

Chapter FIVE: Packing What Matters

“Time to pack. We leave in an hour.” Aunt Tab spoke from her full and imposing height to curled-up Dot on her Tinkerbelle rug.

“No,” said Dot, as defiantly as possible for a person lying on a rug. “I’m not going.”

“Yes, you are. Thea wants us to.”

“You can’t talk with Mom.”

“You’d be surprised.” It sounded like a threat.

After more back and forth like this, which got nowhere, Aunt Tab creaked down, fork-lifted Dot to a standing position and didn’t let go. Being upright, Dot could see a brand new suitcase open on her bed. She also noticed that all her clothing drawers were pulled open.

“Pick out what you want to wear in England. We’ll be there seven days. It will be sunny some days and rainy some days, just like here.” Aunt Tab had a take-no-prisoners look in her beady eyes. “You have twenty minutes to make your choices and fill your bag. Don’t get greedy and fill it all up because you might want to bring some new stuff home.”

“Aunt Tab,” Dot started in a whiney voice, twisting her arm to get out of Aunt Tab’s bony grasp.

“Don’t you Aunt Tab me, young lady. This is one of those times when the kid has to do what the grown-up says. Pack. Now.”

Aunt Tab had that unyielding look that Thea never had.

“Okay,” Dot mumbled. “But I don’t want to go and I’m not going to have any fun.”

“Don’t worry. This trip isn’t a vacation for either of us.” Aunt Tab looked grim. “Enough talk—pack!” She let go of Dot’s arm and waited, hands on her skinny hips, to make sure Dot wasn’t about to crumple back down on Tinkerbell. Satisfied, she turned and loped out of the bedroom. Dot stared at her new suitcase. It was dark green and covered with zippers. The curve of one of the zippers looked a little like Junie’s braces when she smiled. Dot didn’t smile back. She picked up Tinkerbell and carefully laid the rug in the suitcase and then tossed in a sweatshirt and a couple pairs of jeans. In a few minutes, the suitcase was full. But no books, shoes, socks, underwear or tee shirts had made it in. Dot took everything out and stared at Tinkerbell. Silly to think she would fit; still, it was worse to think of leaving her home.

After some thought, Dot remembered the sharp fabric scissors in Thea’s sewing basket. Maybe she could cut Tinkerbell out and leave her bulky blue background at home. This seemed like a good idea until she realized she would have to go into her mother’s room to get the sewing basket, which was on the floor of her mother’s closet.

Dot hadn’t been in Thea’s room since Thea stopped being there.

She walked down the short hallway and stood at her mother’s closed bedroom door for a while. She could hear Aunt Tab crashing around in the kitchen downstairs, and above her a jet decelerated over her neighborhood, headed to Sea-Tac Airport to the south. A dog barked down the street. Everything sounded echoey and mechanical as **AT** time jerked to a halt. In slow motion she reached for the bedroom doorknob. She touched it with one finger, half expecting an electric shock. Nothing—just cold metal. She wrapped her warm hand around the knob, gently turned it, and pushed the door open.

The air in the room that rushed out to greet Dot smelled like Thea. She leaned against the door frame and shut her eyes against alternating waves of sweetness and pain. She couldn't stop herself from taking a deep breath and holding in the air of her past. When she finally exhaled, she cautiously cracked her eyes open, just to a narrow slit, and forced herself to walk in.

The room looked exactly as it had the morning they'd set off for the library. Her mother's orange terrycloth bathrobe was flung like a sunset across the bottom of her ruffled blue duvet. There were piles of books on the floor on both sides at the head of the bed. The closet door was half open. Dot realized Aunt Tab hadn't been in there either. She moved cautiously toward the closet. She found the sewing basket mostly by feel. Without taking it out and with her eyes still mostly shut, she opened it, retrieved the scissors and ran out of the room, eyes pricked with tears as she pulled the door closed.

She couldn't imagine ever going back in. She couldn't imagine sorting through her mother's things, getting rid of things, turning the room into something else. But then she thought it would be creepy to leave it as it was, knowing it would eventually crumble into spider webs and dust. No good choices, just like everything else in her life these days.

