

## Alex's Journey

Morning light filtered through the shutters. Alex Champion opened his eyes and watched the sun's rays creep across his bed. At 7:30 a.m., it was time to get up. A smile of anticipation touched his lips – *Road Trip!* He felt the muscle cramp seize hold before he could swing his legs cautiously over the side of the bed to stand. Tossing and turning through the night took its toll on Alex's seventy-five-year-old body. Between the leg cramps and bathroom calls that woke him with a vengeance, it felt like he never got enough rest.

Today was different; he felt energized, alert, and raring to go. He was anxious to feel the wind in his hair, other roads to seek. He opened the shutters to peek outside. There was something to be said about morning rituals. Sure enough, Mrs. Larson, from the house directly across the street, sat on her porch bench having her morning cup of coffee. It wasn't about the ritual but how she went about it. Sitting in a lotus position directly in the middle of the bench, she balanced a large mug in one hand and a bagel in the other. Her two large mutts sat on either side, and each took turns taking a bite of the bagel and then a slurp of water out of the wide mug. Her dogs fed; Nancy Larson set the empty cup on the little table next to the bench and picked up her hot coffee in a matching mug. This consistent morning ritual never failed to make Alex smile. She and her hubby were good friends. They would keep a distant but watchful eye on his grandsons, Henry and Dan Jr., for the few weeks he was gone. Alex glanced at the clock. It was already 7:45.

He looked through the shutter once more. Mr. Hansen, who lived in the house to the left of him, was already outside, probably looking forward to a lively argument with his gardener, who would be arriving in the next fifteen minutes. The gardener was never late. Every week, the two men discussed what part of the yard needed the most work, the weeds that needed pulling, and the best way to do it. Jack Hansen was a lively soul of ninety years. Alex was willing to swear by his often-overheard conversation that both men enjoyed their weekly spats. They always parted with a pat on the back and a smile, no matter how loud their disagreement. Jack had the best-looking yard on the block, with good reason.

Alex stepped away from the shutters and got ready for his shower, knowing the bathroom would be empty but a mess at this time of the morning. His grandsons had already left, equally noisy as the oldest shouted at the younger to hurry up or he wasn't going to drive him to school, and the younger's response, "Don't rush me." Sure enough, towels were dripping on the floor, and toothpaste and brushes were haphazardly dropped in the sink. Alex shook his head and straightened up the bath area they shared. At least the boys liked to be clean, a definite improvement now that they both had girlfriends.

Dressed and eager to be on his way, Alex went downstairs to the kitchen for his cup of coffee. His daughter Linda was grabbing her purse and laptop, ready to begin a ten-hour shift at the office. He timed it for minimum conversation. Linda was inclined to moan and groan and point blame for her problems at everyone but herself. Alex mostly tuned it out. After her divorce and two years of living with Linda and the boys, she left him immune to her complaints, which were a never-ending litany. He hadn't minded sharing his home, but he felt she should be making more effort to improve her circumstances by now. He shrank from her shrill voice sounding from across the room, feeling himself lessen in her presence.

"Bye, Dad, I'm running late and still need to gas up the car. I don't know why you can't do it; you're retired. You could easily do it for me in the evenings. Be sure to take something out of the freezer to cook for dinner. The boys will be home around 4:00, and I won't have the time to

make anything. Thanks, see you tonight.”

Alex stood still, watching her slip out the garage door before asking him if he had other plans. “Linda, Linda,” he murmured. It was time for his daughter to accept change without him acting as the chief dog's body to aid and abet her laziness. She was young and capable of much; his grandsons were almost out of high school. She'd be fine if he could only find the correct way to encourage her.

Finishing his coffee, he set his cup in the dishwasher and frowned. Was he doing the right thing? Should he stay and try to talk to her? No, he couldn't. He'd never been a talker, and she'd always been a screamer. He felt like beating his fists against a wall. He had to think it through; he had to get away.

Today, he was going to kick-start a plan of action. First up was a talk with the neighbors. He slipped out the back door.

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“Hi, Jack! Today's the day!”

“Alex,” Jack Hansen greeted him with pleasure. “I figured you wouldn't leave without a quick goodbye. I'll keep a good eye on the house. Your phone number is listed in my contacts, and I don't want you to worry about a thing while you're gone. We'll check in on Friday.” Jack held up his cell phone as if to assure Alex. “So, did you decide where you're heading?”

Alex scratched his head. “I figure I'm going to head over to the coast and cruise down Pacific Coast Highway to Southern California for a bit of R&R. I haven't been away since Linda moved in, and boy, I'm ready! You'll call me, won't you, if I need to be aware of anything, but I'm not expecting any challenges. I'll have a quick conversation with Nancy about the boys and then be on my way. Thanks, Jack, you're a good friend!”

