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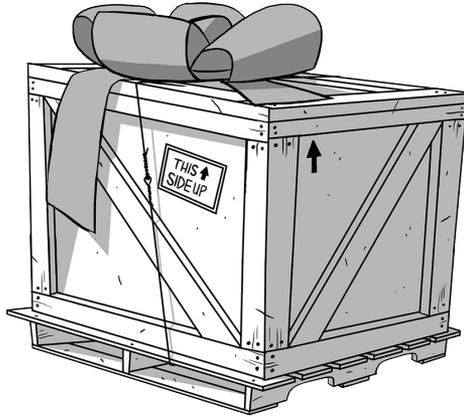
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CHAPTER ONE

THE GIFT



BERNARD STARED ANXIOUSLY out the large picture window in his living room, hoping his final gift would soon arrive. It was his twelfth birthday, and his parents, his older cousin Maurice, and a few of his friends from the neighborhood were huddled around the kitchen table laughing and eating birthday cake and ice cream.

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Everyone except for Bernard, who couldn't stop wondering if the gift from his famous globe-trotting Grandpa Jones would arrive like he'd promised it would. Bernard was happy with his other gifts, but he knew his grandpa's gift would definitely be the best. He admired Grandpa Jones and dreamed of someday traveling the world, taking photographs of cool places, and discovering awesome ancient relics, just like him.

Bernard's father, Walter, was helping pass around the ice cream and cake but never stopped watching Bernard. "Bernard, your ice cream is melting, son," Walter said.

"OK. I'll be right there, Dad." Bernard tried to mask any sign of disappointment that his grandpa's gift had not arrived. He knew his dad would say, "I

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told you so,” so he tried to act as if it didn’t bother him—even though it did.

Bernard grabbed a huge chunk of cake and plopped it into his bowl next to his melting peanut-butter-and-chocolate ice cream, which was his favorite. He took a huge bite of chocolate cake, leaving behind a big glob of frosting on his cheek. “What time is it, anyway?” He mumbled with his mouth full of the delicious cake.

His mother, Faith, wiped the frosting from his face. “Baby, don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s almost seven o’clock, so Grandpa’s gift probably isn’t going to show up today,” she said gently.

“Ahh, darn, so we don’t get to see this awesome motor scooter Bernard has been talking about all week at the park?” his friend Alex said as he stuffed a huge bite of cake into his mouth and smiled.

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Oh no! Bernard thought and glared at Alex. He never told his parents what his grandpa was getting him because he knew they wouldn't understand. They would just think he was too young or too small to drive a motor scooter—and he was right.

“His what?” Faith said as she dropped all of the crumpled wrapping paper she was gathering. She looked at Bernard's father in confusion. “What motor scooter, Walter?”

“Faith, don't look at me. I didn't know my dad was getting him a scooter,” he said. “But it doesn't surprise me.”

Sensing the tension, Bernard's friends slipped out of the room and announced that they needed to get going. Bernard followed them outside to see them off. He peeked back into the house to see his parents having a heated discussion about the motor scooter.

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Bernard felt bad because his friends had all left and his parents were angry with his grandpa again for no reason.

To be completely honest, he wasn't even certain he was getting a motor scooter from Grandpa Jones. He had a good idea, but he wasn't 100 percent certain. It seemed obvious the last time they spoke. It was just last week when he had the video phone call with Grandpa Jones, who was staying at his tranquil beach house somewhere on the west coast of Africa. He had been there for a couple of years on an important assignment to track down a collection of rare artifacts for the local cultural center's museum. He was also preparing for a tour for his latest book. Grandpa Jones was one of the world's best travel photographers and had just released a book filled with photos

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and stories from some of his greatest adventures to the most exotic places on earth.

During the video call, Bernard spotted a beautiful brand-new red motor scooter equipped with a black helmet parked in the back of his grandpa's garage amid some old boxes and strange relics. Bernard remembered Grandpa Jones's words during the call: "The birthday gift I'm sending you will take you to all the places you want to go. I know your parents are extra protective of you, so this gift will be a safe way for you to go on adventures just like your old grandpa."

Bernard had decoded the words "take you places" to mean "scooter" and "a safe way" to mean "helmet." *Obviously, right?*

By the time Bernard's last friend was heading home, the sun was setting, and he was certain his

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scooter wouldn't arrive on his birthday. After a few more peaceful moments alone, he eased back inside the house to be greeted with the sound of his parents in full panic mode.

“He’s still not answering his phone,” said Faith, who was determined to get some answers about the motor scooter.

“He’s probably in a dead zone—out in some jungle or desert or wherever he goes,” Walter said. “Leave him another message to call us back immediately.”

“Great! Now his voice mailbox is full.” Faith calmly sat the phone down, rubbed her temples, and smiled nervously at Bernard. “Baby, why wouldn’t you tell us about this motor scooter?”

Bernard took a deep breath. Just as he was about to speak, his mom’s phone rang.

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“It’s him,” she said. “Dad, thank you for calling me back, we...”

