

THE
DISCOVERY

—▲—
A NOVEL
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DAN
WALSH


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dan Walsh, *The Discovery*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Walsh, Dan, 1957–

The discovery : a novel / Dan Walsh.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8007-1981-4 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS3623.A446D58 2012

813'.6—dc23

2011048595

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1

I remember . . . I was supposed to be sad that day. Everyone was sad. It's always sad when a legend dies. Our family was gathered in Charleston to read his will.

Gerard Warner's novels sold in the millions. He'd won the Pulitzer Prize. Several of his books had become blockbuster movies. I remember reading interviews with some of the celebrities who'd starred in those movies. Talked as if they were friends with my grandfather.

I knew instantly they were lying.

They didn't know him. None of them did. He wouldn't have let them.

To his adoring fans, Gerard Warner remained an enigmatic, elusive figure his entire career. He wouldn't even allow his picture on his own book covers. Every time a new novel came out, TV producers and talk show hosts made their appeals—again—wanting to be the first to interview him. He only said yes to print interviews. Even then, no pictures. And absolutely no questions about his personal life allowed.

Still, Gerard Warner's books flew off the shelves. They were that good.

I called him Gramps.

“You're smiling, Michael.”

I looked over at my beautiful wife, who was holding tightly to my hand, her blonde hair lit up by the sun. “Can’t help it, Jenn. I love this place.” It’s hard not to love a slow walk down Broad Street in Charleston, especially in October. Pick any street in the old downtown area. I loved them all. The cobblestones of Chalmers, the courtyards along Queens. The iron gates and grand staircases on Church Street, the tilting townhomes on Tradd.

I loved the magnificent plantations beyond the city limits that had survived the Civil War. My grandfather had taken me on tours of every one. The exquisite gardens and ponds of Magnolia Plantation. The stunning tunnel of live oaks leading up to Boone Hall. The rolling green lawns and gardens of Middleton Place resting quietly along the banks of the Ashley River.

Charleston was my grandfather’s favorite place in the world. For the last decades of his life, he called it home, wrote some of his best work here. He made me love it too. So many memories for me.

Memories with him.

“I don’t think anyone else in your family will be smiling,” Jenn said. “Your sister Marilyn certainly won’t. I forgot to tell you, she called when you were in the shower. Umm, can you slow down a little?”

“Sorry.” I always did that, walked faster when I got excited. Jenn said it took her three steps to match two of mine.

“She didn’t want to leave a message,” Jenn continued. “And she seemed kind of tense to me. Do you think she’s nervous about the will?”

“Maybe, but it’s not about the money.” We stopped at the corner of Church and Broad to let a carriage go by. The tour guide turned down Broad, drew his passengers’ attention to the steeple of St. Michael’s up ahead. I looked up. A beautiful

building. “Remember, my grandfather talked to each of us individually before he died.” We crossed the street. “Didn’t want there to be any tension in the family about who was getting what. My dad and Aunt Fran will get half the estate. The four of us grandchildren get an equal slice of the second half.”

“I do remember you telling me that. So what’s bothering her?”

“Marilyn’s tense because of this ancestry thing she’s obsessing over.”

“I thought you said she gave that up,” Jenn said.

“No, I said she *needed* to.” I exhaled some frustration. “She’s spent a ridiculous amount of time trying to solve some mystery involving my grandfather. I keep telling her to let it go. Every time she’d bring it up to Gramps, I could see how much it bothered him. But she’d just keep poking and prodding him.” I inhaled the aroma of fresh garlic bread as we walked past the open door of an Italian restaurant. “You smell that? Let’s come back here when we’re done.”

“I’d love that. So, what’s Marilyn after? What’s the big mystery?”

Jenn and I had only been married a year. We lived near Orlando, a seven-hour drive from here. She’d only gotten to spend time with my grandfather a handful of times. “She thinks he was hiding something.”

“Hiding what?”

“I don’t know. That’s what she said.”

“I know he shunned the public eye,” Jenn said. “But a lot of famous people do.”

“She’s convinced it’s more than that.”

“He seemed really nice to me,” she said. “Every time I talked with him, he had the kindest eyes.”

“He was an amazing guy. I’m not talking about his books,

but just being around him, doing ordinary things. I think he was the most honorable man I've ever known. Which is why this thing Marilyn's doing makes me so mad."

"What's she trying to do?"

"She says she's just trying to put our family tree together. A bunch of her friends started doing this a few years ago, some kind of social thing. They each researched old family albums and letters, looked up things on the internet, then met once a month over coffee to share what they found. Everyone else dug up plenty of stuff, but apparently our family tree stops with my grandfather."