Jack gave Alex a quick thumbs up, his attention already drifting back to the rose bushes his gardener was currently pruning.

He walked across the street and knocked at the pretty front door of Nancy's house, painted a bright cerulean blue with a silver peephole. Both dogs could be heard in tandem, one in low growls, the other with a high staccato bark. He grinned, listening to Nancy shout from behind the door. “Shut up, boys! It's just Alex. You know Alex!” Nancy quickly opened the door, where the dog's loud complaints turned to barks of greeting.

“Yeah, it's just me, you crazy critters!” He pulled the two large milk-bone biscuits from his pocket, watching them chase each other to the kitchen to see who would first eat theirs.

“Ready to go, Alex? John and I will make sure the boys are ok. My son Todd usually catches a ride with them on the way home, so if they need a snack or something, I'm happy to help.”

“Thanks, Nancy. If I know them, they'll be concerned about their belly more than anything else. I've taught them how to cook some simple meals. Plenty of snacks are in the fridge and cupboard, but you know boys, the easier, the better. We had a pow-wow yesterday and a good understanding of each other, but they might need your motherly ear to pour their heart into over the next few weeks. I appreciate you, Nancy.”

“Go, have fun! Call me if you need anything. See you soon!”

Alex nodded in the affirmative and went back home.

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He re-read the letter to Linda, sealed it in an envelope, and left it under a refrigerator magnet.

Dear Linda,

Today, I'm starting on a road trip to enjoy the California coast, see some friends, and seek a little adventure. During the past two years, my role as your father has changed to that of a caregiver, watching over you, Henry, and Dan. Lately, I have come to realize that I have allowed you to lean on me more than I should have, knowing I have not encouraged you enough to walk a new path, your own path. Now, you must begin to take those steps toward independence and search for happiness. It is vital for every person, young and old, to venture forth, laugh, and begin each day with a new attitude. I will be taking my own advice for the next few weeks. Perhaps this time will help you to find your wings. I spoke with the boys last night, and they will be okay with some attention and love from their mother. Try to find some time to share with them. I've placed this letter under a new refrigerator magnet I found in a bookstore. It is by Thoreau. "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined." We'll discuss yours and my newly discovered pathway when I return from my adventure. Love always, Dad.

Taking a deep breath, Alex locked up the house and drove away.

## Chapter 2

Some might think he was too old to appreciate it, but he loved every inch of his 1989 Jet Black Mustang, a 5-speed GT convertible. He'd bought it for his fortieth birthday and kept it in prime condition. It didn't matter if he seldom drove it. At least twice a year, he took it for a quick spin, had the oil changed, replaced parts when needed, and generally babied his 'Stang.'

He drove down Highway One with the top down, letting the radio play full blast to oldie rock and roll bands like Kiss, Pink Floyd, the Eagles, Van Halen, and Queen. It felt great to get the cobwebs out of his mind. He grinned at the wind, the bugs splatting on his windshield, and the sheer, unadulterated delight of getting away. Once he'd outdistanced the city traffic behind him, he set the cruise control to 75 and felt the steering wheel dance and tires spin as he wound his way through mountain turns and into the straightaways toward his first stop of the day, the central coast city of Monterey. It was closer to 1:00 p.m. than the noon hour, but he craved seafood chowder at the Fish Hopper in the Monterey Canning Company. The day was young, and families with children were scampering around him, eager to visit the famous Aquarium. Sitting at a table watching the sea otters play, he thought about Linda and the boys. Was he doing the right thing to leave them alone for a few weeks? He almost pulled out his phone to call and make sure, then realized nobody would be home at this hour. He laughed at himself, not quite knowing who this trip was for. What decisions would he make? Or Linda? He leaned back, enjoying the bite of a cold draft beer while waiting for his meal. His ear picked up the argument of the young couple across the way. Both looked exhausted, wrestling with a restless toddler and a baby under a year old.

Alex searched the table for the junk mail flyer he noticed when he first sat down. Considering there were two children, he tore the flyer in half and began to fold the colorful print paper. He drew a wide fish eye on each side with his pen and presented both origami to the father.

"Hi! My grandchildren are older than these two, but I remember days like this when you can't decide who is more tired, you or the kids."

An appreciative dad gave thanks and handed each child their paper fish. The waiter delivered his meal, and he sat back down to eat. He noticed the origami kept the kids quiet for all of 10 minutes, long enough to ensure he enjoyed the rest of his beer. When he left the restaurant, sated and relaxed, he was told that the grateful parents had paid for his beer. Alex wandered Cannery Row for a bit, enjoying the sights, the colorful pennant flags, and the ever-present ocean view.

Alex made it to Lighthouse Ave. in Pacific Grove around 4:00, just a short drive from Cannery Row. Exiting the car at the Victorian bed and breakfast inn, he yawned, realizing he was more tired than he thought from the road trip, the restless night before, and the cool ocean breezes. *Altogether, a good afternoon*, he decided as he sat drinking wine, chatting with other guests, and nibbling the complimentary cheese.

