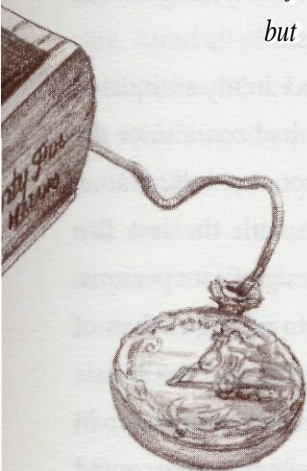


ONE

IN THE BEGINNING

*A journey may be long or short,  
but it must start at the very spot  
one finds oneself.*



**I**t was in my fifty-third year of practicing law, and my eightieth year of life here on this earth, that I was to undertake an odyssey that would change my life forever.

I was seated behind my mahogany monstrosity of a desk in my top-floor, corner office of an imposing building in the most prominent section of Boston. In the marble foyer, the antique brass plate on the outer door reads Hamilton, Hamilton, & Hamilton. Of the aforementioned, I am the first Hamilton—Theodore J. Hamilton, to be accurate. My son and grandson account for the remainder of the Hamiltons in the firm.

I would not say that we are the most prestigious law firm in all of Boston, because that would not be totally circumspect. However, if someone else were to say that, I would not go out of my way to disagree.

As I was simply drinking in the ambiance in my antiquated but palatial office, I was thinking how far I had come since the lean days in law school. I enjoyed gazing upon my wall of fame, which includes photographs taken of me with the last five presidents of the United States, among other significant persons.

I glanced at the familiar sight of floor-to-ceiling shelves of leather-bound books, the massive oriental rug, and the classic leather furniture, all of which predate me. My enjoyment in simply experiencing the familiar environment was interrupted when the telephone on my desk buzzed. I heard the reliable and familiar voice of Margaret Hastings. "Sir," she said, "may I step in and have a word with you?"

As we had been working together for more than forty years, I knew that tone was reserved for the most serious and somber of circumstances.

"Come in, please," I replied immediately.

Miss Hastings entered promptly, secured the door behind her, and sat across the desk from me. She had not brought her calendar, her correspondence, or documents of any type. I was trying to remember the last time Margaret had entered my inner sanctum without some baggage, when she said without preamble or delay, "Mr. Hamilton, Red Stevens just died."

When you get to be an octogenarian, you grow as accustomed as one can to losing friends and family. But some of the losses hit you harder than others. This one shook me to my core. Amid all of the emotions and memories that flooded over me, I realized that I would have to do what Red would expect of me, which was simply to do my job.

I shifted into my lawyer mode and told Miss Hastings, "We will need to contact all of the family members, the various corporate boards and business interests, and be ready to control the media circus that will begin any minute."

Miss Hastings stood up and said, "I'll handle everything." She quickly walked to the door and then hesitated a moment. After an uncomfortable pause, during which I realized Margaret Hastings and I were crossing that line that divides professional and personal, she said quietly, "Mr. Hamilton, I am sorry for your loss."

Miss Hastings closed the door and left me alone with my thoughts.

Two weeks later, I found myself at the head of our massive conference table with all of Red Stevens' various relatives gathered around. The feeling of anticipation—bordering on greed—was almost a physical presence in the room.

Knowing Red's feelings toward the majority of his relatives, I knew he would want me to prolong their misery as long as possible. Therefore, I had Margaret offer everyone coffee, tea, or soft drinks along with anything else she could think of. I scanned and rescanned the voluminous documents before me and cleared my throat multiple times. Finally, realizing that I was stretching the bounds of propriety, I rose to my feet and addressed the motley assemblage.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, we are here to read the last will and testament of Howard 'Red' Stevens. I realize that this is a difficult time for all of us and that our personal losses individually far outweigh any legal or financial concerns we might have this morning."

I knew that wherever he was, Red would enjoy the irony.

"I will dispense with the preliminaries, the boilerplate, and the legalese, and will go directly to the issues at hand. Red Stevens was a very successful man in every sense of that word. His bequests are much as Red was himself—very simple and straightforward.