"Really?"

"Now don't you get started."

"I'm not, but you've got to admit, that is kinda strange."

"C'mon, Jenn."

"What? I'm not implying anything. It's just, I think it would be fascinating, looking into your family's history. But really, Michael, most people would expect to hit a dead end a few more branches back than the grandfather level."

"Can we drop this?" I looked across the street, not at anything in particular.

"You're getting edgy."

"I am not." But I was.

Jenn suddenly stopped, jerked my arm a bit. She led me back a few steps, toward the large shop window of an art gallery.

"Oh, Michael, look at that."

We just stood there. It was beautiful. A fireplace-sized painting of a low-country marsh at sunrise. Palm trees swayed to a slight breeze. A large mossy oak drifted over the water. In the foreground, larger than life, a majestic blue heron surveyed the entire scene, his eyes fierce and penetrating. The whole thing as colorful and detailed as if Audubon had

painted it himself. I remembered that blue herons were my grandmother's favorite birds. I looked down at the price. Eighteen hundred dollars.

"Maybe they have it in a smaller print size," she said, looking up at me with those big brown eyes. She knew I couldn't resist that look, made me want to give her half my kingdom. "How much you think we'll get from the will?" she asked.

I hadn't told her how huge my grandfather's estate was, nor how dramatically I expected our lives would change in an hour or two. "We'll just have to wait and see," I said, easing her away from the window. "But I have a feeling we may just stop in here on the way back to the hotel and wrap that bad boy up."

We resumed our pace down Broad. She squeezed my hand. She liked that answer.

At that point, I felt pretty sure our part of the estate might be enough to break free from my day job at the bank to take a stab at another passion I shared with my grandfather, besides the city of Charleston.

I wanted to be a writer too.

The thought occurred to me just now to add the words "like him," but that would be an absurdity. I could never write like him. Compared to him, my best efforts were like the refrigerator drawings of a child. But Gramps never let me think that way about myself. He told me once, "You got it in you, son. I can see it. Something God gave you. So don't get hung up trying to be like me. Do what you can do. Find the road you want to take, see where it leads you."

When we reached Meeting Street, we stopped. I spun us around to see the whole of Broad Street facing east toward the Old Exchange Building. "Now look at that, Jenn. You realize people from George Washington's time shopped in these same stores? Washington himself danced at a ball in

that building at the end of the road.” I turned her to the right and pointed at St. Michael’s church across the street. “He went to church right there in the spring of 1791.”

“That’s really something.” She spun us around to face the right direction. “How much farther to the law office?”

“Two blocks on the left. It’s in this gorgeous old three-story house, built in 1788.”

“Two more blocks? We should’ve taken the car, Michael.”

“Jenn, it’s such a beautiful day.”

“And I’m in heels.”

That's it?"

My sister Marilyn's remark sliced through the joyful, almost euphoric mood enjoyed by everyone else. We were all sitting—every adult member of our extended family—around the plush conference room of Bradley and Dunn, Attorneys at Law. I may have been the only one who heard her, and that was only because I'd been dreading the possibility she'd make a scene. Except for Marilyn, the rest of us were properly stunned by the enormity and benevolence of my grandfather's will.

I was nearly in shock. Each of us had become instant millionaires.

I looked over at Jenn. Didn't recognize the look on her face. Several notches above pure amazement.

Despite Marilyn's obvious annoyance, tears welled up in my eyes. Not so much at the thought of my newfound wealth but at the magnitude of my grandfather's generosity, and the obvious care and thought he'd put into the words read just now by Alfred Dunn, the firm's senior partner. No legalese here; the words had been clearly penned by my grandfather's own hand. I could almost hear his deep, gentle voice, as if

he were sitting in his favorite armchair, reading us a chapter from his latest book.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dunn," Marilyn continued, "but that can't be all my grandfather wrote."

I glanced around the room. Everyone else sat back in their burgundy leather chairs, trying to take it in. Marilyn alone leaned forward, elbows on the mahogany table.

"Excuse me?" the elder Dunn replied, turning toward her. In such a large firm, his presence at the table was an obvious concession to the huge probate fee from the estate.

"There's got to be something else my grandfather gave you for us. A letter he wrote or a video. That can't be all."

"Marilyn . . . please." My father spoke up.

"I'm sorry, Dad. But Gramps promised me."

"What are you talking about, Marilyn? Promised you what?" my cousin Vincent joined in.

I sighed and took a sip of a latte offered when we came in.

"Not here, Marilyn. Not now," my father said.

