

*When I originally wrote Landon's character, I wanted him to give up being a lawyer all together and pursue a dream he'd given up: to teach elementary school. After my first draft, I decided, as much as I loved that dream, it didn't really fit his character. That meant cutting a lot of scenes and rewriting. These are a few of the scenes that didn't make it into Landin' in Trouble. Enjoy!*

I'm restless after Brynn leaves. I want to be with her, but she's working for the rest of the day. So, since I can't be with her, I go back over our conversation. She made some good points. Teachers don't get paid nearly enough, but it wouldn't be impossible to support a family on a teacher's salary. I wouldn't be buying any more brand-new Audi's, but there are worse things in life than not driving a luxury sports car. Having your trailer and everything you own wiped out by a tornado, for example. Or any other struggle that most people experience.

I get out my laptop and set it up on Gran's kitchen table. Google helps me find all the info I need about how to switch careers to teaching in Virginia.

It's not easy. I'd basically have to complete one hundred and eighty hours of instruction and student teaching in one year. I've done a lot of school in my life, so that doesn't sound fun. But when I look at what types of classes I'd have to take, they sound interesting. I love the idea of being qualified to teach the basics in a variety of subjects. Not only could I do science experiments with kids, I could also choose books to read with them.

Both of those options sound so much more interesting than spending the rest of my life writing briefs and taking depositions. That, however, doesn't make the prospect of

changing careers any less intimidating. Not to mention the fact that there's no way I could be a lawyer during the year I'd spend completing the requirements to get a teaching credential. How would I earn a living?

A voice in the back of my head that sounds a lot like Gran's says, *you don't have to leave.*

I check a few message boards people have posted on about their own experience switching careers to teach. They all say the best way to kill two birds with one stone, i.e., get classroom experience while earning money, is to substitute teach. Its crap pay, but great experience.

Just out of curiosity—definitely not because I'm really thinking about staying—I check the employment website for Creekville Unified School District. They are hiring subs. Not only that, but, as I dig a little further, they offer the in-class mentoring program I'd need to complete during my first year of teaching.

I close my laptop and rub my hands on my legs. My palms are wet, and not just because I spent the entire morning in the July humidity. I'm actually, seriously considering applying to the program. Creekville's local community college offers it. I *could* stay here—if Gran let me. Which she would. She's slowing down, and three acres is a lot to take care of by herself. I could help her, even though I hate yard work. It wouldn't be forever.

My heart pounds at the idea of staying. I don't love small-town life, but I think I could live anywhere if Brynn was with me.

I rake a hand through my hair and pace across the kitchen. I'm getting way ahead of myself. I can't change careers and leave my life—what's left of it—behind in DC on the

off-chance Brynn feels the same way I do. Like my chest is going to explode whenever she's near, and time stops when she's not.

But she is the one who suggested I stay in Creekville and teach. And those words give me more hope than I've had since she told me goodbye.

Gran walks into the kitchen when I'm midway through my one thousandth trek across the room. "I didn't expect to find you in here," she says before taking two glasses from the cabinet. "Would you like some sweet tea?"

"Sure, Gran. Thanks." I don't like sweet tea, but Gran usually offers it when she wants to get someone to talk. And I want to talk.

She pours us each a glass of sweet tea, then adds ice. I've never been able to figure out why she does this backwards. After placing one glass by my laptop, she motions me to the table. "Looks like you could use some advice from your Gran."

I sink into the chair next to her and take a big sip of the tea. It needs some sugar, but I'm not going to tell her that. I don't even know if I can work up the courage to ask what I want to ask.

The glass is already sweating nearly as much as I am, and it almost slips from my fingers as I set it down.

"What would you think about me staying here a little longer?" I focus on the condensation trickling down the glass. If she says no, I don't want her to see my disappointment.

Gran puts her hand over the one I have resting on the table. "You're welcome to stay as long as you need, as long as you're looking for a job." She squeezes my hand, and I wonder for a second if she feels like I'm freeloading. Was she trying to politely say I need to get off my ass and find a job?