Before she could launch into her concerns, she was interrupted by a woman’s voice with a West African accent. “No, no. I’m very sorry. This is not your baba; my name is Sada. I live next door to Mr. Jones’s house. He and my husband, Kene, are away, and he asked me to answer his calls.”

“Sada, can you please have him call his daughter-in-law, Faith—regarding the motor scooter—when he gets back?”

“Oh, yes. I will most certainly let him know the message.”

Faith hung up the phone. “Well, Bernard, until we hear back from your grandpa, you are grounded for keeping this from us,” she said.

“But, Mom, I...”

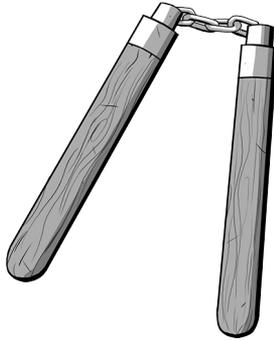
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“Bernard, you heard what your mom said. You’re grounded until we find out what’s going on,” his father added.

Bernard’s head dropped. He gathered all of his gifts, ambled back to his bedroom, and closed the door. *Awesome*, he thought to himself. He couldn’t believe his best gift ever didn’t show up and he had just been grounded on his own birthday.

CHAPTER TWO

WHO'S OUT THERE?



AFTER A FEW hours of solitary confinement in his bedroom, Bernard had finished reading the entire instructions manual to his new headphones while listening to loud hip-hop music. He removed the headphones from his ears to go to the bathroom and heard a faint tapping from outside his bedroom window.

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Startled and confused, he noticed it was now 10:00 p.m., and he couldn't imagine who would be tapping on his window at that hour.

He heard the tapping again, this time a bit louder. Bernard turned off the lights in his room, grabbed his trusty nunchakus, and slowly approached the window. He took a deep breath and, in one quick motion, snatched the blinds up. To his surprise, no one was there. His eyes slowly surveyed the perimeter of the quiet, moonlit neighborhood. He briefly turned his head away to find his binoculars in his desk drawer and turned back to the window.

He didn't need a closer look. A shadowy figure suddenly appeared directly in front of his window, staring at him. Bernard stumbled backward and tripped over his basketball, sending his nunchakus and binoculars flying in opposite directions. "Who are you, and what

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do you want?” Bernard shouted as he scrambled to his feet and started running to get his dad.

“Dude, I think your scooter is here,” the person shouted through the glass.

Bernard froze in his tracks, peeked back around his bedroom door from the hallway, and squinted his eyes to get another look.

The stranger pulled down the hood on his sweatshirt. “Dude, it’s me—Alex. Sorry I scared you, but I was riding home from Eric’s house and saw a big wooden crate on your front doorstep and thought I would let you know the birthday gift from your grandpa is here.”

“Man, you scared me half to death. Are you serious? It’s here?” Bernard tiptoed to his parents’ door to ensure they were sound asleep and then made his move to the front door. He opened the door, and there

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it was: a large wooden crate nailed securely together. It was covered in stamps of the cities it had passed through to arrive. The name Rover Motor Scooter Company was branded on the sides of the crate.

Bernard couldn't wait until the next morning to see it. Since he was already grounded and his parents would never let him ride it, tonight was his only chance to take it for a spin. He and Alex used all their strength to move the crate thirty feet to his dad's workshop directly behind Bernard's house.

Bernard grabbed a crowbar and pried on every side of the crate but couldn't get it to open. Frustrated, Bernard spotted his dad's power saw, which he was forbidden to touch. But this was his only chance, so he plugged in the saw and turned it on. Just as he started to make his first cut into the wood, the saw shut down.

WHO'S OUT THERE?

“Going somewhere tonight, son?” Walter was shaking his head and holding the cord in his hand.

Busted, Bernard thought.

“Alex, what on earth are you doing out this late at night?” Walter asked. “Do your parents know where you are?”

“Yes...well, no...I mean they knew where I was but not where I am now.”

“Get home, Alex,” Walter said.

“Sorry, Bernard. I’ll see you tomorrow?” Alex apologized, jumped onto his skateboard, and zig-zagged down the sidewalk into the dark.

“You might see him, and you might not,” Walter shouted indignantly.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MANSA MUSA GANG



AS THE FULL moon illuminated the night sky and the ocean waves behind Grandpa Jones's house washed up onto the white-sand beach, a white Jeep covered in dirt slowly turned into the driveway and stopped in front of his house. Out from the passenger side jumped Charles T. Jones, a.k.a. Grandpa Jones, a spry and fit older

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man dressed in tan cargo pants and vest, hiking boots, and a brown safari hat with one feather in the hatband. He sported a full silver beard, a big cheerful smile, and a sparkle in his eye. He was exhausted but happy to be home after a long and arduous two-day journey to locate a rare artifact for the local cultural center's new Mansa Musa exhibit. He removed the tan burlap bag from the back seat of the Jeep that contained the priceless relic and handed it to the driver, Kene. Kene, who was his neighbor, was a native to this part of the country and had proved to be a trustworthy and reliable friend to Grandpa Jones. He loved to help Grandpa Jones drive to difficult-to-find places in search of relics.