"When, Dad, if not now? When are we all going to be together like this again? Thanksgiving? Would that be a better time?"

"Mrs. Jensen," Mr. Dunn said, using Marilyn's married name, "I'm not sure what you're referring to. I went over your grandfather's will with him . . . in person. This is exactly what he wanted said and the way he wanted this moment to proceed. There is nothing else besides the will itself. Are you unhappy with what he left you? I was under the impression he'd met with each of you beforehand, to avoid any . . . unpleasantness at this moment."

"No, as far as the money goes, I couldn't be happier. I'm not talking about the money."

"Then what?" Vincent asked, barely restraining his anger. "You don't seem very grateful to me."

His attitude matched the look on everyone else's faces, including mine, I'm sure. "It's about this family tree thing," I said. I took another sip of the latte.

"What family tree thing?" Vincent clearly had been spared her obsession.

"Marilyn, can't you just drop this?" my mom said. "What difference does it make now?"

"It makes all the difference in the world to me, Mom. Gramps promised he'd clear up all the secrets after he died."

"Secrets," I said. "I doubt he said that."

"I don't know the word he used," she said. "But that's what he meant. At the picnic back on Labor Day, he said I could stop asking him all these questions, because everything I wanted to know would come out after he died. I said, 'You promise, Gramps?' and he nodded his head."

"He was probably just trying to get you to back off," I said.

"He was not. Gramps wouldn't do that. He wouldn't promise something just to shut me up."

She was right, he wouldn't.

Marilyn finally sat back on her chair, tears welling up in her eyes.

"It sounds like you were almost waiting for Gramps to die," Vincent said, "so you could solve your little mystery."

"It's not like that at all," she said.

"Sounds like it to me too," I said.

Marilyn pulled her hands up to her face, started massaging her temples.

"All right, guys," Aunt Fran said. "You know that's not true."

"Well, everyone," the elder attorney said in a strong tone, "sounds like you have other family matters to discuss. I will leave that to you for a later time." He had turned in his chair to face all of us. "Perhaps at dinner. I've arranged a

catered buffet at Mr. Warner's home here on Legare Street. And there's something else. As I mentioned after reading the will, because his novels are still in print and new editions are being printed as we speak, the affairs of Mr. Warner's estate have not concluded today. His estate will continue to grow. We have been told by his publisher to expect a new resurgence of interest in his works, as is often the case when a writer of his stature dies. Before his passing, our firm worked with him on an equitable arrangement to disburse future royalties to you as they become available. It was Mr. Warner's wish that from this point, you would all get an equal percentage of those funds, after our expenses are deducted."

Even more money. It was crazy. Jenn was squeezing my hand so hard, I couldn't feel my fingers.

The last thing the attorney said, before sharing some superlative observations about my grandfather, was to ask us to see his secretary before leaving his office. She had some form for us to fill out, indicating whether we wanted any new funds to be mailed to us by check or by direct deposit into our bank accounts.

I looked around the room. Everyone else's attention was focused on Mr. Dunn. But not Marilyn's. She stared at a silk ficus tree in the corner, lost in thought.

What was wrong with her?

Michael, I have a confession to make.”
“You do?”

Jenn and I were strolling back to the hotel. I didn’t think she minded that she was in heels anymore. We even made a few stops along the way. Bought that big low-country painting to put over our fireplace, then grabbed some fettuccine alfredo at the Italian restaurant we’d passed earlier on Broad.

“Yes,” Jenn said. “I only married you for your money.”

“Okay, was it for the money I was making when you married me, or the money we just found out about an hour ago?”

She laughed. “It’s too crazy,” she said. “Are we really millionaires? Did that really just happen?”

We stopped at the intersection, nodded to an older couple walking by arm in arm. Us someday, I thought. “I didn’t know we’d get that much, but I suspected it would be pretty big.”

“Pretty big,” she said. “Michael, we have twelve hundred dollars in our savings account.”

“Which is why I just put that eighteen-hundred-dollar painting on our Visa. Wonder how long it will take to get the money in our bank account.”

“I heard the secretary tell Vincent it would be there by tomorrow afternoon.”

“No way.”

“Yes . . . Michael . . .” She couldn’t finish her sentence. She giggled, smiled some more, and shook her head in disbelief.

“Well, guess we can check out of the hotel in the morning,” I said.

“Why?”

“We can move into my grandfather’s house over on Legare Street. It’s ours now.”

“Is that for real?” she asked. “I didn’t really understand that part.”

“It is most definitely for real. That’s why I got less cash than the other grandchildren.”