I decide not. Gran is way too direct to worry about being polite when she sees what someone should be doing.

“What if I decided to pursue a new career? Something besides law?” I ask. This question is harder. Granddad is the one who encouraged me to be a lawyer. He wanted at least one of his grandsons to go to UVA law school where he’d been the dean. Even though Ian had gone to Georgetown for law school, I thought he’d at least fulfilled Granddad’s dream that *someone* go to law school.

But then in his will, Granddad had left me enough money to go to law school. It was in a trust, so it could only be used for law school or some other kind of grad school.

“You don’t want to be an attorney anymore?” Gran pulls her hand away and takes a sip of her tea. I’m sure she doesn’t mean it to feel like she’s disappointed, but it does.

I loved my Granddad, and I wanted to make him proud, even after he passed. He meant his gesture to be generous, not a burden. He thought I wanted to go to law school. I’d probably told him that before he died.

So, I used his gift and did what he and my parents all wanted me to do.

“I’m not sure I ever did want to be an attorney, Gran.” I spin my glass and avoid her eyes. “I’m sorry. I know that’s what Granddad wanted for me.”

“The only thing Granddad ever wanted for any of his grandchildren was for them to be happy.” Gran puts her hand back on mine and pats it. “He had to put himself through school, and it was a real hardship for us. He thought you’d be married with a family by the time you went to law school, or whatever graduate schooling you pursued. His intent was to make things easier on you, not decide what path you should take.”

“I’m really grateful for what he did. That’s part of the reason it’s so hard for me to consider doing something else. I feel like I’ll be wasting the money he worked so hard for.” Or am I looking for excuses to not do what I’ve always felt called to do?

Gran shakes her head. “Education is never a waste of money if you use it to better yourself and those around you. Your law degree will benefit you, no matter what you do.”

That’s a nice idea, but I don’t know if I believe it. I can’t see how knowing about torts and archaic laws will help elementary school age kids.

I’m about to say never mind to the whole idea when Gran goes to a cabinet. After digging around for a while she brings back a bag of those pink and white animal circus cookies and holds them in front of me. “Now tell me what you’re thinking about doing instead while I open this bag.”

I’m trapped. She knows those cookies are my favorite, and she’s not opening that bag until I start talking. Sure, I could buy my own bag, but that would mean driving all the way to the store. That seems wasteful when she’s got a bag right in front of me. Even if she tells me my idea is ridiculous, I’ll still get a cookie.

“I want to teach.” I start there. That’s worth at least one cookie.

“Well, the world always needs more teachers. What do you want to teach?” She can’t get the bag open, but when I reach for it she shakes her head. She’s playing dirty.

“Elementary school,” I mumble.

The bag tears open and cookies fly everywhere. And I can’t help seeing the symbolism in that. I’m thinking about tearing apart my life to act like a kid again.

“Oh dear.” Gran tries to stoop down to pick up the cookies, but she doesn’t bend like she used to.

“I’ll get them. You sit.” I lower her into the chair, then go to the closet for a broom. If I were going to eat cookies off anyone’s floor, it would be Gran’s. It’s spotless. But I know she won’t let me, so I sweep the loose lions, tigers, and bears into a pile.

“I think you’d make a wonderful teacher, but are you sure you want to teach lower grades? That’s a hard job, and it’s only gotten harder since Covid. A lot of children are years behind where they should be, particularly in lower income areas.” Gran taught high school English for forty years. If anyone knows how difficult teaching is, it’s her. She’s been retired for a decade and a half, but she still volunteers at schools and stays up to date on what’s happening in education.

“Honestly, Gran. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do.” I dump the cookies in the trash then sit down.

“Hmm.” Gran takes a cookie then passes the bag to me. She bites the head off whatever animal she got (let’s be honest, they all look the same) and gazes upward while she chews.

