

The Young Heroics

Book 1

KNIGHTS OF THE EMPIRE



Cousin Summers

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Summers Island Press
Thorne Bay, Alaska

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Thorne Bay, Alaska

To all the young heroes...you know who you are.

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Chapter One

The Accident

"Any fellow who means to be a backwoodsman, whether it is for pleasure or for work, should first of all get some practice at it at home."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Our plan was to drop the raft into a river at night, float all the way down to Mexico, then hike back home through the desert. Boone knew everything there was to know about surviving in the desert, and it was going to be the biggest adventure of our lives. The trouble was, the only body of water in town big enough to launch a boat was the Apestoso River.

The Smelly River, actually. That's the English translation. Because it wasn't really a river. Just a wash the county cemented in so it would quit flooding Ripley Street every winter. But the rule for kids who lived in Ashbury was that they were never—for any reason—to go into it. On account of flash floods. Which are really unusual in the summer but it didn't matter. That wash had been absolutely, positively off-limits for generations. Any kid stupid enough to try (who survived) got turned over to the county for prosecution. Usually by his own parents.

Now, Boone and I weren't criminals. We weren't running away from anything, either, because we both come from great families. Different, but great. It's just that in our little town in

Arizona (not far from Tombstone—how cool is that?) there was hardly anything for kids to do that year but hang out and play games. Or go swimming down at the pool. Mostly on account of the economy. When we first got the idea for our raft adventure, we weren't counting on this thing with the economy getting in the way.

It was Boone's idea, really.

It came to him one day when we were killing time downtown before the pool opened, and happened to notice an old military life raft hanging in the window of *Cooper's Pawn Shop*. Man, it was a real life raft! A regular gateway to adventure, if you know what I mean. The biggest thing Boone and I had in common was our craving for adventure.

Real adventure. The kind where you go and personally set every ounce of strength you have against some wild wilderness—or the forces of evil—and win. For once in our life, instead of just reading about heroes (my dad ran the downtown library), we wanted to actually do something heroic, ourselves. Except we didn't know exactly what, or even how to get started. Until we saw that raft hanging in Cooper's window. Under a sign that said: \$95.50.

It might as well been a thousand.

Only we didn't know that until we already made the deal. It took a lot of talking, but Mr. Cooper finally agreed to sell it to us on the payment plan (the take-it-home-only-after-it's-paid-for kind). He also agreed not to tell anybody. He didn't keep that part of the bargain (which I think is pretty shabby since he was an adult and should have known that's not how you do business), but that's getting ahead of the story, and I'm telling it the way it really happened. Totally.

Anyway, we got that thing almost half paid for just by pooling our allowances, and cutting back on expensive activities like movies and arcade games. We even collected cans and plastic bottles to turn in at the recycling center just outside town. We tried to get jobs but other than doing chores for our parents, there weren't any around for us to get. Since the economy went bust, no one was hiring twelve-

year-old kids for anything. Heck, my sister Hannah was fourteen and she was excited just to land a babysitting job for the summer. Boone and I tried to get one of those, too, but we couldn't find anyone who wouldn't rather have a girl do it, and preferably one that was older. With references.

But right about the time we figured summer would be over before we even got that raft into the water, we ran into a real opportunity. At least, that's what we thought it was. I'm sure if we knew then what we know now, we never would have done something like that. No matter how starved for adventure we thought we were.

The truth is, if we hadn't been so busy picturing ourselves on our own exploring expedition down the Apestoso, we might have at least had some kind of a premonition. Only we didn't. Not even one. We were just looking at a way to bring the raft home from the pawn shop and dreaming about a whole week to practice our survival skills—on our own, without any rules.

I guess maybe it was the accident that threw us off.

See, the whole thing started on the day Boone's grandfather shot himself in the foot. It was Sunday afternoon when we first heard about it, and everyone said it was an accident. We were just finishing off some game tokens down at the *3 Ps* (more commonly known as *Pickler's Pizza Palace*), where Boone's mom had been working ever since his dad left for the war. It was pretty dramatic.

Two policemen came in and asked to see Boone's mom, and Mr. Pickler called her in from the kitchen where she was busy making a large cheeseburger pizza. I knew that on account of it was our pizza, and we order the same kind every Sunday. It got pretty quiet in there because, hey, Ashbury isn't that big of a town and everybody wanted to hear what they had to say.

"Amelia Boone?"

"Yes." It didn't sound like Mrs. Boone, at all. She has a voice that can yell you down off a mountain, and she's always yelling about something. But right then it was so soft and worried that the toothpick Boone was chewing on dropped out of his mouth and he

went over to stand next to her. "Is it something about my husband?" she finally asked.

"No, ma'am, it's about your father-in-law."

"Oh, thank God!" She put a hand over her heart like it had stopped for a minute, and some of the color came back into her face under the white pizza-chef hat she had to wear in the kitchen.

But Boone still looked worried and he blurted out, "Is Grampy dead?"

"No, but he's been shot—"

"Shot! Who shot him?" Her face went white again.

"Shot himself. Accident," the policeman answered. "And now he's refusing treatment. Since you're listed as next-of-kin, we thought you could talk some sense into him."

"Well, I've never been able to before, but I'll try." She took her pizza hat off and felt the sides of her red hair to make sure it wasn't a mess or anything. "Come on, Jeffie, you better come, too." She was always calling him that—even in public—but, hey, you can't pick your mom.

By Monday, the whole story was out. The old crazy black man who lived way out by the Singing Bone Mine, was Boone's grandpa. Who would have thought? I mean, not that it matters. But, heck, when somebody's been your best friend for almost a year and his mother doesn't look that different from yours, it's sort of a surprise. OK, his skin is a little darker than mine but I thought he was Italian, or something. Like I say, not that it matters. We've got Indian blood in our family, and we're real proud of it. Oglala Sioux.

Anyway, as it turned out, Boone's grandpa drew a bead on the government census agent that pulled up into the yard asking too many personal questions. But before he could shoot, the rotten porch he was standing on gave way and the gun went off. After that, the big joke around town was if Old Jackson Boone had grabbed a shotgun instead of that little twenty-two, he'd have blown his whole foot off. They said he was lucky just to be missing a toe.

It was pretty embarrassing for Boone, because he always bragged about how heroes ran in his family, and his grandfather was

an expert marksmen. He even told how he had won a couple of medals for fighting in the Vietnam War. After the shooting incident, though, everywhere we went, someone would ask how that expert marksman of his was getting along. I guess, up to then, it had been a boring summer for everybody and there's nothing like a good scandal to liven things up.

On Mondays, I usually slept over at Boone's because it was his mom's day off. And I remember on that next Monday after the accident, Grampy was there, too. I don't know when I started calling him Grampy, it just sort of happened because that's what Boone called him. I guess he never did end up going to the hospital, only let them take care of his foot in the emergency room, and then he wanted to go home. But there were some appointments the next day with the county people—man, did he hate those county people! Something that happened a long time ago, but Boone said he'd tell me about it later.

Meanwhile, I called home and had to talk my head off to get my parents to let me go with Boone to Grampy's ranch to help out for a week. Not because I couldn't pretty much do what I wanted during the summer (as long as I got my chores done) but because the man had been threatening government employees with a gun. And how easy it would be for a bullet to go astray and hit a boy. Mom hates guns. Even when I told her Boone's mom was going to pay us, it took more arguing. On account of the rumors going around about old Jackson Boone. Exactly what was he doing out there on that ranch for so long? He didn't even have any animals! That's how fast rumors get around.

Boone's mom finally convinced mine that we'd be perfectly safe with Grampy. I have no clue how she even did that. I only know that's how it happened that one day we were sitting around hot and bored, and the next I was in the middle of a nightmare. Scared for my life even. The thing is, you never could have guessed it, looking at Grampy. He was like any other old guy. Black curly hair a little gray on the sides, a mustache, and a short pointy beard that barely covered his chin. Now, I think about it, it's the same as the devil. But

I didn't make the connection back then.

I also didn't make the connection how much Boone looked like his Grampy. If Boone had been older and had a beard, I may have seen it. Anyway, when we headed out of town so late on that Monday night, I just figured Boone and I were going to make a little money and get a whole week to practice our survival skills, even though we were supposed to be going there to help out Grampy until he could get around better. Not that we had to do anything medical for him, because the county nurse would come out twice to change the bandage and check his vitals. All we had to do was sort of help him get his meals, and be there to call 911 in case anything went wrong.

Which was why the whole thing felt like an adventure when we first started out.

Like I said, you'd think a person would get some sort of premonition when their life was about to change, but to be honest, I didn't have a clue. Boone warned me we would probably have to work a lot harder than we ever did at home because Grampy was old fashioned. But don't worry, he said, Grampy's idea of work was like nothing I'd ever heard of before.

"Bad or good?" I had to ask because, hey, a guy's got to look out for himself.

"Good," he said. "Way good."

Which—looking back on it—was the one and only reason I walked head on into trouble without even thinking twice about it. I trusted Boone like my own right hand. His dad was off fighting the war. His family was full of heroes. I didn't have anything but a house full of sisters back home, and I was starved for adventure. Besides that, this one week of helping out Grampy would give us a major shortcut to our rafting expedition.

So, there we were sitting in the back seat, ticking off the miles to Singing Bone, only listening with one ear while Boone's mom kept telling us things like:

"In the house by dark every night, Jeffie. Do you hear me? Dark is when the coyotes come out and some of them are rabid."

"That's a crock," said Grampy. He was in sort of a bad mood because his painkillers were wearing off. "Coyotes aren't dangerous to anybody."

"The rabid ones are, that's all I'm saying. And, whatever you do, boys, stay away from that old mine. Those tunnels go on forever. Some people have even died before they found their way out, again. Besides, there's explosives down there that never went off, and sometimes just stepping in the wrong place can—"

"That's a crock," said Grampy. "You'd have to stand on one foot, light the other one on fire, and then jam it into a two-inch hole to set one of those things off."

"I'm just telling them about the hazards, Jack. I wouldn't be a decent mother if I didn't tell them about the hazards." She looked into the rear-view mirror to see if anyone was coming up on us, and then tromped on the gas pedal to pass a slow-moving semi up ahead. "And don't even think about swimming in that pond, boys, no matter how hot it gets. The water is toxic from all the chemicals that wash down out of the mine. You could get some kind of disease."

"That's a—"

"Jackson Boone!" She yelled at him like he was one of us kids instead of somebody twice her age. "Did we, or did we not, come to an agreement about all this? We're not even there, yet, and you're slipping back into your old ways, already. If you're not going to stick to what we agreed on, let me know right now, so I can turn this car around!"

"Sorry, Amelia, but what are you exaggerating so much for? Hazards during the day, ate up at night—no wonder kids never go outside anymore. What are you trying to raise—a bunch of pansies?"

"I'm trying to make sure they reach voting age."

"What's the point if they're blind and deaf by the time they get there?"

"The point is, things have changed since you were their age. That's all I'm saying."

"Well, at least tell them the truth, for cripes sake. Some things a boy needs to find out on his own, anyway."

"I don't want any major disasters while they do it."

Mrs. Boone slowed to a near stop then—right out in the middle of nowhere—shifted into four-wheel drive, and tuned off the highway. The SUV bumped off the asphalt and began to plow through the loose dirt between giant cactuses that were almost as big as trees, and a whole lot of towering, rocky mesas. Straight into the desert. Like it was the most normal thing in the world to be heading into trackless wilderness in the middle of the night.

She just kept on talking. "You said you would help me. That was part of the deal, remember? You have no idea how hard it is to raise a boy this age without his dad around. I lose sleep nights. And let me tell you—"

We hit some kind of a dip and then a bump, and we all shot up like rockets and banged our heads on the roof at the same time. It was kind of funny, except Grampy swore like fire because Mrs. Boone's purse bounced off the seat and landed on his missing toe. She didn't even apologize. She just tromped on the gas pedal, again, and started speeding toward the next bump in the trail.

"Slow down, Amelia!"

"Not until you agree to keep a decent eye on these boys. Just like you promised!"

"Oh, all right!" He made a great effort to turn around enough to look over the back seat at us. The high white moon was shining in just enough through the windows to see him screw his face into something of a scowl and say, "Stay out of the swamp hole, boys, unless you want your privates to fall off!"

"That is not my idea of decent, Jack."

We would have laughed ourselves silly over that if we hadn't hit another bump and then swerved into a slide, fishtailed our way out of it through deep sand with Grampy swearing all the way, hanging onto the dash like he was riding a bucking bull. That would have been pretty funny, too, except Boone and I knocked our heads together so hard I bit my tongue and my eyes started to water. I was thinking his mom did that on purpose. I mean, she got all three of us at once. I wasn't far wrong. A couple of days later, I found out she

used to race dune buggies down on the Baja, and she could out-drive most men.

Which is why we were all sitting there like zombies by the time we finally pulled around this gigantic mesa that looked the same as all fifty-three others we had passed already, and came to a dead stop in a wide patch of desert. Mrs. Boone turned off the car and all of a sudden it was so quiet we could hear ourselves breathing. That and the heat ticking off the engine.

I looked out my side window before opening the door. Other than a ghostly-looking saguaro cactus about thirty feet tall that was throwing a shadow across the ground in the bright moonlight, I didn't see anything that came close to a ranch house. Or even a miner's cabin. In fact, there wasn't a sign of human habitation anywhere.

Boone punched me in the shoulder and said, "Come on, Hud, we're here!" and flung open his door like he could hardly wait.

"Everybody carry something!" Mrs. Boone yelled after us. "And watch out for snakes!"

Chapter Two

The Dragon's Nest

"The first training that the Boy Scout gets is to understand that Honor is his own private law which is guided by his conscience, and that once he is a Scout he must be guided in all his doings by his sense of Honor."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Okay. Once out of the car I saw that there were *some* signs of human habitation. Some tiny, little signs. There was a lonely boxcar sitting at the end of an old railroad track that stopped in front of the mesa. Right above that was a wooden tower with a big round tank on top—like for loading water into the boilers of steam engines. Also made out of wood, which tells you how old it was.

