

CHAPTER ONE

"The Promise"

Robert stared at the bag, captivated by it. The drone and pictures of the cartoons he'd been watching drifted into the background of his mind. What held his interest lay at the side of his father's large wooden desk. The bag was old and battered from extensive use. Its black leather was cracked and brittle. The once smooth covered handle, was now worn and scuffed. The bag, which his father now used as a briefcase, looked as though it had survived a thousand and one different events. Which was entirely possible, Robert thought, knowing it accompanied his father almost everywhere he went. Upon kissing his wife and son goodbye each morning, Thomas Sterling would bend his six foot frame forward, pick up the case at his feet and carry it to their new Buick in the garage. As he reversed the car into the street, the case could be seen on the passenger seat, as solemn as a small child, and perhaps just as precious.

"What's in the bag?" Robert asked.

"Nothing that would interest little boys," his father replied in a gentle voice, glancing down at the dilapidated doctor's case.

Robert wasn't so sure about that, of course. What four year old would be? He was used to being told, "You wouldn't understand, dear," and "Maybe when you're older, sweetie," when he would ask his curious worldly questions of his mother and father.

But, "Nothing that would interest little boys," was something new.

Something mysterious.

Something worth further investigation.

"Do you keep your toys in there?" he asked, remembering his father taking a small machine with large red numbers and buttons out of the case on occasion.

Thomas Sterling removed his eyeglasses, put down the pen he'd been using and sat back in his leather desk chair. "I guess in a way, some of the things in my bag could be called toys. Adult toys. You know, big people's toys," he added quickly.

Robert's face lit up. "Can I play with them, Dad?"

"Maybe when you're older, son."

"Why can't I play with them now?" Robert questioned, frustration registering across his young face.

"Because I don't want them broken," his father replied.

"I won't break them. Honest I won't."

A degree of hopefulness returned to Robert's features. All he had to do was be really careful. I can do that, he thought.

"I didn't mean you would break them, it's just that I have to use them tonight," his father said in an apologetic manner, not intending to hurt his son's feelings. "Some

other time, Robert, okay?" Thomas replaced his eyeglasses, returning his attention to the work before him.

"It's not fair," Robert said, jumping off the couch, walking toward the desk and more importantly, toward the black case.

"What's that?" his father queried, his concentration still focused on the documents in front of him.

"That you get to play with my toys and you won't let me play with yours! It's not fair!"

Robert's tiny hands were about to reach into the black bag, when his father reached down quickly to shut and then zipper the top of it.

Robert stood bewildered. "I was only going to look!" he cried out, tears forming in his eyes. "I wasn't going to touch anything!"

"Somehow I doubt that," Thomas said in the same soothing voice he always used.

"You're just not big enough to play with . . . adult toys."

"Am so!" Robert declared, trying to hold back tears from careening down his cheeks.

"Someday you will be, I promise."

"You're lying!"

Thomas was at first taken aback by his son's accusation, but he remembered the same conversation almost twenty years earlier, in much the same way. Only back then, he was the one accusing his father of lying. In an instant, he recalled what his father had said to him and thought it might work with his son now.

"I'm not lying, Robert. But I will make you a promise - right here, right now, that I will never, ever break." Thomas waited a moment and watched as his child's waterworks suddenly stopped. He knew he had Robert's full attention. "Here it is. I will give you this case and whatever it contains on one condition: that you carry it to your bedroom by yourself."

Thomas noticed a puzzled look cross Robert's face. "By that, I mean you can't use your wagon, or ask your mother, or get help from any of your friends to lift this bag. You have to do it on your own, using your own strength. Do you understand?"

"I just have to carry it to my room - just like you carry it everyday?"

"That's exactly it."

Thomas knew what the boy was thinking, something along the lines of, That can't be so hard. Dad does it all the time!

Of course, Robert wasn't concerned about the weight of the bag and its contents. He wasn't thinking about just how little his small arms could carry. All he was interested in was getting the bag to his room, so he could fill it with some of his own toys.

These thoughts made Thomas smile. "Is it a deal?" he asked, outstretching his right hand to his son, who was now staring at the embossed letters that graced the top of the bag. They read Dr. M. Sterling.

Sheer exuberance shone from Robert's face. The bag would be his! He placed his hand into his father's and shook it feverishly. Just as he was about to pull it back however, his father gently squeezed his hand tighter, not letting it go.

"You understand, son, that only men make promises they intend to keep, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right."

Thomas let go of the boy's hand and sat back in his chair. He wondered how soon Robert would try to claim the bag as his own.

He didn't have to wait long.

Robert took a step back from the desk and stared at the bag before him. His father hadn't specified that only one hand had to be used, so using both would probably be all right and do the trick. Robert bent his small body slightly forward and grasped the rough leathered handle with his ten tiny fingers and

pulled upwards with all his might.

It moved! It was coming off the floor! It would soon be his, just as his father had promised!

Joy soon turned to despair however, as Robert realized the only movement the bag had made was when its sides "uncollapsed" as he had pulled the handle skyward. A pained expression came over his features as he looked from the floor to his father's face.

"There's too much stuff inside," he complained. "It's too heavy. Take something out."

"That wasn't the deal. The deal was you had to lift the bag and whatever it contained. Only then would it be yours."

"It's too heavy! You're cheating!"

Tears were again forming in Robert's eyes. He felt betrayed. His father knew he couldn't lift the bag with all that stuff in it. It just wasn't fair.

"Look, Robert," Thomas said, picking up his discouraged son, and setting him on his knee. "Someday you will be able to lift that case and I've already promised when you do, it and all its belongings will be yours. I won't back down from our bargain." Thomas could read the mistrust in Robert's eyes. "When I was your age I wanted this bag just as much as you do right now. And do you know what?"

"What?" Robert said, averting his eyes from his father's.

"One day I was able to walk right up to it and lift it off the floor - just like you tried to do. Your grandfather watched me and then declared I was a man."

"How old were you?"

"That's not important, son. What's more important is that I never gave up trying to keep my end of the bargain. Grandpa and I made the same promise as you and I did here today."

"Did Grandpa keep his promise?"

"What do you think?"

Robert somehow knew that Grandpa had in fact kept his promise. He jumped off his father's knee and bent over the bag, testing the handle once again.

"One of these days, I'm going to lift you right off the floor and I'll be a man, just like my dad!" he yelled at the old uncooperative bag.

Thomas couldn't help but let out a loud chuckle. His son's smile was filled with hope, admiration and determination, while his was brimming with pride. The old black bag and the promise he'd made with his father, had taught him many lessons and he was eager to instill those same strong values in Robert.

As Robert ran out of the room to tell his mother of their deal, Thomas could only think that the day he'd accept his young son as a man was many years away. However, those years would, as they had in his life, slip by quicker than either could possibly imagine.