I’m chewing over a few things too. Her comment about lower income areas has sparked an idea. I could teach in DC, like Brynn said. Like, right in the city. Inner city schools always need teachers. Just thinking about the possibilities makes me more sure becoming a teacher might be exactly what I need to do.

I’ve done some pro bono work through my old firm for an elementary school a mile away from our offices. The difference between the marble lobby of my huge firm and the shabby office of the school has never left me. The disparity was too stark to forget. I’d love to go back to that school and do some actual good. Boots on the ground. In the trenches with the people making a difference in the world.

When she finishes her cookie, Gran looks at me and smiles. “Well, dear, I’ve been watching you with those kids over the past two weeks. You’re wonderful with them. I shouldn’t be surprised that’s who you want to teach. What kind of help do you need from me?”

I take a deep breath, because things just got real. I may actually be doing this thing. “I’m going to have to do a year of school. I can sub while I’m doing it, but that doesn’t pay great. If I can’t find a way to stay in DC, could I come stay here?”

“Of course. I would love that.” She is beaming, which makes me feel less guilty about asking.

“Thanks, Gran.” I stand and grab my laptop. “I can’t believe I’m going to do it. I’m going to apply.” I thank her again and kiss the top of her head.

As soon as I get to my room, I go to work. I apply to programs here in Creekville and in DC. Best to leave all my options open. If I’m going to do this, I have to do it for myself, whether or not Brynn and I stay together. If we break up, I don’t want to be stuck in Creekville.

*But then Brynn tells him she's going to Bali, and here's the chapter that originally followed:*

I've done a lot of dumb things in my life, wreaked a lot of havoc, caused a lot of trouble. But I've never felt as stupid as I do when I leave Brynn behind in Bixby's. I almost gave up a new job at a great firm for her, while all along she was planning on leaving. All that talk about being happy in Creekville and not worrying about money? If she really believed it, she wouldn't have been making plans to move across the world.

When I get to Gran's, I go straight to my room. The first thing I do is call Fleming, Roth, and Schill and accept the job. Then I pull my suitcases from the closet and start filling them.

The sublet on my condo is month to month, but I can stay with Mom and Dad in Baltimore for the next few weeks until I can get back in my own place. The commute to DC will suck, but I don't have much of a choice. There's no point to staying in Creekville. And there's no point in thinking about switching careers.

Gran comes in while I'm packing. Her brow creases when she sees my bags. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Back to DC." I keep my eyes down, focused on packing.

"Already?" Her voice is heavy with disappointment. "After our last conversation, I thought I'd get to keep you for a while."

Her words hit me right in the guilt region of my gut. I've noticed over the past month that she moves slower than she used to. When I first moved in, she was reluctant to ask

me for help, but lately she's let me do more things I know are difficult for her. I worry it's going to be hard on her not to have me—or someone--here.

"I know, Gran. I'm sorry." I drop a stack of shirts in my suitcase. "I got a job offer at a firm in DC. The teaching thing was a crazy idea."

She moves in front of the closet, blocking me from the clothes I was about to take from it. "What was so crazy about it?"

There's no use trying to hide the truth from her. She'll get it out of me eventually. It will be less painful if I give it up right now. "I was doing it for Brynn, but she's leaving for Bali and doesn't know when, or if, she'll be back."

Her eyes widen, and I nod. She gets it. She's as surprised as I am that Brynn is taking off for the other side of the world.

But then she says, "You said you wanted to be a teacher, not that Brynn wanted you to be a teacher."

My jaw opens, but I don't know what to say. I finally land on, "I do want to teach, but not if it means giving up making good money. I was doing that for Brynn, but she basically dumped me again, so what's the point of giving up the things I do like about being an attorney?"

"I thought the point was for you to be happy doing something you love. I don't understand what Brynn has to do with that." Gran has a knack for finding the weaknesses in any argument, then pretending she doesn't understand what she's done. That forces the other person to explain their way out of an argument they've already lost, thereby strengthening hers. It's a great tactic. I'd be a better lawyer if I could master it.