Grampy said, "Home, sweet home!" like we had just pulled up to the *Hilton Hotel*, and wouldn't let any of us help him out.

Mrs. Boone opened the back hatch on the SUV and handed us each a bag of something to carry. Mine must have been full of pop and charcoal because it weighed a ton. Not that I minded doing my share of the work, but it was embarrassing how hard it was to slog through all that loose sand with the stuff. The second time I tripped the bag tore. Boone was already there and back with his bag, so, he helped me pick up some of the cans that rolled out. I thought he was going to raz me about being a wimp, only he was too excited to

notice.

"What do you think, man?" He had his ball cap on backwards so he could see better in the dark, and there were a few black curls popping out where the adjustable strap went across his forehead. "Is this cool, or what?"

"So, this is the old Singing Bone Mine everybody talks about, huh?"

"Naw. This is just a loading station where they brought in the ore back when it was running. It's deserted, now." He took the bag of charcoal and we started walking, again. "The actual mine is about eight miles from here."

"How are we going to get there? On a train?" I juggled the torn bag so the loose cans wouldn't fall out.

"Heck, no. There aren't any trains running out here, anymore. The mine's played out. Nobody's worked it since before the war." Then he corrected himself so I would know which one. "The Pearl Harbor war."

"I don't see any houses around here."

"Grampy lives in the boxcar."

"What?"

"Don't worry, it's fixed up comfortable." He set the charcoal on the edge of a big hole in the front porch and peeked down into it. "You and me will probably have to fix this."

I guessed it was the hole Grampy fell into when he shot himself. I couldn't imagine how anyone could fix it. I was just wondering how we were supposed to get across. About that minute a big board fell down with a BOOM! in front of me, and Mrs. Boone brushed off her hands and said, "There! Perfect size for a bridge." Then she stepped up onto it and tried it out. "Just right. Now, you boys stay here and help Grampy across while I put the stuff away."

I can only describe what happened next in one way. It was like wrestling somebody onto a pirate plank when they thought you were gonna push them off the end. Grampy made it across all right, but I don't know how many times he knocked Boone and me over. I never met anybody who was so worried somebody else might help them,

as Grampy Boone. Snagged the seat of my pants on a nail sticking out and heard a big rip on the very first tumble I took. I was starting to wonder what Boone thought was so great about Grampy. He seemed like nothing but an old grouch to me.

I guess I was just upset because we hadn't been there an hour and I already ripped the only pair of jeans I brought. I had a pair of bathing trunks in my backpack, but they weren't much of a comfort the way everyone was talking about watching out for rattlesnakes and the only swimming hole for miles around being a swamp hole for toxic waste. I was even getting a little suspicious of Mrs. Boone. Because she was acting like it was the most normal thing in the world to be leaving us by ourselves for a whole week out here. To tell you the truth, I actually considered sticking a finger down my throat and faking the flu so she would have to take me home with her.

But then a yellow glow of light from a lamp spilled out of the open door and two windows, and the inside of that boxcar looked as inviting as any living room in town. There was a stove and a table and a rocking chair with cushions I could see right from the porch where I was standing. So, it couldn't be all bad. There were probably a couple of pretty decent beds somewhere, too. Right?

Wrong.

The inside of that boxcar was only big enough for Grampy. A closet and one little bed at the other end was all there was to the rest of it. Where were Boone and I supposed to sleep? Outside with the snakes? I didn't have to wonder for long, though. Because about that time, his mom said, "Take your stuff up to the Dragon's Nest, boys. I want to make sure you're all settled in, and then we'll go over the rules once more before I leave."

The Dragon's Nest.

It occurred to me, then, I had somehow fallen in with a family of dangerously weird people. I decided it was now or never for faking the flu. Except I lived with a houseful of girls, at home, and the first thing that came to my mind was how rude it would be to make that kind of a mess in someone's house (even a boxcar house), and I

should probably go outside and do it. Which was exactly why I was leaning over by that giant cactus trying to throw up a few minutes later, while Boone was busy getting our stuff out of the car. But it had been a way long time since dinner and nothing much was happening.

"Heads up!" The sleeping bag he threw hit me in the ear. "You sound like a cat with a hair-ball, Hudson. What's the deal?"

"I—" I caught the heavy backpack he lobbed next only a split second before it knocked me over. "Sheesh, Boone—do you mind? I could be seriously sick, here."

"Well, don't let Mom find out or she'll take you home. Then I'd be stuck for a whole week with Grampy all by myself."

"I thought you loved it out here."

"You gotta be kidding. There's rattlesnakes and rabid coyotes all over the place. Toxic swamps. Rotten wood covering up holes to abandoned mines that go on forever. What's to love?"

"What about Grampy?"

"That's just a kid thing. All kids love their grandfathers. Right? Even if they're aliens from another planet or criminally insane. The only other times I've been out here, Mom and Dad stayed with me, so, it was no big deal."

"I wish you told me this stuff before we came all the way out here."

"What do you mean? It'll probably be our only chance this summer to get enough money for the raft. Where else could we make fifty bucks in one week? I'd camp out with Frankenstein for that much money."

"You could have at least told me what we were getting into."

"Didn't want you to think I was a wimp. Besides, you're just about the smartest—"

"Jefferson Boone Junior!" Boone's mom was hanging over some ledge up on that rickety old water tank, looking right at us. "Quit playing around and get up here! I've got a long ride back and I want to get going!"

Now that I was closer, I could see it wasn't really a tank. Just a

wooden room built on to the front of the mouth of the mine tunnel, halfway up the mesa. It was for dumping ore from the mine into the railroad cars. The ore cars were pushed up to the iron chute in the floor and dumped their ore into the train cars waiting on the tracks below. The iron chute was all rusted and sagging down—hanging on by a few rusted nails, it looked like—and a couple of boards had been hammered over the space in the floor. The whole thing was leaning at such a weird angle it looked like it might topple over onto that old boxcar any minute. But nobody else seemed worried about it.

We picked up our stuff and hustled. Like we had both agreed to go through with it, only we hadn't come right out and said so. I had to admit fifty bucks was a lot of money.

"Ladder's around back," Boone said. "We're stuck with the Dragon's Nest."

"Exactly what kind of a dragon is up there?"

"It's not really a nest and it's not really a dragon. It's just this big honkin' snake that—"

"Holy crud, Boone!" I stopped dead in my tracks. "You mean we have to—"

"That guards the place when Grampy's working up there. But don't worry, it can't get through that big bear door that closes off the tunnel, because—"

"You've gotta be kidding me! You got bears here, too?"

"Not down here on the flat I don't think. And for sure never in summer. Too hot for 'em." He stopped in front of an old wooden ladder that went straight up to the bottom of the tank on top of the tower. Then slipped on his backpack and tied the strap of his sleeping bag around his waist. "I'll go first."

That ladder had to be twice as tall as the high dive at the pool, and I got butterflies in my stomach just watching him. I don't really like high-up places. But, heck, I'm not gonna admit feeling scared about something even somebody's mom can do. So, I tied my stuff on and followed. All I had to do was be careful and not look down. Saw it done that way in a movie, once. It seemed to take forever, but

halfway up—just over the roof of the boxcar—a warm breeze off the desert hit my face with the smell of some kind of plant.

I don't know what it was, but it was sort of delicious and made me feel good all over. About that time I noticed how close the stars hung down out there, almost close enough to imagine you were on the edge of outer space. I just sort of took my time taking it all in, and when I finally poked my head up through the hole in the tower floor, Boone was already getting the lecture.

"Eight o'clock on the button, and don't you forget it." His mom had his sleeping bag unrolled and unzipped, and she was smoothing it out over an old cot with her hands. There were a couple of them in there, each sitting under closed wooden shutters that probably covered up windows to the outside.

"I don't usually have a bedtime during the summer," I pointed out.

"I'm not talking about bedtimes, William. Hand me your sleeping bag." She pulled Boone's off the cot, tossed it back to him, and said, "Okay, zip it up, again."

I wanted to remind her that I did not like the name William, or Will, and especially not Willy, or Bill, which was why everybody called me Hud. Short for Hudson, which is my last name. Only I figured if she was calling her own son, Jefferson Boone Junior, instead of the usual, Jeffie, I maybe should keep quiet about it. Instead, I fumbled around trying to get the knot untied from my belt to give her my sleeping bag. What? Did she think we were hiding something in there? Actually, it turned out she was showing us how to make sure nothing was hiding from us in one of our bags.

"Every night, boys." She unzipped my bag and shook it so hard some dirt on the wooden floor puffed up. But it smelled like the kind of soap you find in your grandma's bathroom, so it couldn't have been dirt. "And don't forget to shake out your shoes every morning before you put them on, too. The scorpions around here aren't poisonous, but their sting hurts like—"

"Scorpions! Holy crud, Miz Boone! You mean—"

"I said they weren't poisonous, William." She spread my

sleeping bag out on the other old cot, sprinkled it all over inside from a can of carpet deodorant, and smeared it in. "Besides, they absolutely hate lavender. I'll have you know this is the expensive stuff. The kind with real lavender in it and not just the smell." She pulled the bag off the cot and tossed it back to me. "Okay, zip it up."

If my parents had known about this scorpion thing they wouldn't have let me come. See, I live in a house where even the sight of a garden spider in the bathtub causes a major panic. And they don't bite. If we see one we have to kill it twice. Squash it first then flush it down the toilet in case it has nine lives, or something. A guy could get seriously injured around here. I mean, what good would fifty dollars be if a scorpion bit me in the foot so I couldn't run fast enough to get away from all the other predators? And that's not counting the hazards.

The way what was left of my dinner started rolling around in my stomach about then, I figured I wouldn't even have to stick a finger down my throat to throw up. Just bend over somewhere and let nature take its course. I was that scared. So, while I was trying to hurry and dream up some excuse to tell Boone like, "Sorry, man, but I think I'm coming down with Mad Cow Disease. Maybe even Typhoid Fever." Mrs. Boone put a chokehold on both of us at the same time and gave us each a kiss on the cheek.

Then she made a face at us like the Wicked Witch of the West. "Now, if I have to take off work to come out here for any reason before next Monday—even if it's an accident—you'll both be washing dishes down at *Pickler's* for the rest of the summer. With no pay!"

That was the last straw. So I took a deep breath and blurted out, "Miz Boone! I—I have something to tell you!"

Chapter Three

Secrets

"He is manly and not afraid to tell the truth, and is to be relied upon because he puts his honor before all."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

"Well, make it fast, Willie. I have to work tomorrow and would like to get home before sunrise. We still have a few important things to talk over."

"I—"

She put a hand on her hip and started tapping her foot. "I'm waiting, William."

"I—" I grabbed my stomach like somebody just punched me in the gut and moaned, "I'm allergic to rattlesnakes!"

"So is everybody else. But they're only aggressive if you surprise them. Even then, they give you a warning. How polite is that? Just be careful where you walk, that's all you have to do. Of course, if you're trying to tell me you changed your mind and want to go home, that's perfectly—"

Now, Boone's face looked like he just got punched in the gut, and it made me feel like I did it. Which also made me feel lower than a snake, because at least they give you a warning. Boone was my best friend. We had plans. We had secrets nobody else in the world even knew about, and I just knocked him for a loop by

thinking about only saving myself. In that split second I realized I'd rather face ten rattlesnakes than do something like that.

"Oh. Well, hey, I didn't mean that, exactly." I tried to go for a quick recovery to make up for it. "I guess, as long as we have one of those snakebite kit thingies."

"Grampy says those are a crock."

"Jefferson Junior!" His mom stamped her foot instead of tapping it this time, and pointed a warning finger at him. "If you come back next week talking like your grandfather, I'll—"

"Worthless, I mean. But don't worry, Hud, the first thing Grampy will probably do tomorrow is give us snake lessons."

"I already learned it all on the Nature Channel. They can kill you dead with one bite. Right, Miz Boone?"

"Only stupid people who don't watch out for them." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Now, listen here, boys —" She waved us closer, like she was maybe going to give us the secret to beat all secrets for charming snakes. "There's something important I need to tell you about Grampy."

"Oh, no." Boone looked worried, again. "Is he going to die?"

"Not if we can help it." She sat down on the floor and let her legs dangle out over the ladder, waiting for us to sit down next to her and listen. "You see, Grampy's on kind of a —well, I guess you could call it a probation. From the county."

"He hates the county," Boone reminded her. "Whatever they say, he won't do it."

"How come he hates the county so much?" I asked.

But neither one of them answered. Instead, Mrs. Boone just went right on explaining how things were. "They think he's a danger to himself out here. They—"

"What's wrong with that?" I couldn't help butting in, again, because, sheesh, where was the logic? "People who climb mountains and jump out of airplanes are sort of a danger to themselves, too. How come nobody tries to stop them?"

"It's different when you're older, Willy. After a certain age, people start to—"

"But Grampy's lived most of his life out here!" This time, it was Boone who interrupted. "Are they forgetting all those fliers he saved out of Iraq, on account of he knew how to survive in the desert? He's a hero! Nobody knows more about the desert than Grampy!"

"They usually don't let people as old as him fly in Iraq." I was starting to wonder how much of all this hero stuff Boone had been telling me was really true.

"The Desert Storm war, not this war," he explained. Then he asked his mom straight out, "Do they think he won't be able to take care of himself now just because he shot off his own toe? One missing toe isn't going to keep him from doing anything."

"The toe isn't the problem. They think he's getting a little paranoid, too. But who isn't these days? Now, I made a promise to your dad that I would take care of you and Grampy while he was gone, and that's just what I mean to do. So, here's the plan. You and Bill have to make sure everything looks normal around here when the county nurse comes to check up on things. She's scheduled for Wednesday and Friday afternoon."

