

## Chapter One: Summer Vacation

The envelope was thin, edged with red and blue, and smattered with exotic stamps.

*TO MISS KATHERINE ELIZABETH ADDAMS IN CONGRATULATIONS ON HER LAST DAY OF SCHOOL.* Katie pushed the letter into her pocket, stuffed the rest of the mail under one arm and ran down the hill to her house.

“I’m home, Mom!” she shouted, “There’s mail on the table.” She dropped her things and went out the back door to the old, sagging barn.

The loft was comfortably cool and dark and smelled dusty and sweet from the old hay that still lay in bales and mounds.

“Cricket?” she called. This was one of her cat’s favorite hiding places and would be a likely spot to find new kittens, if there were any yet.

*Prrrow!*

Katie turned around—Cricket’s belly was still as round and heavy as it had been that morning before the last day of 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

“C’mere—I got a letter.” Cricket’s eyes followed the envelope back and forth in Katie’s hand. Her collection of letters sported puncture wounds because of Cricket’s love of chewing paper.

Katie sat down in a pile of hay looking out of the loft window over the fields, slid her finger under the lip of the envelope, and began to read.

*MAY 23, RABAT, MOROCCO*

*DEAR KATIE,*

*MY GRANDEST CONGRATULATIONS AND DEEPEST APOLOGIES TO OUR ONLY AND FAVORITE NEICE. (THE FIRST ON FINISHING THE FIFTH GRADE AND BEING EVEN MORE BRILLIANT THAN EVER, AND THE SECOND FOR THE VERY LONG WAIT YOU HAVE HAD IN BETWEEN LETTERS FROM YOUR AUNT JOSEPHINE AND ME. WE WILL TRY TO CATCH YOU UP, AND DO HOPE THAT YOU WILL FORGIVE US).*

*AUNTIE JO AND I, AS YOU MAY RECALL, HAD JUST BEGUN OUR BALLOON RACE AROUND THE MARVELOUS CONTINENT OF AFRICA WHEN LAST WE WROTE. IT WAS QUITE A SPECTACLE TO SEE ALL THOSE HOT AIR BALLOONS SOARING ABOVE THE NILE AT THE STARTING LINE. WE MADE GOOD TIME ALONG THE GULF OF ARABIA, AND WERE SOON AROUND THE SOMALIAN COAST.*

*THE RAINY SEASON HAD ENDED AND WE FOLLOWED THE WILDEBEESTS’ MIGRATION TO THEIR BREEDING GROUNDS IN TANZANIA. IT WAS QUITE ENTERTAINING TO WATCH THESE UNUSUAL CREATURES TRAVEL. THEIR BODIES ARE LARGE AND THEIR LEGS LOOK TO BE MUCH TOO SKINNY TO SUPPORT THEM, BUT THEY ARE VERY SPEEDY RUNNERS (THEY CAN GO AS FAST AS 50 MILES PER HOUR!).*

Katie turned the page eagerly and brushed Cricket’s inquisitive nose away from the envelope on her lap.

WE MADE GOOD TIME AND THE WIND WAS IN OUR FAVOR AS WE FLOATED ABOVE JUNGLES, SAVANNAH, AND ACRES AND ACRES OF DUSTY OCHRE SOIL. WE PASSED MOZAMBIQUE AND ROUNDED CAPE HORN IN SOUTH AFRICA AND STILL HELD THE LEAD!

BUT AS WE BEGAN TO SAIL OUR BALLOON UP THE WESTERN COAST A FRENCHMAN PASSED US! JOSEPHINE AND I WERE SHOCKED!

WE GAVE IT OUR BEST BUT HE LOST US OVER ANGOLA, AND AUNTIE JO AND I RESIGNED OURSELVES TO FINISHING SECOND IN THE RACE. BUT OUR PREDICTIONS DID NOT INCLUDE UNUSUAL ENCOUNTERS, AS YOU KNOW WE OFTEN HAVE.

IT HAPPENED AFTER WE REACHED CAMEROON— A COUNTRY TUCKED INTO THE CROOK OF THE CONTINENT; IT HAS EVERYTHING: JUNGLE, SAVANNAH, MOUNTAINS, DESERT AND OCEAN!

SINCE THE MOON WAS FULL (HOW ENORMOUS THE MOON IS OVER AFRICA, KATIE—TWICE AS BIG AS AT HOME!) WE DECIDED TO SAIL ON THROUGH THE NIGHT. YOUR AUNT HAD JUST FALLEN ASLEEP, WHEN OUT OF THE THICK OF THE JUNGLE BELOW I SAW FLAMES SHOOT UP INTO THE SKY ALMOST AS HIGH AS OUR BALLOON! I QUICKLY WOKE JOSEPHINE AND WE WATCHED AS THE FIRE SPOUTED UP THROUGH THE TREES, FIRST YELLOW AND ORANGE, AS ONE WOULD EXPECT, THEN GREEN AND BLUE AND THEN SO BLACK AND FLASHING THAT, HAD THE MOON NOT BEEN FULL AND LEVEL WITH OUR BALLOON, WE WOULD NEVER HAVE SEEN IT.

AUNTIE JO AND I DECIDED AT ONCE TO INVESTIGATE.

BUT BY THE TIME WE ANCHORED OURSELVES TO A TREE BRANCH AND CLIMBED OUT OF THE BASKET, THE FLAMES HAD VANISHED.

WE LOWERED OURSELVES DOWN THROUGH THE TREES IN UTTER SILENCE. YOU CAN'T IMAGINE WHAT WE SAW WHEN WE REACHED THE JUNGLE FLOOR BELOW.

“Katie! Are you up there?—Katie!”

Katie jerked her head up and looked out the window. “What?”

Her mom stood in the yard looking between the hay mow, the old tool shed and the corn crib at the edge of the field.

“There you are. Time to eat,” her mom said.

Katie sighed, folded the letter, and tucked it back in her pocket.