“I wouldn’t be as happy teaching without Brynn.” I glance at her. She’s not satisfied, and I’m going to have to go deeper.

I take a deep breath. “She wouldn’t mind being married to a teacher, is what I’m saying.” And that’s all the explaining I want to do. If I talk about how much I hoped Brynn and I would work out this time, the lump in the center of my chest is going to move to my throat.

“Lots of people marry teachers. Me included,” Gran says.

“A law school professor is a little different from an elementary school teacher.” I’ve let sarcasm slip into my voice, and it doesn’t go unnoticed. Gran raises a warning eyebrow.

Then she lets out a deep sigh and sits at the edge of the bed. “Your granddad did teach elementary school when we got married. That wasn’t good enough for my parents, and I wasn’t strong enough to stand up to them.”

I close the drawer I’ve opened and turn back to her. “I didn’t know that.”

She lifts a shoulder. “It’s not something he and I ever talked about once he decided to go to law school.”

“But he loved being a law professor, didn’t he? He was the dean of the whole school.” I know this about my grandfather, but he retired before I was born. I don’t remember him as that dean. I remember him as the man who would spend hours with my siblings and me doing science experiments, exploring, and reading.

Gran reaches into the unfolded clothes piled behind her, grabs a shirt, and folds while she talks. “He liked it. He never loved it. And he would have hated being a lawyer. That’s why he went into academics instead.”

“Why did he want me to be a lawyer if he didn’t like it?”

She stops folding while she considers my question. “You didn’t have a lot of direction. More than anything, he wanted you to have a good job and be a good provider.” Gran shrugs her shoulder again. “He was raised in a different time where men were primarily responsible for supporting their families. He never moved past that belief.”

She reaches into my pile of clothes, but this time she pulls out a pair of underwear. We both look at what’s in her hands, then back to each other. I rush to grab them, nearly knocking her off the bed. After I wad my underwear into a ball and stuff them in a drawer, I take my time turning back to her.

Gran pulls in her lips, obviously trying not to laugh. It takes a second, but she pulls herself together and pushes up from the bed. “I’ll let you have some privacy.”

As she walks toward the door, she stops and lays a hand on my arm. “If your granddad had known you wanted to be a teacher, he would have encouraged you. He never said he regretted giving it up, but he never loved being a professor the way he loved teaching kids. He wouldn’t have wanted you to make the same mistake.”

I look into her eyes and want to believe her. “Teaching is harder now than it was when he was my age. Supporting a family is too.”

“That’s true.” She smiles gently. “But a good challenge has never stopped you before. If teaching is what you want to do, do it because it’s what you know you’ll be happy doing. Do it for yourself, not for anyone else.”

“But what if it doesn’t make me happy?”

“Oh sweetie...” her chest rises in a deep breath. “Happiness doesn’t come from a job or what you do or what you have. It comes from in here.” She lifts two fingers and taps my chest above my heart.

I remember when I had to look up to see Gran's smile. Now she has to look up at me, and it's weird that the smaller she gets, the wiser she grows. And, holy crap, "happiness comes from the inside" is so cliche it might be true.

"Thanks, Gran. I'll think it over." I hug her, then shut the door as she leaves.

I look at the mess of clothes on the bed. A lot of them I haven't touched since even before I moved to Gran's a month ago. Some of them I forgot I had. Most of them, I'm sure, don't fit anymore.

When I left DC, I packed everything. I didn't know how long I'd be gone, and I didn't have anywhere to store them in my condo. Now it seems silly that I held onto so many things. I thought they were important.

Maybe if I'd realized a year ago that they weren't, Brynn and I would have had a chance.

Or maybe not.

Maybe our paths are only meant to cross, not converge.

Since our breakup last year, I've held onto the relationship we had, knowing it didn't fit but not wanting to let it go. I let my hurt pride get in the way of my job, and, if I'm honest, that's what brought me back to Gran's when my life fell apart. A part of me had to know if Brynn and I could slip back into a relationship.

I got my answer.

We can.

But we still don't fit.