"Man, there's no way this place could look normal." I felt sort of responsible to point that out, on account of I figured they had somehow got blind to how crazy this whole situation looked to an outsider. "I mean, how many people in their right mind live in a boxcar out in the middle of nowhere?"

"We can't tell anybody he lives in the boxcar," she replied.

I didn't even try to interrupt on that one, because I didn't have a clue how we could pull something like that off. Not unless there was some abandoned ranch house around somewhere we could move him into real quick. Especially since the census taker had only been out here two days ago and already had this address. If the place even had an address.

"Listen up, now, here's the story." Mrs. Boone started to explain how we were supposed to say the boxcar was only temporary on account of his missing toe. That he really lived up at the Singing Bone in a beautiful ranch house that they were perfectly welcome to visit if they wanted to make the six hour hike up the mountain to get

there. Which, of course, nobody would.

Then she went on to say we only had to do three important things. Number one: make sure he was actually here on Wednesday and Friday afternoon. Number two: slip a pain pill into his apple cider as soon as we saw the nurse's car pull off the Interstate (one of us would have to keep watch from the tower on those days). That way, he wouldn't be rude to the nurse when she started poking around on his missing toe. This had to be done on account of Grampy hated medications of any kind and had already tossed them in the trash. But Mrs. Boone fished them out, again, and stashed them in Boone's backpack while Grampy was settling in.

"What's number three?" Boone asked.

Which I didn't think mattered much, no matter what it was, on account of I figured we were already sunk on one and two. Considering we couldn't even get Grampy across the porch bridge when we first got here, how in the world did Mrs. Boone think we could get him to go anywhere he didn't want to? And, to tell the truth, I would rather face ten county nurses than Grampy Boone, if he ever caught us spiking his cider. What was she thinking? What's worse, what would my parents think if they found out I was helping out with all these lies?

"What if the county's right, and he really can't take care of himself anymore?" I only brought it up for discussion but you'd have thought I said someone should put him out of his misery the way they both stopped talking at the same time and looked at me all hurt and offended.

"Grampy could take care of the whole town if he had to!" Boone popped off like I had dared him for a fight. "What do you know about it?"

"I know my parents will ground me till I'm thirty if I tell all these lies, that's what I know! In case you forgot, they both work for the county."

"Listen, Billy." Mrs. Boone was calling me the all-time worst name I had, but I don't think she even realized it. "Taking care of yourself is a matter of opinion, and in this country everybody's

entitled to their own opinion. Right?"

"I guess so. But if somebody gets in trouble with the county—"

"Well, let me put it another way. Suppose the county decided to round up everyone who was outside during rainstorms because they might get struck by lightning, or get sick and the county would have to take care of them?"

"Those things hardly ever happen."

"But they do sometimes, William. We all have to admit that."

"It wouldn't be fair to lock up everybody for just sometimes, Miz Boone."

"You're such a smart boy, I knew you'd understand. Now, I really have to get moving or I'll be dead on my feet tomorrow." She stood up on the ladder and turned around to start backing down. "Goodnight, boys. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite!"

I didn't see what rounding people up in rainstorms had to do with lying to the county nurse. I just couldn't make the connection. And right at the time I was trying to figure out if I had—or hadn't—agreed to help with the lying to the county thing, she hollered back up to us when she was about halfway down.

"Do a good job of it, boys, and you could be making the last payment on that raft of yours next week!"

Which made me feel like I got punched in the gut all over, again.

"You told her!" I accused.

"Did not. I swear it."

"How'd she find out, then?"

"How should I know? I think maybe she's psychic."

"Well, if she blabs to my parents, I won't get to go." We both leaned over the open space to look down at the same time, but Mrs. Boone was gone already. "Sheesh. How'd she disappear so quick?"

"She used to work for a circus. You wouldn't believe some of the things she can do."

"You know something, Boone? You're either the biggest liar—"

"Hey!" He threw me a scowl that was an exact copy of Grampy's when he was warning us about the swamp hole.

"Or the weirdest friend I ever had."

"So, what's wrong with weird?"

"I haven't decided, yet."

"Well, think about it tomorrow." He swung the heavy trap door closed over the hole. "Five o'clock comes early around here."

"I'm not getting up at any five o'clock."

"Suit yourself. But you won't find me hanging around up here after five." He sat down on the edge of his cot and started taking off his shoes. "That's when Grampy lets the dragon out."

Chapter Four

Sold Into Slavery

"On taking up your work, you have agreed to do a certain amount for a certain wage, and it is loyalty on your part then to stick to that agreement and to give good work in return for your pay."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

"What do you mean he lets the dragon out, Boone? You're kidding, right?"

I was busy sticking my socks into my shoes so I could find them in the morning. "I mean, there has to be something seriously wrong with anyone who would—"

All of a sudden it occurred to me I maybe should leave my shoes on the end of the cot instead of on the floor under it. On account of the scorpions. Then I decided to put them inside the sleeping bag (at the bottom), so they wouldn't fall on the floor when I rolled over. About that time, Boone started to snore, and I realized any more information I wanted would have to wait until morning. Because once he crashed it was like trying to wake the dead to get him up, again.

Not that I'm any better. Because only three seconds after I closed my eyes it was morning. First, I couldn't remember where I was, then I prayed nobody had left me with the dragon all by myself. The

way the sun was shining in through the slats in the shutters above our cots when I peeked out from underneath a corner of my sleeping bag, I knew without a doubt it was way past five o'clock. I looked around real slow, in case anything was watching for movement — and caught sight of Boone, spread-eagle on the top of his, with his mouth hanging open. If he wasn't sleeping, he was dead.

"Pssst! Hey, Boone—pssst!"

He moved a little, made a sound like he was maybe trying to answer, and then shot up like a bullet. "What? Oh, no! The bear door's open! Grab your stuff! The bear door's open!"

"Holy crud!" I snatched up my shoes and launched myself halfway to the trap door before my feet hit the floor. "Is the dragon out?"

"Woo-oo!" He practically crashed down on top of me with a flying leap. "Make noise! Make lots of noise! *Oh, I wish I—was in the—land of cotton—*" he sang out and heaved the trap door open at the same time. "*Old times there are—not forgotten—*"

"*Look away, look away—*" I joined in at the top of my lungs and stuck my shoes in the waist of my jeans so I could hold on down the ladder. "*Look away, Dixieland.*" I was so scared of a rattlesnake dropping on me before I could get down, I think I could have jumped all the way to the bottom if Boone hadn't been in the way. Heights didn't scare me half as much as getting killed with one bite. That's way worse than vampires, even.

"Sheesh, Boone, why don't we just—ahhh! Ow! Oh, my achin'—" I had tromped right over the top of a sticker patch in my bare feet and had to sit down quick to pick them out.

"Those bullheads under the ladder sting like fire. I usually try to hop over them."

"Well, thanks for the warning. Where the—ah, nuts—I left one of my socks up there!" I stashed the other one in my pocket and stuck my feet into my shoes without them. "Why don't we just sleep on the floor in the boxcar? I'm liable to have a heart attack if we have to go through this every morning."

"I could set the alarm on my cell phone," he offered.

"Why take the chance? And what kind of a grandfather lets a live rattlesnake loose where kids are sleeping? Probably even against the law."

"It's not a rattlesnake, it's a king snake. Been a pet of Grampy's for years. My dad said they actually protect you from rattlesnakes, because rattlers won't come around a king snake. Mortal enemies. That's why Grampy keeps one up here. So he doesn't have to always be looking over his shoulder for snakes when he's working in the tunnel. Sometimes it likes to hang around up in these rafters when he leaves the door open all day."

"Well, if it's harmless what are we running around like this for?"

"I hate snakes. They give me the creeps."

"Man, is there anything else you maybe should tell me about the way things are out here? Before I drop dead, I mean. And how come we didn't just close the bear door instead of singing *Dixieland* at the top of our lungs and practically breaking our necks getting down this ladder?"

"Because Grampy would get madder than a hornet if we locked him in there."

"What's he doing in there, anyway? Digging for gold on company property? No wonder he doesn't want the county people snooping around out here."

"Something like that." He finished tying his shoes and headed for the boxcar.

"You mean there really is gold?"

"Sure there's gold. There's gold all over the place, if you know where to look for it. What do you think the company brought in all this heavy equipment for? Come on, let's get some breakfast. Oh, and don't let on to Mom or Grampy I told you about the gold. It's supposed to be a family secret."

"You mean your mom and dad know about it, too?"

"Sure. We were all working out here together before Dad got called away to the war."

"Ever find any?"

"Yeah, but whatever we find gets stashed away for hard times."

Boone family tradition."

"Wow. No wonder Grampy can afford to pay us fifty dollars."

"He's not paying, Mom is. Actually, it's costing her a hundred because he's charging the same to watch out for us."

"What a deal." I limped after him as he climbed up onto the porch bridge. My foot felt like somebody stuck a red-hot poker under it. Besides that, it was going to be a scorcher of a day and it wasn't even eight o'clock.

There was a note on the table inside the boxcar, and I read it out loud while Boone clattered around getting bowls, spoons, milk, and cereal from somewhere. So much for taking care of Grampy. He wasn't even there. "*Back for dinner, so have some rabbit stew ready. Tools and lumber in the shed. Leave everything else in there alone. Sheesh, he sure doesn't waste any words.*"

"I hope I can remember how to work the stove." Boone pushed a box of *Sugar Crisps* toward me and sat down. His hair was sticking up in a couple places and he didn't have a shirt on, just a pair of khaki shorts.

I would have brought a pair of shorts too, except, I never went home to get my stuff before we left. Didn't figure I needed to. I always kept a pair of swim trunks in my backpack when I stayed over at Boone's. But when I went looking for them, the pair I found wasn't mine. My sister Emily had stuck a purple pair of her lacy shorts in there, instead. With a note pinned on the rear that said, "*Ha Ha!!! Have fun Willy Bill!*" So I was going to have to drag around all week with underwear hanging out through the rip in my jeans. Living with sisters really gets to me sometimes.

Of course, she hadn't known I was leaving for a week, and probably figured I'd just run home from the pool and get my own after the joke. Still, if I didn't have such great parents, I would have run away from home a long time ago. Because out of all three of my older sisters, Emily's the nice one. The other two can be brutal.

My sister Hannah locked me in the broom closet for two hours once (while my parents were at work) because that's how long I held out until I finally agreed to pull weeds for old Mrs. Douglas, next

door. Another time, I told my oldest sister, Meg, the spaghetti she made tasted like dishwater, and all three of them jumped on me. Next thing I knew somebody put a pillowcase over my head and I ended up on the roof of the garage all by myself. At night. My folks were off at a meeting somewhere, that time.

Not that I'd tell them the sort of things that happen to me when they aren't around. Wouldn't want to get tortured dead before I grow up. Besides, as long as I do whatever my bossy sisters tell me, all I have to put up with are unexpected bear hugs (I hate those things!) and getting called mushy names in front of my friends. I got to admit, they do give me spending money sometimes, but that sure doesn't make up for taking away a guy's self-respect.

Boone has no idea how great he has it. He's an only kid and can do what he wants when his parents are gone. Only he never does. He does all his chores without being told, and even puts a tea bag in a cup and fills up the teakettle every day before we take off anywhere, for when his mom gets off work. Until then, he can roam around the whole town if he feels like it. Sometimes, he comes up with these amazing ideas for adventures that are way better than games. Because they're real.

Which beats a game any day as far as I'm concerned. Nothing like a first-hand experience. Only I never could figure out where he came up with this stuff all the time. I was starting to believe he was pretty much of a born adventurer until he finally admitted he was getting the ideas out of some old book. Which actually made me like him even more for letting me in on it. After that, I figured I could come up with just as many adventure ideas as he could.

All I needed was the book.

But it turned out to be one that had been passed down through his family for a long time and wasn't around anymore. Even though it was written by the guy who started the Boy Scouts, and we still have them all over the place. Except, after looking through that old book for awhile, I found out scouts were way different back then. A kid wouldn't be able to do half the things in that book these days. He'd probably get arrested. Which is why Boone and I agreed to

keep all our old time scout activities secret.

Like saving up all summer to buy that old raft hanging in *Cooper's Pawn Shop* window, so we could explore the Apestoso River. Of course there was that long hike back through the desert, but, like I said, Boone knew everything there was to know about surviving in the desert, on account of his family had been living on this huge hunk of it for generations. When they weren't off fighting wars. Which made me feel a little lame on account of all my family ever did was academics.

That is, until me knowing everything there was to know about academics paid off. I'm not saying I know all there is to know in the world, I just know how to find out about it. Which was why Boone practically passed out when I came up with my own copy of his special book. From then on, he figured I was some kind of genius. That sort of evened us out with the hero stuff. For every hero he had in his family, I had some kind of a mastermind in mine. Pretty soon, we weren't just a team, we were best friends.

That's how things stood when I first went into the desert.

Only, I didn't make it through half that first day before I realized I might not have what it takes to survive. Not to mention the hero stuff. By ten in the morning (I didn't even make it till lunchtime!) I thought maybe I was going to die out there. That's on account of it was a hundred degrees, already, and the boxcar wasn't air conditioned. About the time I was seriously thinking about calling my Dad at work so he could come get me, Boone told me there was a place close by we could cool off in.

"Well, don't try to talk me into taking a dip in the swamp hole, 'cause I'm not doing it." I untied the sock I had wrapped around my hand to cover the humungous blister that showed up after a couple hours of prying broken boards off the porch with a crowbar. Only it was stuck to the thing, now, so I tied it back up, again.

"We can eat our lunch in the tunnel. It's about thirty degrees cooler in there. Depending on how deep you go."

"What about the snakes?"

"I'm not so scared of them when Grampy's around. Besides,

there's been enough noise going on with him working in there they all would have run off somewhere."

"What about the bears? Tunnel seems like a good place for them to hang out. They like caves, don't they?"

"I told you they head for the high country this time of year. Up on the mountain. They only come down in winter if they're not ready to hibernate, yet. That's why we put the bear door on, because one tried to hibernate in the Dragon's Nest one year."