“I was wondering about that,” she said. “I’m not complaining, but I was surprised at how much less.”

“Jenn, that house is worth close to two million dollars, even in today’s market. I asked Mr. Dunn about it when you were talking with my mom. Gramps had them get an appraisal then deduct that much from my portion, so we all got an equal amount.” It still hadn’t sunk in. I was talking way too matter-of-factly about this. “Getting that house means more to me than the money. It’s priceless. You remember it, don’t you?”

“Of course I remember it. I fell in love with it the first time I saw it.”

“Jenn, you realize what this means?”

“You can write your book now,” she said.

“And do it in the same place my grandfather wrote his books for the last thirty years.” Just then it dawned on me . . . that’s what he had in mind all along. He knew how much I loved that house, and this town. He had never once asked me if I wanted it for my inheritance. He just knew.

“The whole family is supposed to meet over there in a few hours, right?” she said.

I looked at my watch. “Yeah, at 6:00 for the dinner. Mr. Dunn said it was my grandfather’s idea. Give us all a chance to chat and reminisce awhile before we go our separate ways.”

“So . . . that place, that incredible house . . . it’s really *ours*? Just like that?”

“Just like that. Mr. Dunn said he’d give me the keys at dinner, and also the keys to a safe deposit box at my grandfather’s bank, where the deed and title are sitting safe and sound.”

“There’s no mortgage?”

“It’s free and clear.”

“I have a house,” she said.

“You have a house . . . actually, way *more* than a house. You have a historic landmark, fully furnished with nineteenth-century period antiques. Every single one handpicked by my grandmother.”

“Incredible,” she said.

We walked in contented silence for a while. I thought about how happy Gramps and Nan must be at this moment, together again. Their love for each other had spanned almost sixty years. It was, at times, an odd thing to behold. Usually when I’d see older couples together, they’d seem comfortable with each other; many times I’d observe them eating a meal at a restaurant, barely saying a word the whole time.

But Gramps and Nan were a couple in love, right to the end. Their passion for each other at least matched my own for Jenn. But they’d had a depth of intimacy far beyond our reach. An intimacy forged over time, granted to a select few. Sometimes I’d catch them stealing glances at each other that seemed to convey entire conversations. I never saw them walk together when they weren’t holding hands. They still preferred to sit together, and without fail, Gramps’s arm would instantly wrap around Nan’s shoulder, like he was some teenage boy at a movie.

Gramps had told me something very encouraging the first time Jenn and I visited him, a few months after our wedding. We were drinking iced tea in the courtyard by the fountain. “You chose well, Michael. I can tell. I’m a good judge of these things. She’s going to make you very happy. Like Nan made me. Nan would have loved Jenn right off if she were here. Take good care of that young lady, all your days.”

That was my plan.

I looked over at Jenn as we turned the corner at Church Street. Her eyes looked all around, taking in the sights of this beautiful city. Maybe trying to envision herself now as one of its citizens, living in the prestigious historic district itself.

It seemed perfectly right that my grandfather should live here, the reward of a long, successful life. But how did I . . . *we* . . . rate this distinction? We walked past yet another large, majestic home on Church Street. I couldn’t process the fact that its owner was now my neighbor.

It got me thinking about our new home on Legare Street. One of Charleston’s famous Single Houses. Gramps’s was built in 1868, just after the Civil War. The town lots in the old walled city were long and narrow, so the homes had to be also. Most were two floors, some three. A Single House, by definition, was just one room wide. The more money you had, the wider the room. Each house had a long, covered porch that ran front to back, called a piazza. The same porch repeated above on the second floor, held up by white pillars spaced evenly across the front. To add privacy, a solid front door was added on the first-floor porch, facing the street.

Legare Street, like most in the historic section, was designed for carriage traffic. Barely two lanes wide. Many of the homes were on the small side, but here and there you’d find a huge mansion built on double- or triple-sized lots. My grandfather’s house—our house—was somewhere in

between, built on a double lot. It was two stories, with a decent attic for a third, and had neat little dormers poking out the south side.

The house and driveway occupied the entire left side of the property. A garden courtyard filled the right side, bordered by a brick wall, head high and covered in ivy. A tall hedge set just inside that wall extended a few feet above it, creating even more privacy. Really, except for the ornamental iron gate stretched across the driveway, the whole property was enclosed and obscured from prying eyes.

Just the way my grandfather wanted it.

His favorite thing was the massive live oak in the far corner, which spread its thick limbs in every direction, covering the property in shade. At the courtyard's center was the angel fountain, old and weatherworn. Water trickled down from the angel's bugle into a circular pool. You could see most of this through the windows in my grandfather's study, the last room on the ground floor.

