

## Forever Young

### Chapter I

It was quite the hike. Any longer and I would have started spitting blood or at least suffer from a shortage in oxygen. One hour of moving your feet to the rhythm of the luggage you swing around. All in one of nature's most peaceful mountain ranges. Although I cursed myself doing it, I knew it would be worth it. In the end, it would all be worth it.

Behind me was an astonishing alpine landscape. One where you wish you could draw your last breath right then and there as the howling wind felt cooling, but calming and soothing at the same time. In front of me, I saw a beautiful and gigantic house. Occupied by only one resident: Mr. Schmidt. An old, rich man living it up at the top of a mountain. A man determined to draw his final breath, right here. It almost had something poetic to it, something to die for.

It must have been two months since Ben saw the job ad coming into his mail box. Three weeks. Five thousand euros. He never thought he would have gotten the job, at least not as easily as he got it. Two days after showing his interest, he received a call from a woman he never heard before: "Good morning, Ben! I have fortunate news! Mr. Schmidt has chosen you to be his care provider. You'll be expected to start Monday the 21<sup>st</sup>, 9 a.m. sharp. Good luck!"

Easy money, easy life. That's all he could think of. As he made his way to the front door, he turned around one last time to take in the view. The valley was alluring to walk through, especially now, since it only went downhill ever so slightly looking down from the house. The rocking trees from afar looked like they were waving him off. The boulders that felt as welcoming chairs a moment ago were now grey dots, covered under the shadows left by the hanging leaves.

"Will ya come inside already? We don't have all day!" A harsh voice coming from the doorway sent chills down Ben's back: "Oh, uh, of course!" He felt a bit taken aback by this sudden outburst. As if he already messed up the opportunity given to him. He quickly rushed inside and as he was mumbling his first apologizing words, the man cut him short: "Close the door behind ya, will ya?" The man didn't even look at Ben as he was entering his house.

The young man followed Mr. Schmidt to his living. He was so focused on keeping the man's silhouette in his eyesight, he didn't even consider looking at his interior. The hallway was richly ornamented with all sorts of wooden decorations. Tree stems as tables, cut out blocks as wall planks, even a clock tower fully made of bark. The same natural feel was to be had inside the living room: a leather sofa big enough for two adults to sleep in, a neat table mainly made out of glass and supported by chops of wood and the dinner table was just a tree cut in half, protected by a thick reflective layer.

As Mr. Schmidt came to a halt, Ben couldn't let this chance go by: "I'm sorry, Mr. Schmidt, I didn't mean to stall, I was just admiring the view and –" The old man interrupted: "Son, do you have a piece of paper?" Ben looked startled. For a moment, not a single word came out, but his mouth looked like he paused mid-sentence. "You better have something to write on, because my list is going to be long!" The man gazed outside. His eyes looked severe, but his lips revealed a slight smile before he gasped for breath: "I want two packs of butter, one huge pack of milk, containing exactly six bottles, two schnitzels, one bag of potatoes and after you're back, you're going to pick the beans from the garden to peel them, because I want fresh peas on my plate!"

Hastily, Ben took out his notebook. He was glad to have one with him, just in case. Holding his pen, he chased down the words the man got out in only one breath. After having written everything down, he looked up from his notebook to Mr. Schmidt. A moment of silence snuck in before he turned around with a hungry look in his eyes: "Well? Don't just stand there, get to it!" With just the list and a pen in his hand, he opened the front door and ran. "Hey! Come back here!" Ben turned around, confused and slightly irritated. "Aren't you forgetting something?" Slowly, Ben stepped towards Mr. Schmidt, who stood still for just a moment. He looked as if he was studying the boy, taking him in. After a moment's notice, he nodded. With a shake of his hand, he made a large, empty bag appear from his pockets. "Be back before eleven." Ben nodded. With the bag in his pockets now, he made again a run for it. Three weeks. Five thousand euros. Three weeks. Five thousand. Only three for five...