"I didn't see any lock on that door, Boone."

"You don't need a lock with a crossbar, Hud. They're bears, not people."

"Just saying."

"Well, quit saying so much and let's get busy. We'll have to get supper on the stove, first, so we can say we're working on everything on the list."

"Sheesh, what's he think we are—his slaves? I don't know if all this work is worth fifty dollars, Boone. I wasn't counting on heatstroke. I seriously think I'm having a heatstroke, here."

"Take my word for it, Hud, you can actually get used to it. Just have to drink lots of water instead of soda. All they do is make you belch."

"Why didn't you tell me that before I drank six of them?"

"Figured you knew what you were doing."

"I was thirsty enough to drink the swamp hole! OK, so, I'll try the water. But you're going to have to fix that stew up yourself. I'll drop dead if I have to go back in the boxcar, again. Thing's like an oven. Just set out the pan, it could probably cook itself in there."

I got to admit, I felt a whole lot better after drinking about five cups of water. I had to hand it to Boone, though. Because while I was soaking the sock off my blister and cooling down in the shade of a giant rock, he was back in the boxcar by himself. Clanging and banging things around like he was trashing the place instead of just fixing dinner. But at least he was giving it his best shot. He even managed to scrape up a couple of huge ham sandwiches and some oranges to take into the tunnel with us.

Considering what we had accomplished by eleven o'clock in the morning that first day, I figured Grampy wouldn't have a thing to complain about when we caught up with him. Heck, we even brought him a sandwich, and there was nothing about having to fix lunch for him in that note. Which was the whole reason I didn't think twice about heading down a mine tunnel after I had already been warned about all the hazards of doing something like that.

I think maybe I was starting to get a little paranoid, myself.

Chapter Five

Gold Fever

*"Decent Scouts look down upon silly youths—
and they do not let themselves give way to
temptation, either to talk it or to do anything dirty.
A Scout is pure, and clean-minded, and manly."*

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

The inside of the tunnel smelled like wet sidewalk after a rain, and felt like it was air-conditioned in there. Which I think actually saved me from dying of heatstroke. No kidding. We sat down with our bare backs leaning against the cool rock wall (after making a huge amount of noise and a really good snake inspection), ate all our sandwiches (including Grampy's), and most of the oranges. I don't know what the deal was, but I felt like I hadn't eaten for three days. There were a couple of low-hanging light bulbs spread out along the passageway, but no sign of Grampy before they disappeared into the dark, farther down.

"How deep does this thing go?" I asked.

"Just to the bottom of the mesa and out the other side. Don't worry, it's not a mine shaft or anything, it's a tunnel."

"I thought you said Grampy was working in here."

"He is." Boone wiped a big glop of mayonnaise off his mouth with the back of his hand and then wiped that on the bottom of his shoe. "Couple of years ago, when he was rigging this old electric

light system up for solar power, he busted open a pretty thick vein. So, he decided to work closer to home.”

"Who took care of him that time?"

"Not a blood vein, Hudson—a gold vein. You're hilarious!"

"I've never seen a real gold vein before. Must really be something."

"It's a lot of work, that's what it is. Without heavy equipment, you gotta work like a dog for every little bit. Muscles feel like *Silly Putty* at the end of the day. You can hardly hold up your arms."

"Well, if you can't keep any gold, do you at least get paid wages?" I picked up the pile of orange peels I had made and dumped them into my backpack. "What are we doing collecting recycle stuff all summer when we could have been digging for Grampy a long time ago? We could be floating down the Apestoso right now instead of doing hard labor in hundred-degree heat. Look at the size of this blister I got." I untied the sock to show him but it was stuck, again. "Anyway, it's huge."

"All I get is ten bucks a week for allowance. That's all I ever get. My dad says someday I'll be able to whip anyone on the high school wrestling team with muscles like these." He flexed his biceps a couple of times for emphasis. "But a lot of good that does me now."

I have to admit I was impressed. If I had a set of biceps like that I wouldn't get pushed around half so much when mom and dad weren't home. "You know something, Boone?" I noticed one of my fingernails was split and spent a few seconds thinking while I bit the end of it off. "I don't see what's to keep us from working a little on this tunnel ourselves at night. I mean we're sleeping right on the other side of the bear door, aren't we? What's to keep us from digging out just enough gold to get ourselves—"

"Are you kidding? Grampy'd wear the pants off me if I did something like that! I told you it's a family secret." He threw me one of his Grampy looks. "You better not tell anybody, either."

"One or two little nuggets, that's all I'm talking about."

"This isn't the wild west, Hudson. You can't just sashay into *Walmart* and say do they want to trade a nugget for a bunch of

camping gear. Gold's big business. Kids like us go flashing any around and—next thing you know—the whole town would be up here to check things out. Ever heard of something called a gold rush?"

"We maybe would have to deal with Mr. Cooper down at the pawn shop, then."

"He couldn't even keep his mouth shut about our raft. We turn up at his place with so much as a itty-bitty nugget, and he'd be the first one handing out picks and shovels." He got up and dusted the seat of his pants off. "Come on, let's go."

"So, what's Grampy digging for all this gold for if he can't spend any of it?" I slung my backpack over one shoulder and followed after him. "He ought to have a pretty good heap of it by now if he can't trade it in anywhere."

"My dad flies all the way to Colorado whenever we have to cash any in, and he only deals with legitimate companies. Lot of amateur gold diggers up there, and it doesn't draw so much attention."

"Colorado! Sheesh—I guess that pretty much takes care of any profits."

Boone stopped dead in front of me and I almost ran into him. "I bet you don't even know what gold is worth."

"No, but I sure know how to find out."

"Last time I heard it was about a thousand dollars an ounce."

I dropped my backpack. "Ho-lee crud, Boone!" I practically fell off the railroad tie I was standing on. "Are you kidding me? We gotta find us a vein! We gotta dig as much as we can while we're here, and—"

"Don't even think about it, Hudson."

"And then hide it somewhere safe until we're—"

"Never happen."

"Old enough to fly to Colorado ourselves and—"

"Get a grip, will you? Man! Do I have to bust you in the jaw or something?"

"Long as we kept secret—come on—how would anybody even know?"

"I'd know."

"Don't tell me you never thought of how much you could do with even one little bit! Why, if I had—if I—" I could hardly breathe just thinking about it. "If I could have—"

He gave me a shove off the railroad tie before I even saw it coming, and I tumbled backward right onto my butt. "You have gold fever, that's what you have," he said and started walking again.

I got up and scrambled after him without even dusting myself off. Not that I wasn't bothered at being shoved around. It's just that we had come a long way down the tunnel by then, and I didn't want to get left all by myself in there. "Sure, that's easy for you to say," I accused. "People with enough money are always telling people without money it isn't everything. Like it doesn't matter. Well, it matters to me, bud!" I shifted my backpack onto my other shoulder and kept on talking. "There isn't anything money can't buy. Just because you can't spend yours right now doesn't change the fact you got no worries about not having any. Like where you're going to college, later on. Or if you might not be able to afford to drive when you get in high school. You even got a—"

"None of that matters to me."

"Yeah, right. Because you got it all settled already, that's why. So you can't have any of it now—you still know it's there. That's practically the same thing. You actually got enough money to buy anything you want!"

He stopped all of a sudden, again, and this time I had to jump off to the side of the railroad tracks to keep from running into him. Besides, I wasn't so sure he wasn't gonna try and shove me on my butt, again. "Money can't buy everything I want, Hudson!"

That's when I noticed he was totally upset. I mean, he looked like he was about to cry, or something.

Instead, he just yelled, "I'd shout gold all the way to Phoenix! I'd turn this whole place over to the town—no matter what my folks said! You want to know what for? I'll tell you what for! If I thought for one split second—just one split second, William Hudson—it would bring my dad back from the war!" He sniffed, wiped his nose

with the back of his hand, then turned around and started walking fast, again.

I stood there for a minute, letting him get ahead of me, feeling like a balloon popped with a pin. Sheesh. I knew he missed his dad—but sheesh. I felt rotten for rubbing things in and making him feel like that. I never met Boone's dad, but I thought the world of my own. We were the only two guys in my family, and we were tight. I couldn't even imagine not having him around anymore. I probably couldn't hold up half as good as Boone, if something like that happened to me. And here I was trying to get him to go back on a promise he maybe made to his dad. What kind of a friend was that? All of a sudden I felt like I would trade ten gold veins for a way to make things up to him right then.

So, I jumped back onto the rail I'd been walking along and hurried to catch up. "Hey, Boone! Wait up. Hey, I'm sorry man. I don't know what came over me. Must have been gold fever, all right. Since when have I ever been worried about going to college? Sheesh, I'm not even in high school, yet!"

He didn't say anything, just kept right on walking at a fast clip. He was way better at walking on those rails than me.

"I'll tell you what, Boone. That was gold fever, all right. And you have my permission to go ahead and shove me on my butt, again, if you ever catch it coming on me anymore. Really! I mean, what are best friends for if they can't tell each other to wise up once in a while? Boone? Are you even listening to me? I said you could—"

This time, when he stopped I ran into him.

Just when I thought he was madder than I realized, and I'd probably lost the best friend I ever had, he bent down and picked up a shovel that was lying across the tracks in front of us. Farther along there was a pick propped up against the side of the tunnel, and past that there was an old miner's hard hat lying upside down with the headlamp still turned on and shining up at the ceiling.

"Oh, no. Grampy!" Then he hollered, "Graaaam—peeeee!" so loud an echo came pinging back, "Peee—peee—peee." over and over, again, like ripples in a pond.

After that, I couldn't keep up with him. By the time I made it to the end of the tunnel, I had fallen down twice and was wheezing like an old guy whose oxygen tank had run out. I staggered up to Boone. He was shading his eyes from the bright desert that stretched out in front of a huge opening that felt like someone just opened the door to a blast furnace. That's how hot it was out there. I tried to see what he was looking at. All I could see was a wide valley that stretched all the way to a single, towering mountain that seemed to rise up out of the earth like some ancient volcano.

The train tracks plunged out across the middle of that piece of desert that was so hot it looked practically underwater in all the heat waves passing over it. Right for the heart of the volcano. But just before the shadow of the mountain at the other end, I could make out some kind of a box lying on the tracks. Boone threw down his backpack and knelt to unzip it with shaking fingers. He pulled out a pair of binoculars and stood up, again.

He gasped.

"What is it?" I stared harder over his shoulder but it still looked like a blurry lump to me.

"It's Grampy's electric rail car! Broke down, or something! I can't see Grampy! He must be—oh, my gosh—Hudson! It's a leg! All I can see is his wrapped up foot sticking out!"

Chapter Six

Rush

"If my scout had only learnt, when a boy, how to obey orders, it might have made a great difference that day to him, to us—and to the enemy."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

The thought that Grampy had run off and died somewhere gave me the creeps. "You better call 911." I tried to keep my voice steady since Boone looked about to go ballistic.

"Cell phones don't work down here—only up in the Dragon's Nest!" He shoved the binoculars into his pack and took off back into the tunnel like somebody had just shot the starting gun at a track meet.

"Hey!" I called. "Don't you think we should check things out? At least hike out with some water? What if he's—" I ran a little way in, tripped over one of the railroad ties, and cracked my knee on top of the steel rail when I went down. "Owww—crud! What if he's—ow—just keeled over from heatstroke, or something?"

I felt like a blind man stumbling back through that tunnel. After squinting into the bright light of the desert so hard, even the light bulbs along the passageway didn't help. But I could hear Boone getting farther and farther ahead of me and I didn't have time to wait until my eyes adjusted. Instead, I started hopping from one railroad tie to the next like some crippled frog until things came back into

focus. When they did, he looked about a mile ahead of me, already. I don't know how he did it. I mean, it was like he had busted into hyper-drive or something. I figured I was pretty much on my own because he was probably thinking every minute counted before he could make it back to the Dragon's Nest and call for help.

I had a flash that I maybe should have volunteered to hike out to Grampy with some water in the meantime, but—from the shape I was in—I would have dropped dead before I got there. I just didn't have the poop. Which was a real disappointment since I spent the summer telling myself what a great adventurer I was. All of a sudden I wished I hadn't been so stubborn every time my sisters hollered at me to turn off the video games and go outside. Maybe then I wouldn't have felt so much like an alien from another planet out there in the desert.

"Pick it up, Hudson!" I practically ran into him again before I realized he was waiting for me around a corner. "It's life or death we're up against here!"

"Go ahead—I'll catch up. The faster you get through, the faster we'll get help."

"What are you talking about? We are the help!"

"Then what are we going back to the Dragon's Nest for!"

"Because it's too far to walk in this heat, that's what for." Then an almost crazy look came over his face and he whispered. "We're gonna have to ride the rhino!"

That was the instant it occurred to me none of this was real. It couldn't be. I mean, come on. Had I seen any legs sticking out from under that box out there? Not with my own eyes. I didn't even look through the binoculars. Right then, I had a hunch Boone was just trying to scare the pants off me because he was sorry he told me about the gold. Come to think of it, he had kept me running and hollering ever since we got here. Only, this time, he went a little too far because he was forgetting my academic strong point. I might not know everything about surviving in a desert, but I at least knew where I was.

And I knew there were no African rhinos running around in the

Arizona desert.

Only I didn't know exactly what I could do about it other than limp my way out of there and talk him into letting me use his cell phone to call my dad. I for sure wasn't going to run all over this scorching hot desert to chase some imaginary rhino. Not when I was half-dead I wasn't. At that point, I didn't even care if he called me a wimp anymore, on account of I had such a strong desire to live long enough to grow up. It was a life and death situation, all right. Only it was my life at stake, not Grampy's.

The sound of him singing *Dixieland* at the top of his lungs told me he had made it to the Dragon's Nest. But when I finally brought up the rear (forget the singing. I wasn't afraid of harmless snakes, just poisonous ones) he wasn't there anymore. I knew nobody could have dialed and got through to 911 that fast. Which was just one more proof that he was trying to trick me.