I was seeing it all now in my mind.

"What are you thinking about?" Jenn asked. We had reached the door to our hotel.

"I still can't believe he left it to me."

I didn't expect it, but tears welled up in my eyes.

4

Two hours later, the whole family was at the house on Legare Street. We'd just eaten a wonderful dinner, a full buffet of low-country cuisine, spread out on tables in the courtyard. Perfect temperature. Pleasant music playing softly in the background, old forties love songs in honor of Gramps and Nan. The sun had set, but there was still a dab of light left in the day.

Everyone was in high spirits. How could we not be? Oddly enough, that included Marilyn. She seemed fine now, like nothing had ever happened. Jenn and I were sitting next to my cousin Vincent and his wife, Abby, sipping some high-end coffee from the island of St. Helena.

"So, Michael, you going to write that book you've been talking about the last few years?" Abby asked.

Jenn answered for me. "He is, from the same desk their grandfather wrote all his." She was so happy saying it.

"You going to use Gramps's old typewriter?" Vincent said.

I laughed. Gramps had never switched to a computer. "No, I think I'll stick with my laptop. But I'll keep it on a shelf nearby for inspiration. Worked pretty well for him." Vincent's eyes reflected concern. "What are you thinking?" I said.

"Nothing."

“C’mon, I know that look. It’s why I always beat you at poker.”

“It’s just . . . how do you follow an act like that? Gramps was, you know . . . a megastar.”

Abby made a face at Vincent. If I got it right, that face told him he was a total idiot for bringing that up.

“Michael’s not going to try to be like his grandfather.” It was nice of Jenn to come to my rescue, but it didn’t help. “He’s going to write the way he writes, find his own voice. Right, Michael?”

“That’s the idea,” I said.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine, great even,” Abby said. “I heard your grandfather bragging about one of your short stories last Christmas. He really thought you have talent.”

“Maybe you could write his biography,” Vincent said. “Might be a good place to start. You’d have instant name recognition. It’d probably be a bestseller, especially if it was written by his grandson. Everybody’s curious about the great and mysterious Gerard Warner.”

“I don’t know, Vince.”

“You know somebody’s going to write it,” Vince said. “Might as well be family, someone who’d do it right.”

Apparently, Aunt Fran was listening in. “Say, Michael. That’s not a bad idea. And it would be a nonfiction book, so no one would be drawing comparisons.”

That didn’t help, either. Jenn reached over and grabbed my hand. She was feeling my pain. Just then I noticed my mother get up and walk to the fountain. Marilyn joined her.

“Hey, everyone,” she called out.

About half the family stopped and turned.

“Hey, y’all, can I get your attention just a minute.”

Now the rest turned to listen.

“I know this celebration’s probably going to start winding

down soon,” she said. “Most of us will be heading home tomorrow.”

“Except Michael and Jenn,” Vincent yelled out. “They’re home right now.”

Everyone laughed.

“Well, let me get this out before they tire of our company and put us out by the road,” she said. “Marilyn and I had a nice long chat after things wrapped up at the attorneys’ today. She’s got something she wants to say . . . well, I’ll shut up and let her say it.” Mom stepped aside.

“Okay, everybody,” Marilyn said, stepping into her spot. “You know what’s coming. I’m sorry I was such an idiot this afternoon. I want you to know how sorry I am if I spoiled the moment for anyone. I love Gramps so much, and I . . .” She was getting choked up. “Today was so special. Gramps was so good to all of us, his whole life. I don’t want any of you thinking I’m not grateful for all he’s done. Not just now, but . . . you know what I mean.”

She took a deep breath. “I guess I’m just going to have to let go of this family tree thing I’ve been going after these past two years. But . . . doesn’t it bug any of you that we don’t know a single thing about how he and Nan met, or who his folks were, or . . . I’m sorry. Look at me, doing it again. Anyway, I am sorry.” She stepped off to the side.

There were a few awkward seconds, then my father walked into the spot vacated by Marilyn. “Hey, everyone, let’s let Marilyn off the hook on this. Took some guts to do that.” He started to clap gently. We all joined in, till it almost reached the volume of something you’d hear after a nice birdie putt.

“And before anyone takes off,” my dad continued, “let’s say a toast to my dad and mom.” He held up a champagne glass. “To two wonderful lives well-lived.” He looked like he

had more to say, but he started choking up. We all held our glasses up, then the courtyard filled with the sound of glasses clinking together.

I looked over at Marilyn. She wasn't smiling.

I just knew . . . she wasn't about to give this up.