Back in her own room, Dot was glad to focus on the physical labor of cutting out Tinkerbell. It was trickier than she expected and took all her strength and attention. The rug material was much tougher than any fabric the scissors were made for, and it was hard to follow Tinkerbell's outstretched arm and the skinny wand. But eventually it was done, and Tinkerbell fit nicely into the bottom of the suitcase.

Now there was plenty of room. She carefully folded and rolled most of the clothes Aunt Tab had laid out. There was still room left, so she went downstairs and took the fabric collage *Dancing on the Edge* from the wall next to Thea's poetry shelf. Rolled tightly, it slid neatly along one side, next to her jeans. After a wave of bittersweet **BT** memories, she zipped the suitcase closed and dragged it down the stairs. Might as well get it over with.

Chapter SIX: A Terrible Start

The inside of the airplane was huge. Dot had seen airplane insides only on TV, so she was impressed by the size of the real thing. It was frighteningly big. Bumping her suitcase down the aisle (Aunt Tab said she didn't believe in checking bags), she was convinced it could never stay up in the air. By the time they'd walked the mile or so to their seats, Dot became equally convinced that it would never be able to take off and that they'd all end up in a fiery ball at the end of the runway.

The rows of seats went on forever, each row nine seats across with two aisles. Dot and Aunt Tab's tickets put them in two adjacent seats in the five-seat middle section—Aunt Tab in the aisle seat and Dot one seat in. Aunt Tab's skinny arms were pretty strong and she put their bags in a sliding compartment above their seats by herself, even though a man across the aisle offered to help.

Dot sat down and expected the plane to start immediately lumbering down the runway to its certain destruction. When it didn't, she fiddled with the light switches on her arm rest and watched people fight over the diminishing space in the overhead compartments. After that got boring, she looked across the empty seat beside her and saw two kids, a girl and a boy, sit down in the two seats on the other side of her row. They looked about her age, maybe a year older, and they didn't seem to have any adults attached to them. They were each wearing black hoodie sweatshirts with "Microsoft Computer Camp" printed in red, green, yellow, and blue down their left arms. Except for the red, Dot had to admit they were pretty cool sweatshirts.

The two kids appeared to know everything about the little buttons and lights around their seats. They were also bickering noisily about something and fighting over a pillow.

“Oh, hello there,” the girl interrupted her squabble as she noticed Dot looking at her.

“Hi,” said Dot, as noncommittally as possible. Making new friends was not high on her list, because then she’d have to talk about stuff.

“Are you American?” the girl asked. She had an English accent.

“Yes.” Dot looked at Aunt Tab, hoping she’d join in and scare them off or at least take over the conversation. But Aunt Tab wasn’t paying attention; she’d gotten up and was rearranging bags overhead so someone else could cram his stuff in.

“I’m Nell. This is my brother Nick. We’re twins and we’ve been to computer camp in Seattle. We’re English and we’re going home.” Nell pushed her dark curly hair behind her ears and Dot noticed her brother had the same hair, even the same length. They both had bright blue eyes and light pink skin.

“I’m Dot. That’s my Aunt Tab.” Dot stopped. She had no idea what to say next; no idea how to explain why she was going to England. She didn’t even know herself. Aunt Tab’s explanations had been scattershot, as usual, and even if Dot had paid attention, which she hadn’t, they probably wouldn’t have made sense. Something about ashes and something about the meaning of Dot’s name *Dorothy Mary-Jane*, which apparently was complicated and meaningful—she vaguely remembered her mother telling her the same thing, but it hadn’t stuck. Whatever the reasons, they didn’t matter anymore. Nothing in **AT** time mattered. Besides, none of this was simple small talk for when you meet a kid for the first time.

Dot wished Junie were there. She'd know what to say. She'd flip her braids at them and spout off something about Chinese pirates stealing terabytes of Microsoft software. Junie always sounded as if she knew what she was talking about, even when she didn't.