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The phone call woke him from his nap at half past six.

"What's this all about, Dad? What's your problem? Are you kicking us out of the house?" She could barely spit out the words, and the anger from his daughter rolled like a wave over his head, snatching what little rest he had enjoyed. Alex sighed and sat up straight on the recliner he had been napping on.

"Linda, did you take the time to read the letter properly? It did not say I was kicking you out. But I need you to start thinking about your future – you were never meant to stay in my

home forever. When you and Dan Sr. split up, you told me you would only be there a short time, a year at most. It has been considerably more than that, and Linda, I am not your housekeeper, cook, whipping boy, or babysitter for two teens who don't require one at their age."

"So, you do want me to move. Fine! I'll start looking for a place for us to go, although how I'm going to do that with Henry in the middle of his senior year, I don't know. I work ten-hour days, and surely, with you retired, I can't imagine what you need to do with your extra hours. It's not as if you are married or have a girlfriend. You're a widower and likely to stay that way at seventy-five. But fine, just fine. I'll drag us to some apartment somewhere where Henry can finish his last year of high school."

"Linda, listen to me. We've got to come" . . . the cell phone went dead in his ear. Alex had known it was coming. He knew he should have tried to speak with her before writing that letter. The bottom line was that he was a coward in conflict, and his instinct was flight, not fight. He could feel his chest ache from her words. It had been the same way speaking with Linda's mother; the glass was always half-empty.

Alex went over the contents of the letter in his mind. Had he worded it in the way that Linda thought it meant? No, he only wanted her to start thinking about her future, her pathway, not his. She was so angry and argumentative. He rarely saw her smile. Remorse almost had him picking up the phone. Linda was only thirty-nine, with plenty of time to make a new life and marriage if that's what she wanted.

As for his own life, he scratched his head. He missed his freedom, friends, and the peaceful existence he'd experienced after Linda's mom passed away. Although fiercely attracted to each other, Alex and his wife Marge had married before realizing they were totally opposite personalities. Alex had never been able to stand up to her. It shamed him to know he was letting his daughter take up where Marge had left off. Deciding to clear his mind of it for a while, he laced his shoes, grabbed his jacket, and went to the local bar for a round of darts and a few beers.

Alex woke the following day feeling like the wind had been removed from his sails. Sad and stressed, he had spent the night questioning his motives, worrying that he was doing the right thing for his family and himself. He explored the picturesque areas around Monterey and Carmel by the Sea, feeling his spirits rise at the surrounding beauty.

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It was the tail end of the season at the Pacific Grove Monarch Sanctuary. He watched the clusters of butterflies in their graceful flights, landing in the nearby eucalyptus trees. Three little girls jumped and shrieked with laughter as the majestic monarchs flitted over their heads, spiraling around in flight. Had Linda ever been that joyful? He pulled a memory out of his heart.

"Daddy, why can't we fly in the air? I want to fly high in the sky and look for angels and hummingbirds. Wouldn't it be faster than climbing a tree if we could only fly and land on the leaves?" Linda gracefully lifted her arms and became the beautiful, mysterious butterfly dancing around him. "Look at me! Look at me, Daddy!"

The next day, he met up with his old Army buddy Gus and his wife in San Luis Obispo. He traded his Mustang for a bus ride, and they took a tour of the valley with several wine-tasting venues.

A slightly drunk Gus slung his arm around Alex's neck. "Alex, my friend, you need a woman! I know just the one. My wife's sister, have I told you about my wife's sister? No? Well, my wife's sister, Wendy, is her name, is this plump, cute little woman who would be perfect for a guy like you," Gus leaned in confidentially to tell him, "You need to come down here more often. We'll set you up, and snap!" Gus tried to snap his fingers but couldn't, so they all laughed

till they couldn't stop. They forgot all about Wendy.

It was just what Alex needed. That laughter over absolutely nothing did more to raise his spirits than the entire trip thus far. It felt as though a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders. This trip to re-find himself had been a long time coming. He was sure that Linda needed the same. Was she as ready as he was? Perhaps they were prepared to talk.

### Chapter 3

It was a glorious day in Morro Bay. After a good night's rest, he found himself walking on the beach early in the morning, feeling happy and relaxed. Had he ever been as snarly as Linda? But who had allowed it? Him. He realized he was partially to blame for letting her continue the bad behavior. It wasn't too late to fix it.

Finally, with a clear direction and most things resolved for future discussion, Alex rested at an outdoor café, staring at Morro Rock. It wasn't going anywhere; neither was he.

Taking a deep breath, he dialed Jack's number, as pre-arranged before he left.

