *always* trimmed the sails perfectly, and he *always* executed his jibes crisply without wavering. And people often approached my mother to tell her how my father had saved their son or daughter.

“However, we all have a choice,” my father continued. “We choose to toss starfish, or we choose to turn away because we consider the world’s problems too great or we don’t want to dirty our hands. As a surgeon, I choose to toss starfish. I hope you’ll choose to toss starfish, too, but it doesn’t *have* to be as a surgeon. Many ways exist for a man to become a tosser of starfish. What to remember is this line from the Good Book: ‘Let us never weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.’”

We shared a quiet moment surrounded by the infinite splendor of the mighty Indian Ocean as the omnipresent coastal wind scoured the air clean and tickled the beach grass, and the relentless waves splashed against the rocks. Then, with the future but a nebulous concept and nothing more than a tiny spark on a faraway and yet unseen horizon, I nodded with emphasis and began my life’s journey with not a step, but a solemn promise.

“Someday, I will do good,” I said. “Someday, I will toss starfish like my father.”