Dot began feeling extremely sorry for herself—missing her mother and now missing her best friend. How could Aunt Tab possibly think this trip was a good idea?

Dot was rescued from having to think of what to say to the English kids when a woman in a uniform started a long speech on ceiling-mounted video screens about what to do if the plane began to crash. Good, thought Dot, I'm not the only one who's worried. Then she noticed that no one else was paying any attention, which she thought probably meant that none of the instructions would make any difference. Even so, she double-checked her seat belt when the video got to that part.

Taking off was a slow and undramatic process. Aunt Tab was restive because she couldn't see out a window. "No good at all. Like being in a shipping container."

About an hour into the flight, Dot almost forgot that she was in a thin and fragile tube with only miles of icy air between her and a very rocky, completely non-bouncy surface. A little while later, a sort of dinner was passed out. Dot didn't eat much. There was a tiny lettuce salad with one hard cherry tomato and a piece of chicken covered in a gooey something and a stale roll and a few green beans. She picked at a chocolate cupcake that was drizzled with a sticky sauce that tasted like damp brown sugar.

"So why are you going to England?" Nick asked from across the empty seat as he finished his last bite of beans. He said it like it was a challenge, not friendly at all.

"It's about my mom." Dot didn't know any other way to begin. "She died, and..." Dot turned to Aunt Tab, hoping for help.

“Well, hello, you young people,” said Aunt Tab, smiling as benevolently as she probably knew how. Surprised and relieved, Dot stuffed a big piece of cake into her mouth so she wouldn’t have to talk for a while.

“Yes, my niece Dot and I are visiting your fair country. I take it from your accents that you are of British stock,” she waved a gloppy forkful of chicken in their direction, “We plan to partake of your literal and literary landscapes—”

“Your mother died?” Nick interrupted, looking at Dot. “So you’re spending her insurance money or what?”

Dot was so stunned by Nick’s nasty tone that she wished she could disappear into the seat pocket in front of her. Either that or leap across the empty seat between them and hit his head as hard as a speeding truck.

“Young man! Did your mother never teach you a modicum of manners?” Aunt Tab bristled in a very satisfying way and stretched her arm across Dot’s seat to shake a bony finger at Nick. Nick ignored Aunt Tab and turned to his sister, “Nell, the empty seat is for that girl’s mother. She’s a ghost.”

“Nick, stop bothering them,” Nell said in a tired voice and swatted her brother’s arm.

“Travel does not come without risks,” Aunt Tab muttered. “Dot, let’s change seats.”

“Let’s just go home,” Dot trembled. “We never should’ve left.”

“Come, come. We don’t crumple that easily. Put your tray on the empty seat between you and that execrable young man, and then you get up and hold my tray and then I’ll get up and then we’ll change seats and when I sit down in your seat you can give me my tray and then when you 38

sit down in my seat, I'll give you your tray. Hang on to your pillow and keep that blanket off the floor. Simple."

"I get the picture, Aunt Tab. I'm not stupid."

Despite the clear plan, Aunt Tab spilled Dot's salad container on the floor. Aunt Tab was as uncoordinated as Thea had been graceful.

"Dreadful children," she said to Dot when they'd finally been rearranged, "Not representative, we must assume, of Great Britain's finest."

Dot stared straight ahead into the blue fabric seatback in front of her and didn't answer. The color reminded her of the part of the Tinkerbell rug she'd left behind, carefully folded and tucked under her bed. It had begun to appear that the plane might make it all the way to London, so it was good she'd brought Tink with her. And *Dancing on the Edge*:

Be Daring

Be Inventive

Be Loyal.

Was there any help there? Not that she could see. Not yet.

After the dinner trays were collected, the attendants turned out the lights and most people started wiggling around in their seats, trying to find a sitting-up position where they might possibly fall asleep.

"When you wake up, we'll be in London," said Aunt Tab. "First stop: Mary Wollstonecraft."

"Whatever," said Dot, perfectly resigned to a terrible week. It certainly had started out that way.