***Life in a Box*** Sample Chapter

**The Illuminator’s Endowment**

**Athena, Texas**

**August 2001**

Andee Camp cradled a leather-bound book as if the spine anchoring her novel together cracked, the narrative would be lost. She likened her joy to the rapture of discovering a Tiffany glass skylight concealed by layers of paint intended to hide its presence and beauty.

From her bedroom window, she spotted a white-tailed doe enjoying a meal of tropical plumeria with her speckled fawn. The pair looked up when she tapped on the glass, darting off searching for a yellow rosebud lunch. She and husband Scott reveled in the tranquility of their home near a sleepy lake and golf course community in East Texas, moons away from their hectic travel schedules. The neighborhood treasures, blue herons and white egrets dipping in among the native hickory, oak, and pine canopies, mockingbirds chasing squirrels, twittering cardinals and robins, created a home like Thoreau’s *Walden*. Summer months dripped with heat and humidity, and in the fall, flocks of white pelicans migrating from Canada stopped by before journeying farther south.

Andee had turned her passion of the written word into a career reviewing literature, adopting a character’s persona and offering a unique point of view and innovative presentations. Scott, an Alabama product with a family golf pedigree, enjoyed a partnership with Andee’s father in an international golf course design business. Both calendars demanded the organizational skills of a presidential assistant.

However, another reoccurrence of melanoma threatened to derail her future. Andee now qualified for an immunotherapy clinical trial combining radiation and drugs. The doctors hoped, by taking advantage of the great strides in metastasis research, this treatment protocol would eliminate the tumors tied to the deadliest form of skin cancers.

Scott wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “What are you doing up so early?”

“The wet nose on my eyelid from our big ball of orange fur woke me up. Olive’s version of pillow-talk I guess.”

“Let’s get you back under the covers. The usual breakfast of coffee and a protein shake?”

“Mint chocolate chip ice cream sounds better.”

“Double scoops it is.”

She propped a bolster and two cushions against the headboard. Climbing into bed, under the watchful blue eye of the cat squinting in her direction, she pulled the bedspread over her legs, placing the book on her lap. Olive moistened one paw, washed her face, coiling into slumber after a good human scratching between her ears. Andee opened to the dedication page marked with a tattered envelope, running her fingers over the quotation from the poet Horace. “*Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents, which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant*.” Inside the envelope, a letter from her mother, Victoria Jeanne, discovered in a box of memories altered the direction of Andee’s life. Rereading her words summoned the same profound sadness as before, only today they were restorative much like a parent blowing the sting away after dousing a skinned knee with mercurochrome.

*Dear Andee*,

*The mysterious Hawaiian petrel spends nearly all her life hovering over the world’s oceans. Imagine caging this special bird. What happens? This free spirit then becomes dependent on you for its basic needs, and is accepting and content because it knows no other lifestyle. In this pattern, what the caretaker deems elemental triumphs over instinct.*

*You are the rare bird in the protective shell your father and I created for you. Though our intentions were sincere, we guided you along a cautious path minimizing your chances of failure by exchanging your starry-eyed dreams with realistic alternatives…robbing the songbird of lyrics and shackling your independence to our expectations.*

*Daddy and I adore you, his love is as consistent and open as mine is guarded and conditional, but now I’m able to give you something not possible before…my story. I have lived it and now I want you to write it. Do it for you and me so we can see who we are and why we are. You own the tools, you know the characters well, and now the puzzle will fit together. Use your three-dimensional prose to flavor your creativeness, add our Smith-Brown sense of humor, and voila, the result will be a character driven novel based on your colorful relatives. People seek out your opinions and respect your book reviews, but you are unraveling plots and characters scripted by others. Write your own words and let someone else analyze your art. I’ll only be disappointed if you don’t try.*

*Reality television rules today’s airwaves by giving ordinary people a chance to do something extraordinary. Dreams are extensions of the potential we see in ourselves. Be the big dreamer who accepts challenges and learns from failure not a little dreamer terrified of falling flat.*

*Inside your memory box, a clear piece of sea glass known as Ocean Eclipse, affixed to a key ring by a spiraling silver bale, represents ageless symbols of eternity, dating back to our roots, Victorian era, England. The key unlocks our Balboa beach house. Remember how many happy summers we spent there. If only the walls could talk, we might have more story than we want to tell. It’s a place filled with inspiration and history and a perfect place to fulfill your dream…all that remains are your words.*

*Like the Mama petrel flying over six thousand miles to find food for her lone young offspring, never doubt my purpose. I hope you realize how hard I tried when you discover the whole story. I love you.*

*Soar with vision,*

*Mom*

*P.S. When you look up the petrel, and I know you will, note the long thin legs and think of me.*

The saga of two sets of twins, the Smiths and the Browns, born on the same day thousands of miles apart exposed more than a story. Andee closed her eyes muttering...*Everyone was wrong. No one really knew her.*