Everybody knows you can get in some serious trouble calling 911 when there's really no emergency. And Boone has a phobia about getting in any kind of trouble with the law on account of he wants to go into some special Air Force program after high school. Another Boone family tradition. I don't mind saying that, right about then, I was getting pretty tired of all those Boone family traditions.

With my bullhead stung foot, my cracked knee, and my giant sock-wrapped blister, I headed down the ladder like some half-dead spider. I was trying to think over the best way to say I was seriously close to dead here and wanted to go home. Even if we had to work the rest of the summer down at the *3 Ps* for no pay. He should have thought twice about trying to mess with me like this. How much is a guy supposed to take? He'd talked me into pulling up boards until my hand almost fell off. He let my brains bake in the sun 'til I nearly passed out from heat stroke. To top things off he knocked me on my butt just because I got excited about a little gold. What kind of a friend was that?

"Get a move on, Hudson! Every second counts!" He was waiting for me at the bottom of the ladder. "I only hope it starts!"

"Hey, can I—" I jumped past the last two rungs and away from

the sticker patch. "Can I borrow your phone for a minute?"

"We can't call 911. Remember what Mom said?" He grabbed the sleeve of my black *Ashbury Cougars* T-shirt—I had put it back on after we cooled off in the tunnel—and pulled me toward the big wooden shed behind the boxcar. The same junk building we had dug all the tools out of that morning.

"Think about it, Boone," I tried to reason with him, because I was also seriously beginning to think he was going paranoid, too. "Mr. Pickler isn't so bad. I bet he wouldn't have the heart to let us work a whole month without at least paying us something. No matter how much your mom yells."

"I'm talking about Grampy!" His face wrinkled up into a Boone scowl. "He's on probation with the county, in case you forgot!"

"But I'm starting to think maybe the county—"

"Well, think some more. If they have to send an ambulance all the way out here because he wandered off into the desert, they'll lock him up for sure! I know my Grampy, Hud. He'd rather die than get locked up in one of those old people places. Believe me he would!"

He let go of my shirt, threw open the door on the shed, and started tossing stuff out like there was some kind of fire, or something. "Come on. Hurry up and help me get all this junk out of the way so we can get it out of here."

"What out of here?"

"The rhino!" He hopped over the pile enough to yank a tarp back from another mountain of junk.

"Sheesh, Boone! How can you expect me to believe—" That's as far as I got before I caught a look at what was underneath that tarp.

It was the roughest-looking little dune buggy I ever saw in my life. All black and silver. Stamped into the chrome of the hubcap on the spare tire hanging off the back was the big imprint of a Rhino. Boone jumped right into the driver's seat (it didn't have any doors), and turned the key. When the engine let out a roar like some army tank firing up, my mouth dropped open.

"Come on!" He pulled down a seatbelt that was attached to a big

roll bar over his shoulder and strapped himself in. "Clear me some more path. I'm coming out!"

I shoved the rest of the stuff out of the way just in time to jump aside as he rolled back. Gold fever and blisters were nothing compared to the thought of hauling all over the desert in something like that. Boone could have been the devil for all I cared. I'm sort of ashamed about that now, but it's the truth. Just the way it was. I was even trying to think of the best way to ask if maybe I could have a turn driving.

Later on, of course. Right then I had all I could do to strap myself in before he tromped on it. I mean, we took out across that desert like a contender for the Baja Five Hundred. I gotta admit my admiration for Jefferson Boone went sort of ballistic about then. Just from the way he could handle that thing!

"Ho-lee!" We caught about ten feet of air off the rim of a whoop-dee-doo and crashed down just in time to make a hairpin curve around a giant boulder on two wheels.

Boone howled like a coyote, as we fishtailed out of the loop, and tromped down hard on the way to the next rise. "Hold on, Hud! Next one's a double! Whoooooo-up!"

It was better than a fast-moving carnival ride. We whooped and hollered for a good fifteen minutes before he finally slowed down to a steady chug along the winding packed-down trail.

He breathed out a long sigh, took his ball cap off, and tossed it between the seats. "Any more than that and it puts a twist in your gut you can feel all night long."

"Sure was fun, though."

"Yeah. Guess you can tell what I spent most of my time doing out here. Got bored one day when I was about ten, and Dad just handed me over the keys."

"You mean, it's yours?"

"Sort of. Except anybody that needs it can use it. I'm the one that does most of the driving, though. Take the wheel for a minute, will you?"

I reached over and steered while he pulled his *Ashbury Cougars*

T-shirt off and wiped at the sweat that was starting to roll down the sides of his face. Then he pulled an edge of it over his head and halfway down his forehead before anchoring it down with his ball cap. I had to laugh because it made me think of the Foreign Legion uniforms in one of those old black and white movies.

"You won't think it's so funny when you shrivel up like a raisin later on." He took the wheel, again. "We got almost an hour of this, so you better do the same thing."

"An hour! In this heat, Grampy could die of thirst by then." I took off my hat and started doing a repeat of the Foreign Legion costume. "We should have just hiked on out."

"It was too far. Besides, what good would it be if he had to rescue us? I'd lose points."

"What kind of points?"

"Points on assessing the situation. Sort of a thing Grampy and I have going when I'm out here. He says unless you can tell what's going on by looking at all the clues around it, you don't have half a chance of being a good tracker. Much less a hero."

"He said that?"

"Not since we been here, but he's said it lots of other times."

"So, this whole rescue thing is some kind of a game between you and him? I thought so! I had a feeling back there in the mine you were pulling my leg with all this."

"I'm not pulling your leg! That's how he used to train people to survive in the desert. By putting them in different situations where they had to survive."

"You mean he's laying traps for us? Oh my aching foot! What is he—crazy? That's what everybody in town says, they say he's—"

"He's not crazy. He's a hero!"

"I hate to tell you this, Boone, but everybody goes crazy when they get old. Even heroes. It's just the way things are."

"Only if you eat too much processed food and don't get enough fresh air. That's what Grampy says. Think about it, Hud. Nobody used to go crazy when they got old in the olden days. Just keeled over from a heart attack, or something, and died. Most people didn't

even go to hospitals. Just—" He made a choking sound in the back of his throat and stuck his tongue out. "They just keeled over and died. But Grampy's not dead out there. Believe me. Probably just taking a nap."

"In hundred degree heat?" Every time I started to believe Boone—even a little bit—he popped off with something wild like that.

"Listen," he went on with his theory. "The only reason he'd stop the electric car out there is if it broke down. And since he left early this morning, that means he was probably on his way back. Otherwise, he would have just hiked on up to *Padre Gordo*. But he was still there. See? Now, it's way too hot to walk out here at this time of day, especially with a missing toe. So, I figure he's just laying in the shade of that car waiting for us."

"Why didn't he call us then? If it's a real emergency. I mean there's no mesa or giant boulder in the way to block the signal out in this valley. Just a bunch of dirt and cactus. Even if he only sent us a text message, your phone would have beeped when we were up in the Dragon's Nest all those times."

"Grampy doesn't have a cell phone."

"What?"

"Doesn't believe in them. Not that he couldn't afford it. He could afford to live in a mansion in town, if he wanted to, but he doesn't believe in that, either."

"Well, he must have gold fever worse than me, then. Nobody in their right mind wouldn't believe in cell phones and downtown when they're everywhere you look. Is there anything he does believe in?"

"The code, man. Loyalty and honor. He believes in the code."

"Lot of good it does living out here in the desert all by his self."

"He wasn't always by his self. My Gran was with him at *Padre Gordo* for years. All the way up until the county killed her a year ago."

"Holy crud. The county killed your grandma?"

"That's what Grampy says. But it was more like an accident, really. They made a mistake in her medications when she went in to get her appendix out, and she died."

"Sheesh. That's awful. No wonder he hates the county so much."

"He took it really hard. That's why Mom and Dad decided to move out here for a while. But he's never been the same. He even looks older. Only I figure that's just on account he was sitting around in that boxcar so much, waiting to die. Nothing to live for. Know what I mean?"

"I guess."

"He probably would have been gone a long time ago if he hadn't found that vein in the tunnel. He never would go back to *Padre Gordo* without Gran, though. But that's the only place he could have been headed this morning. Headed there pretty fast, too—didn't even turn his headlamp off—did you see that?"

"Maybe he ran up against a nest of rattlers."

"Grampy's not afraid of rattlers. Nope. Had to be something else."

"What else could it be?"

"Could be he heard the singing bone. But, man, I sure hope not."

Chapter Seven

Curse of the Singing Bone

"...The boy scout, was called by the Indians "Little friend of all the world," and that is the name which every Scout should earn for himself."

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

"What happens when somebody hears that?" We came to the edge of a dry wash that dropped off about fifteen feet into a bed of river rocks, and I couldn't help letting out a holler when Boone went right over the side. "Ho-lee crud!" I practically bit my tongue in half on the landing. "What happened to the road?"

"That's the end of it."

"You coulda warned me. I think I seriously cut an artery here." I grabbed the tail of my shirt and stuffed it into my mouth to soak up the blood.

"Sorry. I keep forgetting you've never been out here before. Probably 'cause you're taking to it all so fast."

I said, "Oh, right," like I believed him about as much as Santa Clause, but it came out more like, "Oh, why," with my mouth full, so it lost some of its punch.

Which made him laugh like I told the joke of the century. Then —on account of Boone has a laugh like a hyena, and no one can

hear it without busting up right along with him—he got me to laughing, too, which only made things worse. I didn't know if I was laughing or howling with pain, so, I had to throw him a side punch just to get him to shut up. It's the only way to stop him when he gets like that, because I think he makes himself, laugh. We finished thumping over the smooth river rocks and, after we crawled up the other bank (that Rhino could climb anything) he reached under the seats.

“Here, see if this helps.” He handed me a bottle of water to rinse my mouth out with.

I tossed the end of my shirt back over my shoulder and gave it a try. “Hot ath bathwater. I'm dyin' here!” That set him off all over, again, and this time I had to resort to a Grampy scowl of my own to stop him.

“OK. OK.” He made a wide easy circle around a towering cactus that had a bunch of chattering gray and white birds sitting all over it. “It was funny. What do you want me to do?”

“Quit making me laugh, that's what.” I put the cap back on the water and shoved it under my seat. No problem figuring out who it belonged to, it had turned pink. “Give me a heads up before you go over anymore cliffs, will you? And tell me about that singing bone thing. If it isn't funny.”

“Nothing funny about it. Only people who are about to die can hear it.”

“Must be just a superstition, then, if there's nobody alive to prove it.”

“Oh, you can prove it, all right.” He started crawling up another steep hill and the Rhino automatically shifted into a lower gear. “I guess I better tell the whole thing from the beginning. All the way back to how the mountain got named *Padre Gordo*.”

“That means fat priest in Spanish, you know. Weird name for a mountain.”

“It got named that because there was this fat priest—way back in the Indian troubles—who was the only one brave enough to go up there. Anybody else tried, they got ambushed by Apaches. Anyway,

he was friends with them because he helped the tribe through the cholera one year, and they paid him with a bunch of gold. They didn't think as much of it as the town people did. I guess because it was all over the place up there."

"Wow."

"They started trading it for supplies the priest would bring up to them. Blankets, mules, food... especially during winter. But I bet you can guess what happened to the town when all that gold started getting rumored around."

"Gold fever."

"Big time. But those Apaches were fierce and still wouldn't let anyone else up there. So, all of a sudden, everybody in town wanted to be friends with the fat priest. Even the crusty old railroad workers started going to church. That old priest wasn't stupid, though. Only thing he'd do is pay good wages to build up the town. That's how Ashbury got its start."

"In school they just said it sprung up as a railroad town in the late eighteen hundreds."

"Ever notice how they leave all the exciting stuff out of history books? I'm telling you the truth here. Just the way it was passed down through my family all these years."

"You're not going to tell me you're related to the fat priest, are you? Because, in case you forgot, it was only the day before yesterday you said your family didn't start working the mine until the Great Depression. Honest-to-crud, Boone, you lie enough to write books!"

"We're not related to the fat priest. Did I say that? The truth is, we're sort of related to Henry Ashbury."

"The founder of the town? What do you mean sort of? Either you are, or you aren't."

"Listen. That wasn't his real name. We can't trace that side of our family back any farther, see, because nobody really knew who he was or where he came from. He was just some orphan kid the fat priest raised up and gave the name of the town to. Priests don't use their real names, either. Besides that, what kind of a last name would

fat be? Kid would have been made fun of by everybody. Bump.”

“What? Whoa!” I grabbed the handhold attached to the roll-bar beside me and hollered, “Uh-oh. Look. Ooowwww!” as we thumped into a deep ten-foot crater, practically at hyper speed, and then launched off the rim on the other side, right up into thin air. But this time I had my mouth shut when we crashed down, so it wasn’t too bad. Except I was starting to think Boone was worse than his mother when it came to speeding up for bumps instead of slowing down. I was probably going to feel like I’d been through the spin cycle of a washing machine before we ever got to *Padre Gordo*.

“Like I say, he was an orphan. But he was like a son to the fat priest. Which is why he was the first person to actually hear the singing bone.” He looked over at me like I should have maybe got the picture but I didn’t. “The fat priest’s bones! He died up there, see?”

“You mean, after all that, the Indians killed the fat priest?”

“No, they buried him. He died up there on one of his trips and they buried him.”

“How can anyone hear a bone sing six feet under? Bones can’t sing, anyway.”

“I thought you told me you had Indian blood.”

“I do, but that’s ancient history. And we come from plains Indians, not desert Indians. What do I know about the way they did things around here? We didn’t even move to Ashbury till dad got the job to run the library, last year.”

“What about your passed-down things? Don’t you have any stories about them?”