“You can go ahead and take it inside, Kene,”

THE MANSA MUSA GANG

Grandpa Jones said. “I’m going to grab my camera bag and be right in.”

Kene went inside with the artifact and shut the door. A couple of minutes later, Grandpa Jones walked into the pitch-black house and put down his camera bag. He carefully navigated his way through the living room and headed straight to the kitchen for a long-overdue drink of water. He didn’t even bother finding a glass but instead guzzled the water straight from the large clear-glass pitcher.

“Staying hydrated is definitely important in Africa, isn’t it, Mr. Jones?” a voice with a strange accent said in the darkness.

Grandpa Jones put down the glass pitcher. “Who is that, and what are you doing in my home?” He snatched off his round glasses and wiped the dust from them so he could try to see more clearly. With

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help from the refrigerator light, Grandpa Jones saw a large man sitting in his favorite leather reading chair in his living room.

“Mr. Jones, my name is Remi Hawkins III. You don’t know me, but I believe you may have discovered something on your little adventure that belongs to me.”

Now with the help from a beam of moonlight streaming through a crack in the living-room curtains, Grandpa Jones saw a big, round, sweaty face looking back at him. “Look, mister, I don’t know who you are, but you have about five seconds to get out of my house.” Grandpa Jones grabbed his telephone. “Or I’m calling the authorities to escort you out for trespassing.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be necessary,” Remi calmly replied as he flicked on a reading lamp next to

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the chair. The light revealed two hulky men dressed in black standing on either side of him with their faces snarling and fists balled up. “Mr. Jones, I’d like you to meet my business associates, Boris and Ivan.”

Boris and Ivan were obviously Remi’s muscle and ready to attack on command. Ivan was holding the tan burlap bag that Kene had just brought inside the home.

“You may not know me, but you probably know my work,” Remi said.

“What work?” Grandpa Jones replied.

“You see, I like to collect rare Mansa Musa artifacts too. The only difference is, I prefer to take them from beautiful indoor air-conditioned museums instead of dreadful outdoor miserable places like you do.”

After thinking about it for a moment, Grandpa Jones had the answer. “You’re the Mansa Musa

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Gang, aren't you? You're the ones who stole all the artifacts I tracked down last year for the cultural center's Mansa Musa exhibit."

"You're very sharp, Mr. Jones. The problem is, there are only two artifacts remaining that I need. And since the museum has now improved its security, I decided we would just go straight to the source this time and steal them directly from you, Mr. Jones."

Remi snatched a brightly painted wooden tribal mask from the brown burlap bag.

"Like this, the infamous magic tribal mask. One half of the two most priceless—and some say magical—artifacts that once belonged to Mansa Musa over six hundred years ago. Both were gifts given to him by a magical craftsman who carved them from wood taken from a wishing tree. The magic tribal mask could answer any question he ever asked it,

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while the magic chair could teleport him to any place he could imagine. But the most exciting part about the chair is a scroll hidden inside it that shows the secret location to Mansa Musa's infamous hidden treasure. Any of this ring a bell, Mr. Jones?"

"Of course it does. I'm the one who researched it and wrote about it in my book," Grandpa Jones said. "Look, I'm sorry, but that mask doesn't belong to you. It's going to the cultural center where it belongs."

"Not anymore. Now it's coming with me, and so are you. Because according to your little book here, you also know the whereabouts of the magic chair. So you are going to take us to it tomorrow morning, or your friendly neighbor and his wife here are going to pay."

Boris reached behind the sofa and pulled up

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Grandpa Jones's friend Kene and his wife, who were tied up together with tape over their mouths.

“OK, OK, don't hurt them,” Grandpa Jones pleaded. “I only know where the magic chair and scroll are said to be located, but we've never looked there. The old blind craftsman who gave me the tribal mask told me where I could find the chair. His ancestor was the magical craftsman who made the artifacts for Mansa Musa. And now the old blind craftsman makes replicas of the magic chair for tourists.”

“Fascinating. You can tell us more about it on the way there tomorrow morning,” Remi said.

“I can't go with you tomorrow because I have an important keynote speech and book signing tomorrow at the bookstore. People are expecting to see me. If I don't show up, then they'll start looking for me, which will make you look like a kidnapper.”

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Remi thought for a moment. “Fine, we will go with you and keep a close eye on you. After the event is over, you will take us to the magic chair.”

Grandpa Jones knew that if the legend were true about the magic relics, then a greedy and ruthless person like Remi would no doubt use their magic and power to cause more harm than good to the world.



The next morning, Grandpa Jones, Remi, and Ivan loaded up in a large black SUV and headed to town for Grandpa Jones’s book-signing event at the bookstore. Meanwhile, Remi’s other goon, Boris, and his three vicious dogs stood guard over Kene and his wife, Sada, who were tied up together in the basement of their home.

“And remember, Mr. Jones, any funny business,

and we will release the dogs on your dear friends,”

Remi told Grandpa Jones as the car pulled away.