"I drew up this revised will for Mr. Stevens just over a year ago on his seventy-fifth birthday. I know from our subsequent conversations that this document does, indeed, reflect his final wishes. I will read directly from his will, and you will realize as I read that while this document is totally legal and binding, some of the passages are in Red's own words.

"To my eldest son, Jack Stevens, I leave my first company, Panhandle Oil and Gas. At the writing of this will, Panhandle's worth is somewhere in the neighborhood of \$600 million."

Several gasps could be heard from around the table along with one prolonged, audible squeal of glee. I set the document down on the edge of the table and looked over the top of my reading glasses with my most intimidating courtroom stare. After a significant pause, I picked up the will and continued.

"Although Jack will be the sole owner of the company, its management and operations will be left in the hands of Panhandle's board of directors, which has served me so well over so many years. Jack, I want you to know that since you didn't have any interest in the company when I was living, I figured you wouldn't have any interest now that I'm gone. And letting you control something like Panhandle would be like giving a three-year-old a loaded gun. I want you to know that I have instructed Mr. Hamilton to write this will in such a way that if you fight for control or hinder the board or even complain about the nature of my bequest to you, the entire ownership of Panhandle Oil and Gas will immediately go to charity."

I looked up from the will and stared at Jack Stevens. The entire range of possible emotions was displayed on his face. Jack Stevens was a fifty-seven-year-old playboy who had never known the privilege of earning a day's wages. He had no idea of the favor his father had done for him by taking the control of Panhandle Oil and Gas out of his hands. I knew he was feeling that this was just one more time when he failed to live up to his illustrious father's expectations.

I actually felt some pity for Jack as I explained, "Mr. Stevens, the will does direct that each bequest be read in order and that the parties be dismissed after the portion of the document pertaining to them has been read."

He looked at me with a confused expression on his countenance and said, "What?"

At that point, always vigilant Miss Hastings took his arm and said, "Mr. Stevens, I'll escort you to the door."

When everyone had settled back into their chairs, and the level of anticipation had again risen to a fever pitch, I continued.

"To my only daughter, Ruth, I leave the family home and ranch in Austin, Texas, along with all working cattle operations."

Ruth was seated at the far end of the table with her dubious husband and offspring. Even at that distance, the sound of her hands slapping together and greedily rubbing back and forth could be heard. She and her family were so self-absorbed that I do not believe they understood the fact that the entire operation

would be managed for them and that they would be kept at arm's length where they could not hurt themselves or anyone else. Miss Hastings promptly showed them from the room.

I cleared my throat and continued. "To my youngest son, and only other remaining child, Bill, I leave the entire holdings of my stock, bond, and investment portfolio. However, Bill, this portfolio will be left in the hands of Mr. Hamilton and his firm to be managed in trust for you and your heirs so that there will be something left to divide when somebody is reading your will someday."

The room continued to clear as each of the more distant relatives received their eagerly awaited windfall. Finally, there was but one, lone occupant of the room remaining with Miss Hastings and me.

I looked down the table at young Jason Stevens, the twenty-four-year-old great-nephew of my longtime friend, Red Stevens. He glared back at me with a look of rage, defiance, and disrespect that only someone who has made a lifelong practice of selfish anger can muster.

He slammed his hand on the table and yelled at me, "I knew that mean old man wouldn't leave anything for me. He always hated me." He stood and began to stomp out of the room.

"Not so fast," I called to him. "You are, indeed, mentioned here in the will."

He slid back into his chair and stared toward me, stone-faced, not wanting to signal the hope he felt.

I returned his cold stare, determined not to speak until he did. Patience comes easily to those of us who have seen eighty birthdays. Finally, when he could stand it no longer, he said, "Okay, what did the old goat give me?"

As I sat down and reached for the document, I heard young Jason Stevens mutter, "I bet it's nothing."

I sat back in my chair and smiled at him as I said, "Young man, it is, indeed, nothing and everything—both at the same time."