“The only things I get passed down to me are a watch from my great-grandpa that worked on the railroad, and an old set of encyclopedias. The watch still keeps good time, and the encyclopedias came over the Oregon Trail. That’s all I know about them.”

“Man.”

“So, what’s the big mystery about Indian burials? A lot of people believe in ghosts, too, but that doesn’t mean you can prove it. I sure

never heard anything about bones singing before.”

“Well—” He stopped talking long enough to thread through a patch of giant cactus like a skier doing slaloms in the Olympics, and I had to hold on for that, too. Then he went on with the story. “Most Indians didn’t bury their dead people in the ground back then. They tied them up in the trees. Along with some of their personal things, and a few provisions for their spiritual journey. You know, like jars of food and tobacco —maybe a bow and arrow.”

“Oh, yeah. Sacred burial grounds. Now that you mention it, I do remember reading something about it, once. But it was how they wouldn’t let strangers trespass over any of them because they believed the spirits of the dead were still there.”

“That’s what I’m talking about! You could get yourself a major curse if you stole anything off one of those dead people.”

“Sheesh, who’d want to? Probably stink to high—”

“For the gold. Henry Ashbury stole the gold. But only after he grew up and turned into a bum on account of nobody respected him anymore. And not till he actually heard the singing bone. They say once you hear it, there’s no way on earth you can keep from going up there.”

“Must be some song.”

“Grampy says it’s different for everybody. But it’s always the one thing in their life they wouldn’t hesitate to go for. No matter how dangerous.”

“I guess it would only tempt people who had a gold problem, then. Like gambling, sort of. The kind that just can’t help it.”

“That’s the thing, though. It isn’t always gold. It wasn’t gold for Henry Ashbury.”

“What was it?”

“He started hearing the fat priest hollering for help.”

“Holy crud.” All of a sudden I felt the goose-bumps pop out all over me like telling too many spook stories on Halloween. “It’s a good thing it’s daylight out here because that gives me creeps, Boone. Seriously.”

“So, of course he had to high-tail it up to *Padre Gordo* just to

make sure. They say that's when he found the actual mother lode. The Indians buried the priest practically right on top of it. That's how much they respected him." He leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "You might say they thought gold of him. Get it?" Then he started laughing, but I side-punched him, again, before it got catching. "Ow! That's what my dad always says. Pretty funny, huh?"

"Hilarious. What's a mother lode?"

"The main vein of a gold mine. The source for all the little veins. Like an artery getting it's blood straight from the heart."

"Are you saying the fat priest's bones led him to the artery?"

"They did but they didn't. See, he was standing on it, but he didn't know what he was standing on. Besides that, he was totally freaked about those bones. The story is, the priest's voice kept getting weaker and weaker the closer he came to them. When he finally got there, it wasn't much more than a sigh and a moan sort of sound that could have just been the wind whistling through the bones."

"There's always an explanation for those things. That's my theory."

"Well, it scared the bejitters out of him. Thought maybe it was a sign he was gonna die. Which he did, but not right then."

"Did the Indians get him?"

"Nope. And this is the best part. See, right when Henry felt like he was being watched and figured it was all over for him, who should come walking up but the priest's old mule? And, get this, her saddle bags were still full of gold! When those Indians saw that, they started treating Henry just like the fat priest. Like he was a god, or something. On account of they'd been trying to catch that white mule for years, only she kept disappearing somewhere into the mountain whenever they got too close to her. Never could figure it out."

"So, what happened to Henry?"

"Henry came walking back into town with the fat priest's gold and the mule and everything. Figured he better finish what the priest had on his mind, or he'd be haunted by him till all eternity."

“Finish building up the town?”

“Yep. The gold in those saddlebags paid for the hospital, the library, the city park, and a little ranch on the outside of town for orphan kids.”

“Sure doesn’t sound like a curse to me.”

“It wasn’t a curse till some of the town people talked him into going back up there for more gold. Only seeing as how he wasn’t the smartest guy that ever lived, the only gold left that he could find was the couple of chunks the Indians had tucked up next to the fat priest’s bones when they buried him.”

“Uh-oh.”

“But by that time, he figured he’d done plenty enough for a town that treated him like dirt most of his life. And since he hadn’t been haunted by the fat priest anymore after he finished the orphan ranch, I guess you could say he thought his obligations were over. So, he told the town the Indians wouldn’t trade any more gold with him, because he wasn’t a real priest, and they weren’t giving away any secrets where to find it, either. Then he took off for Colorado.”

“Big mistake.”

“Yeah, nobody believed him. Mostly because he kept sending money back to the lady who ran the boarding house where he had lived in Ashbury. So much that she built an ice-cream parlor onto her place and never had to take in boarders, again. Of course, the town people said it was way too much money just for appreciation. If you know what I mean.”

“Maybe he was rich by then and just liked to help people who had been nice to him.”

“Maybe. Anyway, that’s how the rumors got started that she was his girlfriend. So, they all treated her real nice after that. Because they figured Henry would be back whenever he needed more gold. Hey, do you have any oranges left in your backpack? I’m starved, again.”

“Well, did he come back, or didn’t he?” I reached behind the seat for my backpack and started digging through. “I have three.”

“Peel me one, will you? I hate drinking hot water when I’m

thirsty.”

“So does everybody else, Boone.”

Half a hyena laugh popped out of him then but he stifled it.

“Some joke.” I hiked the orange peels out into the desert one by one. “Go on, what happened to Henry?”

“Oh, he came back, all right.” He took the section of orange I handed over, stuffed it in his mouth and kept talking. “Didn’t prove any rumors, though. Mostly because, by that time, ol’ Maude Louise had got fat as a house from eating too much of her own ice cream.”

Which struck me really funny for some reason and we both busted out laughing this time. Boone laughed so hard the Rhino slowed down to a crawl and practically stalled out on the next rise before he gunned it and we shot up to the top like a cork popped out of a bottle. That thing had some power! The lurch back onto level ground made me drop the orange onto the floorboards, but I used the three-second rule and picked it up anyway. Those oranges were the only things we had left to eat out here. I went back to dividing off sections, again.

Boone was eating about three to my one, on account of I had to practically choke myself sticking them far enough back in my throat to keep the juice from burning my severed tongue. All right, so it wasn’t totally severed, it just felt like it. And talking so much about ice cream made me suddenly wish I had some. Chocolate with fudge swirls. Out there on the desert in the hundred degree heat had me fixating on triple-dip cones of that famous slow-churned chocolate with fudge swirls you could get downtown at *Mad Maude’s*.

“Hey!” I almost choked on a piece of orange and had to spit it out in my hand. “What did you say the ice cream lady’s name was? Maude, right? There’s still an ice cream place called *Mad Maude’s*, downtown!”

“They didn’t start calling her that till after Henry died of pneumonia. She was so upset she ran up into *Padre Gordo* all by herself. No one saw her for five whole years. Indian troubles were all over by then, though.”

“Wow.”

“Course some people had the idea Henry told her where the gold was before he died. But most people just thought she was crazy. They said nobody in their right mind, especially if they had plenty of money already from selling ice cream, could survive that long by themselves up there without going stark raving mad. Mad Maude.”

He stopped talking for so long I thought that was the end of it. Except I still didn't get the part about a singing bone that kept on hollering out to people after all these years. He hadn't even told me who found the gold. I knew someone found it because that Singing Bone Mine was famous enough to get into the history books at school, too. On account of all the gold some company got out of it. No exciting parts about that, either. The whole story got shrunk down to one sentence that said, “*During its operation from (something to something, heck, I'm no genius at remembering dates), the Singing Bone Mine uncovered the fifth largest gold deposit in the state of Arizona.*”

“She wasn't crazy, though,” Boone said all of a sudden. “She was probably the smartest lady in our whole family. Because she didn't just find the gold, she—” The Rhino choked, sputtered, and started slowing down to a slow roll. “Oh, no!” He threw off his Foreign Legion get-up and knocked himself in the head. “I can't believe this! I forgot to—” We came to a dead stop. “Oh, my gosh!” He dropped his head down on the steering wheel like somebody shot him and moaned. “We're only halfway there and WE'RE OUT OF GAS!”

Chapter Eight

Stranded

“Manly fellows know how to give and take, and they manage to keep their tempers when small things go wrong.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

“This is going to cost me big points with Grampy!” he muttered against the steering wheel.

“Holy crud, Boone! We could die out here in this heat and you’re talking about game points with Grampy! Call 911! Get a helicopter out here! Seriously!”

“Are you kidding? I’d call Mom first.” He undid his seat-belt and did a three-sixty, looking in every direction to figure out where we were. “I’d be making pizzas for the rest of my life for free if I called the county in on Grampy. Not to mention my dad wouldn’t be too proud of me, either.”

“Let me call my dad, then, I didn’t make any deals.”

“That’s the same as doing it, myself.”

“Boone, we’re in trouble here!”

“No, we’re not.” He put his Foreign Legion gear on, again, and hopped out. “I have lots of survival stuff in the back. Never go anywhere without it.”

“What good is that? We can’t sit out the rest of our lives here! Think about it. We’d just end up calling for help anyway, right? So, the smart thing is to call right now.” He started rummaging around

behind the seats and didn't answer. I figured at least he was listening, so I kept trying to convince him. "You know. Before we run into a rattler—or get attacked by rabid coyotes—or bears or something."

I looked around at where we had ended up. Nothing but the same stuff we had been traveling through. A few giant cactus standing like traffic cops with one hand up and the other directing traffic. A dry river gulch a few yards off to the side. And a bunch of whoop-dee-doods all around that stretched out so far in the distance they plunged straight into the heat waves just under the horizon. Not a good place to die.

"I'm telling you, we don't need any help," Boone insisted. "We just have to get a decent camp set up for the night. Before Grampy gets here."

"Grampy, you said he's waiting for us to save him!"

"Not if I give him the signal he won't be. Scout around for some dried up pieces of sage or cactus, will you?" He unfolded a green army shovel. "I gotta dig a fire pit."

"How about I dig the pit, and you scout around? I can't outrun hazards with my gimp leg. You're way better at singing *Dixie*, anyway."

He threw me one of his don't-be-a-wimp looks.

So, I had to insist, "Seriously. I'll probably need the county nurse to take a look at me when she comes out. On account of it's unhealthy for somebody with heatstroke to have a swelled foot, a cracked knee, an infected blister, and a severed tongue all at the same time."

"OK, OK." He handed over the shovel, then gathered up a bunch of little rocks and stuffed them into the pocket of his shorts. Boone had a decent pair of khaki shorts to keep cool in while I was still running around in ripped jeans with my underwear hanging out. "You better collect some of these, too, Hud. Then if you hear a rattler—"

"Oh, holy crud."

"You just toss a couple in that direction and it'll go away."

“If I hear a rattler I’ll be hollering, help!” I jammed the point of the shovel into a flat space of ground about twenty feet away and winced at the sting that shot through my blister. “So, don’t even think about going out of sight!” I shifted over and tried to do the next shovel-full left-handed. “You hear me, Boone? I don’t want to be stuck out here all by my—”

“Boone?” I straightened up and looked all around but he was gone already. “BOONE!”

I might have been worried if I hadn’t heard a stifled hyena-laugh coming out from behind the nearest whoop-dee-doo. That’s when I realized what kind of friend he was. He really was watching out for me. I knew that because, even though I couldn’t see him, I could hear him rustling all around me everywhere. And while I was supposed to think he was just making enough noise to give any snakes plenty enough time to crawl away, he was never more than a rock throw away from where I was. He was watching my back.

It took us all the way till sunset to set up our camp.

By that time, we had a fire smoking away in the pit. I say smoking because that was the signal to Grampy that we were in trouble. To do that, we just had to make sure we kept enough green stuff thrown on every once in a while. I was surprised at how much fuel there was for a fire out in that desert. There were tons of bushes. Some clumps as wide and tall as a man. Dead tumbleweeds lying around. There was even a busted up dead saguaro not far away (those things can grow up to fifty feet high) and they have sort of a skeleton of actual wood inside them. Indians around here used to build houses with the ribs.

Can’t anymore, on account of they’re protected now. There’s plenty of busted up dead ones lying around, though, and it’s all right to use them in cases of emergency. Not that they fall over and get busted up when they die. It’s just that before they got protected, people got a kick out of busting them up. Which is kind of sad, considering the big ones have been around since the Indian days. They live to be about a hundred and fifty years old, and take a way long time to grow.

I was the one responsible for the fire. On account of I totally surprised Boone (and I mean totally) by starting it without matches. I don't know what the big deal was, I just followed the instructions I read in Sir Robert's book. I set it up just like he said, and then made a spark by using the flint fire-starter I always carry around in my pocket. Boone said he had been practicing for years to get one going that fast. Mostly because he never had the patience to follow each step. Which I didn't exactly get. I mean, how much patience does it take to try something that gets you there faster in the long run?

He got me back on the rabbit trap, though. Like I really believed he had enough tracking skills to find an actual rabbit trail. Or that his crazy loop-de-loop string he set up across it was strong enough to catch one. Then again, everything looked the same to me out there, and he had been studying the terrain for years. Not to mention he had the advantage of someone like Grampy to show him how it was done.

After we set up our campsite, the next important thing we had to do was find a water source. Even though we had plenty enough bottles under the seats. Boone said he would make up for all the points he lost on this rescue if he could locate water close by. I had to mention I didn't think the county would look too highly on a point game, even a survival game, as a genuine emergency. Besides that, I was starting to really like those saguaros (sometimes they looked sort of like people), and wouldn't want to sacrifice something that had been around since Tombstone just for a couple of extra points.

"You crack me up, Hudson! This isn't cartoons. You can't just stick a straw in a cactus and get water out. Even the Special Forces guys don't bother taking the time. They just hack up a few thin slices and carry them around in their pockets to chew on as they walk. Most of what we have out here is so big and tough, you'd have to have a machete to bust them open. Or at least a hand-axe. Which I do, but there's easier ways to find water. Especially this close to *Padre Gordo*."