"Jack, my friend, it's Alex. How is life in the neighborhood?"

"Is it Friday already, Alex? Things are the same as they were before you left. Not much changes on this block. The grass continues to grow. Your daughter allowed herself a few temper tantrums. I can only assume who she was upset with and why, but you know what they say about that word. I sure could hear her, and with my deaf ears, that's pretty loud. I just assumed, there's that word again, that you lit her temper up like the fourth of July. I haven't heard a word from her since. Henry and Dan hauled ass over to Todd's house. I imagine Nancy has ensured it's more calming across the street."

"Yep, that note I left Linda set those fireworks off. You know what, Jack? I needed this trip to think about many things I've been avoiding. One of the things was Linda's temper. She's got a fuse just like her mother did, and doesn't always take the time to think about her treatment of others. Mostly, me. We both need a come to Jesus meeting when I get home because I'm not without blame. I'm still planning on taking another week, but I should be home by next Friday at the latest."

"Alright, Alex, take care of yourself; enjoy that convertible."

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Alex was driving down to Santa Barbara when the cell phone buzzed in his ear later that day. The Mustang didn't have blue-tooth capability.

"Grandpa? It's me, Henry. Dan and I are sitting at the dining room table. I've got the cell on speakerphone. Mom's still at work, but we thought we'd give you a call. Maybe we can put a plan together between the three of us."

"Hold on, Henry, I'm going to pull over at this exit so we can talk and I can hear you better."

"Hey Grandpa, it's me, Dan! We sure do miss you. It's been a weird week."

"I know boys. I figured you would both have to take some flack for my actions, but I also knew you would be welcome at Nancy's house. I heard you've been hanging out there."

"Yeah, she's a good cook too," piped in Dan.

Alex pulled into a strip mall and shut off the car engine. He ran his fingers through his hair and took a deep breath. "OK, guys. I want to say something, and then let's go from there. First of all, I owe you an apology. I should have been able to speak with your mother but couldn't or didn't, and sometimes you got the fallout. She has problems, and I wasn't sympathetic to them. I've had a few days to devise a compromise for all of us that I hope will work, but she and I will have to speak face-to-face when I get home. We can't fix everything on the phone. Then, all four of us will sit down and hash out anything that still needs fixing.

"As I told you before I left, it is difficult for me to verbalize when I'm upset. I needed to get into my own space so I could think straight. I never intended to move you out when you're not ready, whatever your mom might have told you. What I was trying to do, and I admit not very well, was to get her to realize she needs to think about where her life is going. Between the anger

and blaming others for her problems, unless she is willing to seek counseling. . .”

“Yeah, we know,” Henry replied sheepishly. “We haven’t been much help in that direction. We just let you deal with her anger issues, and we should have seen a blow-up coming. She is our mom, and we’ve been taking the fallout since we were kids.”

Dan chimed in. “Yeah, gramps, she and Dad had terrible fights before they split. We were sort of thankful you’ve been putting up with it, not us.”

“Well, we’re going to find a solution with conversations, family counseling, and compromise”. Alex tried to sound more reassuring than he felt.

Henry spoke up, and Alex could hear the leadership in his voice. “Grandpa, you know I got accepted to UC Davis in August, so I won’t be around often. But Dan still has his Senior year coming up. Do we have to move? You know he’s been filling out applications for the schools back east. He wants to go to Boston University so he can play with people’s teeth in the future.”

Alex could hear Dan snort in the background, and he would have bet a dollar he slugged his brother in the arm. “Ow man, that hurt!”

“There was a pause for a moment, then Henry continued, “Grandpa? We know that mom is a bully. I don’t think she means to be, but she doesn’t know how to deal with things she dislikes, so she yells a lot till she gets her way.

“Yeah, I know Henry, and I retreat because I hate arguing. That’s on me, but together we’ll straighten it out. I will call your mom now, and we’ll get the ball rolling. Maybe counseling will help us figure out how to work together. Now, I’m going to be real honest. Dan, I will do everything I can to make things work out for your senior year, but I can’t promise till I know we can all work together. If your mom doesn’t agree to counseling or changes her attitude, she can’t stay. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

‘It would be best if you boys pulled your weight also. Do your laundry and clean the bathroom. I’m tired of hanging up your towels.’”

Alex listened to the relieved laughter in the dining room of the house. “Now hang up the phone so I can call your mom.”

“Okay, we’ll do it. When are you coming home?” Henry questioned.

“Ummm, another week? I’m going to Disneyland!”

“AW MAN!” came the shouts on the other end of the phone.

Alex just laughed. “See you soon, boys.”

He sat in the car for a few minutes more, wanting nothing so much as to turn the engine over and keep cruising down Highway One. He took a deep breath, took a few more, and dialed.

“Hello Linda”

“Hi Dad.” Then, both together, “Can we talk?”