That was another advantage he had over me. Knowing just

where and how far to dig down into that dry riverbed until he hit wet dirt. After that, he suspended an empty plastic water bottle above it with a couple of forked sticks, and then set up a little funnel to drain any condensation into another one set off to the side. I figured we'd be old as Moses before we ever got a drink out of that, but he surprised me on that one, too.

"Must be a paradise up at *Padre Gordo* to get so much water this close to the surface down here." By that time we were tying off the ends of a blanket (tying a knot in a blanket is harder than it looks) so we could attach a couple of ropes onto the knots to make a hammock. "I mean, there's water starting to drip into that empty bottle, already. What's up there? A year-round waterfall or something?"

"Something like that." We had already stretched one blanket out between the roll-bar on the Rhino and the nearest tall cactus about six feet away. *Taa-daa!* We had a hammock to sleep in that was up off the ground and safe from hazards. So, while I was tying off my end for the next one, he hopped up into the finished one for a test run, and fell flat on the ground. "Ow! Ow! Right on top of a rock! You said you knew how to tie knots."

I had to laugh—I couldn't help it—because I'd been falling off things all day and he hadn't hit bottom once. "I do but I'm under sort of a handicap with my hand in a sock."

"Well, I better retie yours." He got up slow. "We dump Grampy like that and he might put us to working in the hole."

"That sounds like something out of a horror movie. You know that? And I'll tell you, Boone, I sure hope I find something to admire about him as much as you do pretty soon. Because so far, he's been about as friendly as a snake. Hires us to help him and then acts like we're the enemy. Wouldn't even let us help him across the porch!"

"Help him? You gotta be kidding me. No wonder you ended up on your butt so much. Man, I was trying to knock him into that hole." He started with the hyena laugh but this time I did not think it was funny. None of this was funny anymore.

"Your mom said to help him across the porch."

“Mom doesn’t know half what goes on between me and Grampy.”

“Well, do you mind letting me in on some of it? I don’t enjoy getting knocked on my butt, you know. And what’s this with the points? What do you earn with them? The fifty bucks?”

“His respect.”

“That’s it? Man. Then what am I killing myself here for? What do I care if that old man respects me? What do I—”

All of a sudden there was a scream. The scariest, most blood-freezing sound I ever heard, coming from somewhere off in the desert. I never experienced anything like that before in real life, but I heard it enough times on TV to know exactly what it was, and it scared the pants off me. I mean, hysterics. Totally. Before I knew it, I was hollering my head off. Just like in the movies. Which I am way not proud of, now, but I’m telling the truth, here.

“More wood! Hurry, Hud! We gotta get more wood on the fire! More wood! More wood!” Boone wasn’t hollering like me, but he was hopping around like he just landed in the sticker patch. “Hurry! Keep throwing wood. I’m going for the flares!”

“Holy crud!” I yelled after him. “You can’t kill a mountain lion with a flare! Don’t you have a gun in there?”

“Heck, no, my folks won’t let me.” He hurried back from behind the Rhino with an armload of red roadside flares and dropped them at my feet. “If I went around popping off everything that scared me they’d have put me in one of those juvenile places a long time ago.” He lobbed another chunk of saguaro wood into the pit and jabbed at the blaze until sparks shot up into the darkening sky.

“I’d rather be in one of those places right now.” I grabbed a flare and felt around for the paper end to peel off but it was getting too dark to see, so I started banging it on the nearest rock, instead.

Boone looked at me like I was crazy. “Hey! What do you think that is? A can of biscuits?”

“How does it open, then? I never changed a tire!” I threw it back onto the pile. “What good is it anyway? Call 911!”

“You only light one off if you can see him. Otherwise it’s a

waste. Gotta be close enough to scare him.”

“I’m close enough. You get me out of here! Give me the phone, Boone!” I lunged for his pocket but he danced backward before I could grab it.

“I said we’re not calling 911!”

Those words did something to me. All of a sudden I felt like a bull busting into a rodeo ring. I charged him so fast he didn’t have a chance to get away this time. I plowed into him with the force of a freight train. It caught him by surprise and knocked him on his own butt long enough for me to grab the phone out of his pocket and back off quick. Only I fumbled trying to get it open with my left hand. I could hear him coming at me, and just as I jumped out of his reach, it rang.

For a minute, we both froze.

Then he snatched it away on the second ring and held up a hand for quiet. “Hi, Mom. Eight-fifteen? I guess I wasn’t watching the time.”

I made wild signs like I was begging and mouthed the words, “TELL HER TO COME AND GET US!” only Boone turned around and ignored me.

“Sure, everything’s fine. We’re camping out under the stars tonight. Grampy?” He turned back around and this time I shook my fist at him for warning. “Grampy’s out checking the rabbit trap, right now.”

That did it.

I leaned my head back and yelled, “HELP! HELP, MIZ BOONE! HELP!” at the top of my lungs. Boone’s mouth dropped open—like I had just betrayed him to the Nazis—and he let the phone down slow from his ear like he couldn’t believe it. Just in time for me to hear his mom say, “Let me talk to William, Jeffie.”

Saved.

I grabbed the phone from him and could hardly choke out the words I was so relieved. “Miz Boone!”

“What’s going on there, William? I’m sure you’re smart enough to know how important it is not to holler wolf when someone is

trusting you to—”

“I’m not joking, Miz Boone! I swear! There’s a—A MOUNTAIN LION OUT HERE! And Grampy’s probably too dead to—”

There was the snap and crackle of something coming up behind me and I let out a holler like somebody was killing me. I spun around and raised my arm up at the same time to ward off the fatal spring (you can’t ward off a mountain lion at that point, it was just a reaction) and... came face to face with Grampy, instead. He came walking into the ring of our firelight like the devil himself, leaning on a cane in one hand, and holding up some bloody skinned thing with the other. He was looking right at me. Shaking with laughter, only no sound was coming out.

For one split second I thought he was a ghost.

Which made a scream worse than a mountain lion start to build up in my chest. But about the time I opened my mouth to let it rip, I caught sight of Boone doing the silent begging routine at me. He had his hands clasped together and was mouthing the words, “DON’T TELL! PUH-LEEEZ. PUH-LEEEZ! DO NOT TELL!”

Chapter Nine

A Time of War

“As a backwoodsman you must, of course, be able to cook your own food—you can’t lug your mother about with you to do it!”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

The last thing Grampy looked like was dead. He handed the bloody thing off to Boone and held his other hand out for the phone at the same time. I handed it over.

“Amelia? Boy’s never been camping before, that’s all. We’ll get him straightened out.”

Never been camping? Of course I’ve been camping! Two summers ago my family went on a trip to Yellowstone National Park and we stayed there for a whole week. There were a few too many people (you could hear coughs, sneezes, and other things coming from neighbor’s tents on every side) but it was camping all right. We had sleeping bags and everything. Dad even cooked us hamburgers over the fire. Being stranded out in the desert because you ran out of gas in a hundred degree heat was way far from camping, as far as I was concerned. That old man was exaggerating.

“I lost a toe, Amelia, I didn’t break my leg.”

Silence, except for the crackling fire.

“I don’t need to be sitting around that boxcar with my foot up when I got things to do. It’s a hundred and forty degrees in there,

anyway. If I feel like putting my feet up, I'll do it at *Padre Gordo*."

Long silence this time, except for Boone clattering around at the back of the Rhino, doing something. It had cooled off a lot now that the sun had gone down. I went over closer to the fire, got a face full of smoke, and moved around to the other side. The breeze coming off the desert that hit me then had the same delicious smell as last night, and, all of a sudden, things didn't look so bad. Especially with an adult around. Even if it was only Grampy.

"No, I haven't got over anything," he said into the phone. "I just feel like putting my things in order. So, it's good the boys are here to help."

His things in order. I knew what that meant. It was what old people did when they thought they were going to die. Usually the last thing they did. I threw a look over at Boone, who poked his head out from behind the Rhino at the same time to mouth "I told you!" at me.

"I'm not being morbid, I'm telling you how it is." Pause. "Never felt better in my life." Another pause. "We'll go easy on him. Right. Now, quit being so bossy and put your own feet up somewhere, Everything's fine." Click. He didn't even say good-bye.

"Well, Junior." Grampy looked around at our camp for a minute, taking everything in. "I might have something to say about how many times it'll take before you remember to check that gas can before you take off. Except I took off half-cocked myself this morning and forgot to charge the batteries on the rail car."

Boone walked up to him slow, carrying a frying pan full of cut up meat, and asked, "Left your headlamp on, too. How come you did that?"

"Shoot, that makes two things I forgot today." He hung his cane on one of the hammock ropes, then sat down in it and leaned against Boone's backpack stashed at the end (to keep bugs from crawling in). He put his feet up slow and made himself comfortable. "I figure that makes us about even."

"How come you took off to *Padre Gordo*, Grampy?"

"I'll tell you about it after supper. Did a lot more walking than I

planned today, so I'm gonna take a little nap first. Have to fry that meat, now, since you got a regular bonfire going over there. You'd need a spit halfway to the moon to get on top of it."

"We heard the slewfoot out there somewheres."

"I told you he's not interested in campfires. Or you either. Couldn't get close to him even if you tried. That old cat doesn't have enough teeth left to take interest in a couple of brawling boys. What's wrong with you two, anyway?"

"Hudson, here, wanted to call out the county!"

Now, what kind of a friend was that? Sheesh. He didn't even try to cover anything over. Just popped right off and told somebody who hates the county that I wanted to call out the county. The old man threw me an iron look over the top of Boone's head. Then he did the silent laughing thing, again. Which felt even worse than being in trouble, because I do not like being made fun of. Making fun of people is way rude in our family.

"Boy, you are one sorry looking sight!" he finally managed to say.

"Only on account of Boone Junior, here, has been getting a big kick out of running me wild all day! Knocking me on my butt and everything else."

"Man's gotta watch out for his own butt, I guess. But I don't hold with any fighting in the ranks. Hear me boys?" He folded his hands over his chest and closed his eyes. "Especially during a time of war."

"The war's a long way away," I muttered.

"That's what most people think."

He was quiet for so long after he said that, I tiptoed over to where Boone was shaking half a can of pepper on top of all that meat before setting the whole pan on top of a grill. Even with the grill the flames were shooting up out of the fire pit about two feet past it, and when he shoved on the pan, they spread out all around it like a fire flower with a big black middle.

He backed off and wiped his hands on his shorts. "Want to help me cut up potatoes?"

“Left-handed, I might cut off a finger.” I felt sort of sulky because, hey, ratting out a friend is a big deal to me.

“Don’t be that way, man. What was I supposed to do?”

“Didn’t have to blurt everything out like that.”

“Well, he came right out and asked me. Grampy and I have a thing going. I don’t lie to him and he doesn’t lie to me. It’s part of the code.”

“Yeah, thanks for letting me—”

“I didn’t have time to let you in on it, did I. Came out of nowhere like an Indian, just like he always does. Probably got a big kick out of watching us for a while first, too.”

“Shhh!” I looked back at the hammock but it was too dark to see if his eyes were open or not. “What if he isn’t asleep, yet?”

“He’s asleep. He can drop off instant whenever he wants to. Have to be careful though, ‘cause he can wake up just as fast when you’re not expecting.”

I sat down on a big flat rock a couple feet away (out of the smoke) and watched Boone rustle back and forth between the Rhino and the fire. After a while he came back with some barbecue tongs and moved the red-hot pan over enough to get a pot of chopped up potatoes on the grill next to it. Then, when he went to turning the pieces of meat over in the frying pan, grease started to pop out everywhere. He looked pretty silly hopping around, trying to keep out of the way. The other sides of that meat looked like black lumps of charcoal by then, and I couldn’t help laughing when he sputtered out, “Dang!” and shot a worried look over at Grampy.

“You come try if you think it’s so funny!” he snapped at me. “You could at least carry stuff over so I don’t have to keep going back and forth like a duck in a trap shoot.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.” I felt a whole lot better after a belly-laugh. Besides that—burnt on one side, or not—that food was starting to smell better than a restaurant.

Which was probably why I found it so interesting to watch exactly what he was doing. With a mom and three sisters at my house, I wasn’t allowed to mess with the kitchen. The only thing I

knew how to make was popcorn. The kind you put in the microwave.

“Bring me a couple of those water bottles. Not the one you turned pink.”

I don’t know how I was supposed to see pink in the dark, but I got them from under the driver’s seat and figured they were pretty safe. He emptied both of them on top of the potatoes, went crazy with the salt and pepper again, and then scooped a big glob of something gray out of an old coffee can and dropped it in.

“What the heck was that?” I’m not a picky eater, but sheesh.

“Bacon grease. Makes everything taste good. That’s what my Gran used to say.”

“Oh.” Even if I didn’t agree, I wasn’t about to criticize his grandma. Not after what he told me about the county thing and Grampy never getting over it. I knew for a fact Mom, and even my sisters, always drained all the grease off stuff and pitched it down the sink at our house. But I didn’t say a word.

After that, he took the tongs and started tossing all the meat chunks into the pot, on top of the water and potatoes. That fire was still so hot, they were already black on the other side, too. Then he put a lid on everything. He grabbed a dishtowel that was lying close by and moved the empty fry pan off the fire and onto a rock, all the time saying, “Ah. Ow. Oh.” And then when it crashed down too hard and some hot grease splashed out, “Ow! Dang.”

“Get me the rest of the coffee cans, will you?” He pulled a giant spoon out of his back pocket and started stirring the grease around like he was in a race to see how many circles he could make before I got back with them.

When I went to the back of the Rhino, I saw an opened-up wooden box standing on end on top of the tailgate. Inside, it was like a kitchen cupboard. There were containers of mustard, ketchup, and pickles—even pancake syrup. Lots of stuff all sitting on a couple of shelves built into it. I grabbed the three coffee cans off the bottom and headed back.

Boone took one, opened it up and looked inside. “Just coffee, I

don't need it." and handed it back to take another. He opened that one and looked. Then grabbed a whole handful of something white (flour, I guess, it was too powdery to be sugar) and threw it into the grease. The last can was full of something brown and he just took half a handful of that and threw it in. "OK, put them back, then bring the plates and forks."

Plates and forks were in another open box that was for the coffee pot, pans, and dishes. I counted out three metal pie-pan looking things (cross between a bowl and a plate), and grabbed three forks out of a plastic jar full of silverware. By the time I set them on the rock, Boone was sitting on the ground with his back leaned up against another big rock, looking up at the stars.

"You ever wonder if there's life on other planets, Hud?"

"Sometimes." I sat down next to him and looked up. "Mostly I just like picking out constellations. Like Orion there. See? I always find him first."

"The warrior. Yeah. His sword points to the big dipper. Did you know you can find your way out of anywhere as long as you can locate the big dipper? That's how you find the north star. You can go anywhere if you know where north is."

"I read that's how sailors used to go all around the world. Just navigating by the stars."

"Yeah, Grampy says you can get yourself anywhere as long as you can see the stars."

"Yeah."

The potato pot started to hiss and boil over but Boone just sat there, not paying any attention to it. "You scared of ghosts, Hud?"

"I'm not scared of anything on TV. Except the news, sometimes. If you're asking me if I ever saw a ghost in real life, though, the answer's no."

"That's good. Because *Padre Gordo* is a ghost town."

"Tombstone's a ghost town, too." I pulled a sharp rock out from under me and tossed it aside. "All kinds of stories about ghosts that haunt that place, on account of all the shoot-outs and stuff that went on there. But I've been there lots of times and I never even got the

creeps.”

“Me, too. *Padre Gordo* is a real ghost town, though. Not a soul left living in it anymore. No tourists, either. Not many people even know about it, and the ones that do don’t think it’s worth the hike up there just to see a bunch of old broken down buildings. Nobody’s been up there since—heck, nobody’s ever been up there in my lifetime.”

“So, what’s Grampy want to go there for? Is that where the singing bone is?”

“Naw. That’s way up on the mountain. Where the fat priest is. You want to see his bones?”

“Not really.”

“Don’t blame you. I never have, either.” He folded his hands behind his head and looked up at the stars, again. “ Heck, I don’t even know how to get up there.”

“Sheesh, Boone—how were we supposed to rescue Grampy this afternoon if you didn’t know how to get there?”

“I’m just glad we didn’t have to go. Because to tell you the truth, my tracking skills don’t even come close to Grampy’s, and I been working on them for years.”

“Man—what if he hadn’t been able to find us!”

“Grampy can track anything.”

“Not when he’s passed out or dead, like you told me he was.”

“He’d have sent up a signal if he was in bad trouble. I was just hoping to catch up on some points.”

“Well, thanks for telling me that, Boone. Thanks a heap!”

All of a sudden, there was a sound like a couple of ladies screaming, and I could practically feel the hair rise up on top of my head. If I was to try and imagine what some tortured ghost sounded like, that’s how it would be. I knew it was just a coyote pack running close by somewhere, though. They were everywhere. I can even hear them from our house sometimes.

They slink in from the desert and raid the town every night. Eat left out dog food, tip over garbage cans—that sort of thing. They’re shy of people and never bother anybody. Except the rabid ones, of

course. Get bit by anything rabid and you'd have to go through a torture of shots every day just to get cured. If it's one thing I hate is shots.

I listened for a few minutes before the noise started to fade away like they were making a big wide circle around us. No rabid ones in that pack, then. Rabid things aren't afraid of anything. They'll even jump a fire. I let out a long breath of relief and looked over at Boone, thinking he must have nerves of steel not to feel at least a few jitters listening to all that howling and wailing. Then I saw why. His mouth was hanging open, his eyes were shut tight, and he was off sawing Z's.

Great. The one person in the group who wouldn't know a hazard before it sneaked up and bit him, and I was the only one awake.

Chapter Ten

Swearing In

“It is chivalry to do one's duty to God and the King, to help women and children, and all people in distress; and to be plucky and brave in carrying out one's duty.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

The first thing I noticed was the potato pot wasn't hissing and steaming anymore. A person didn't have to be a genius to figure out the bottom was going to look worse than those black chunks of meat if it didn't get moved off the fire. So, I moved it. Then I just stood there for a while, feeling like the last person left on the planet. But I sure wasn't going to act like a wimp and wake everybody up right away.

Heck—what was I afraid of?

I was out here with a genuine hero who had a couple of medals for rescuing people. Even if it was a long time ago, he still knew his stuff. If worse came to worst, we could call 911. I mean, if Grampy dropped dead, or something. We had a roaring fire to keep wild things away. Well, it wasn't exactly roaring anymore. So I decided I better chunk in a few more pieces of wood.

The wood pile was on the other side of the fire. The open desert side. Not that there wasn't desert on every side of us. It's just that we had set the camp up between a couple of giant rocks and saguaro cactus, with the Rhino blocking off one end. Now, it felt sort of

protected with the firelight bouncing off everything all around. Except for that open spot on the other side of the fire. It was still in the circle of light, though, so it wasn't like I had to venture out into the dark or anything. Just to the wood pile.

I saw movement.

I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck and it had a ripple effect all the way through me. But about the time I was trying to remember if snakes were night creatures or day creatures, a little bitty mouse scurried out from under the pile. It made a daring run across the circle of light, and then dashed into the safety of the dark on the other side. Sheesh. A little bitty mouse.

I forced myself to walk over to the woodpile. "Get a grip, Hudson," I muttered as I picked up the nearest piece of wood. "This is nothing but a case of mind over matter. That's all. Hear me? Mind over—"

I saw movement.

This time it was out in the dark somewhere. Halfway down into the dry wash near a clump of bushes. Then I thought I heard a snorting sound. Mice don't usually snort. Or cougars, either. Wild pigs do, though, and there were a lot of them around here. I knew that because they wandered into town raiding yards sometimes, too. I also knew they had razor sharp tusks that could rip—

Something way bigger than a pig came up out of that wash. Just like a whale rising out of the ocean. I let loose with a holler before I could even think about getting another grip. Like a belch in public it was over before I could catch it. Which started sort of a chain reaction. Boone yelled loud enough to raise the dead and jumped to his feet like somebody lit his pants on fire. I flew straight past him to get away from the thing (it was right behind me—I could hear it) and knocked Grampy's hammock down a notch right when he was trying to fight his way out of it.

I dove into the Rhino, stood up on the seat, and climbed on top of the roll bar to get someplace safe. All before I actually caught a look at the thing. "Holy crud—" I hollered, "it's the fat priest's mule!"

Boone breathed a loud sigh of relief. “Cripes, Hud—it’s only Miss Jenny!” He jumped down off the rock he had climbed up on and reached for the reins.

“But she rose up out of that wash just like a ghost! With the saddlebags and—”

“Hold it!” Grampy eased himself up off the ground and reached for his cane. “Everybody hold it right there.” We all froze. “Now, Junior, am I hearing things, or does this boy know everything there is to know about the family?”

“Just about.” Boone stood there looking at the old man, tying knots in the reins without even realizing his was doing it.

“Can we trust him?”

“I think so.”

“You think so? What in thunder got into you to bring that kind of stuff up before you knew? Now, we’ll either have to get rid of him or adopt him. One, or the other.”

Get rid of me—all of a sudden my mouth got so dry my sore tongue felt big as a ping-pong ball in there. What the heck did that mean? My folks waited a long time for a son and I was the only one they had. Not to mention I was sort of partial to myself, too. He had to just mean send me home. Right? I didn’t wait to find out.

“I’m sure my dad wouldn’t mind driving out here to get me. He could pick me up at the highway, even. And—hope to die, sir—I’d never breathe a word about the gold!”

“You told him about the gold, too? Junior, I ought to—”

“Listen here, Grampy.” Boone quit messing with the reins and pointed in my direction. “Hud is the best friend I ever had, even if we do fight sometimes. Besides that, he’s a scout.”

“Scouts these days don’t know diddle-y.”

“But he does, I tell you—he even has his own copy of the book!”

“Our book?” Grampy looked over at me then like he was seeing me for the first time. “Where’d you get it, boy?”

“Some place in Indiana”

“Indiana?”

“I bought it off the Internet from somebody in Indiana. My dad helped me.”

“Did you read any of it?”

“Read it twice over, all the way through.”

“He’s got a photographic memory, too,” Boone added quick. “Runs in his family.”

“Then you know what the *Knight’s Oath* is.” Grampy hobbled over to the big rock, like his missing toe was starting to hurt, and sat down.

“It’s what the Knights of Britain used to be sworn in with fourteen—” I felt myself slipping off the roll bar. “Fourteen hundred years ago.”

“I told you he had a photographic memory,” said Boone.

“Then come on over here, boy, and let’s hear it.”

I didn’t know exactly what he was getting at, but I at least knew he wasn’t thinking of popping me off. Not while I was quoting something he respected as much as the *Knight’s Oath*. So, I decided to make it good. I heard once that if you ever wanted to make something look important, do it slow. So, I took my time climbing down off that roll bar. Then I took even more time walking over. When I got about three feet away from him, I lifted up my chin, took a deep breath, and—

“What are you waiting for—Christmas?” Grampy rapped the end of his cane on the ground. “I thought so, you little—”

About that time Boone walloped me across the back and said, “Spit it out, Hudson!” like I had something stuck in my throat.

Which is why I ended up rattling it off like a *now-I-lay-me-down-to-sleep* with all the *god-blesses* thrown in at hyper speed. “*I swear before God, and the Holy Book, that I shall not fight against the King, who now bestows the Order of Knighthood on me. I also swear with all my force and power to maintain and defend all ladies, gentlewomen, widows, orphans, and distressed women; and I shall not run from adventure in any way—or even war—if it’s where I happen to be.*”

“Close enough,” said Grampy, with a twinkle of respect coming

into his eyes. I know that's what it was because I felt it down to my toes. "Now give me the definition of chivalry."

"Uh—it's a combination of the Latin word for cavalry and the French word for horse. So any brave act done by the knights—who rode horses—was called chivalrous. Or, knight-like. Is that it?"

"You know what a knight is?"

"Well, sure. They were like a whole army of protectors that rode around in armor, looking for a fight. Against anything bad, I mean. On account of they were honor-bound to be on the good side. Especially when it came to protecting girls."

"Mmm-hmm." Grampy reached out with the end of his cane and knocked away some crawly thing headed in my direction. I didn't notice it was a scorpion till it rolled onto its feet, again, and headed back toward the desert. Then when I recognized that pointed tail curled up over its back, I sort of felt my knees start to wobble. "And what do you think about all that?"

"I wish we brought the carpet stuff to douse our hammocks with!"

"Not the scorpion, boy, the knights. What do you think about them?"

"Oh, I—" I couldn't help scanning the edge of the firelight after that, in case any more scorpions showed up. "I wish we had some around these days, that's what I think."

"We do. They're called heroes. Junior?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Fish the book out of Miss Jenny's saddle bag and bring it over here."

I knew for a fact Boone Junior always kept that book in his backpack. So, about the time I figured every Boone in the family must have his very own copy of it, I caught a look at what it was. When he held it out to me and said, "All right, raise your right hand," I thought I was going to choke to death right there on the spot.

"Holy crud, Mr. Boone—that's a Bible! If I break a swear off that, I'm liable to be damned for all eternity!"

“What do you think people been swearing off it all these years for?”

“But it’s a sin to use it backwards! I been going to church all my life and I know it is!”

“For cripe sake, boy—who’s asking you to use it backwards?”

“Swearing on it to sin is using it backwards! I can’t swear to lie to the county—my parents work for the county! Lying’s a sin! It’s wrong even if it helps you, that’s what my dad says.”

“Lying to the county—all we’re doing is trying to keep from starting another gold rush here. Junior? What’s this about lying to the county?”

“Well, sir,” Boone tied Miss Jenny’s reins to the front bumper of the Rhino (probably just stalling for time). “It was Hud’s idea.”

If he hadn’t been so far away I’d have side-punched him. On account of he was blaming me to protect his mother. She’s the one that came up with the big idea to lie to the county so they wouldn’t know Grampy was going crazy. Now, he was blaming me for it. He was the one telling the biggest lies around here—just like he always did. So, I decided to blurt out the truth, right then and there. Even if it got us all in trouble. Let him come over here and swear on the Bible. See how he liked it.

I jumped in and let it rip. “I didn’t even know about it till your mom told us to do it! So, how could it be my idea? She’s the one said we should tell that whopper about Grampy living in a big ranch house up on the mountain. It wasn’t—”

“Listen here, Grampy,” Boone interrupted before I could get the whole thing out. “I had to let him think that. See? I didn’t know how far I could trust him then. I sure wasn’t giving out secrets. Honest, I wasn’t! It was the way Mom said it made him think it was lying. But all she said was—Hud and me—we had to tell the county nurse the boxcar was just temporary. You know, so nobody would go snooping around *Padre Gordo*. That’s all it really was.”

“I suppose it was your mom told him to keep an eye out for a fat priest and a ghost mule, too, while he was at it.” Grampy went to tapping his cane on the ground again—sort of irritated-like, this time

—and it occurred to me he might knock one of us over with that thing about as quick as he did the scorpion.

“No, sir.” Boone admitted. “I was the one told him that. But I only told it up to the part about how the mountain got its name. I sure didn’t tell where the gold was.”

“Hmm. What stopped you?”

“We ran out of gas.”

“You mean the only thing that kept you from spilling the beans on the whole family was the Hand of Providence?”

“I guess so. But I knew I could trust him by then, Grampy. Honest, I did.”

“Well, boy,” The old man stopped tapping his cane and looked hard at me. “We don’t believe in telling lies in this family, either. And we sure don’t believe in using the Bible backwards. It just so happens you walked into a situation here that’s gonna take more than a little grit for us Boones to handle. So,” He held the Bible out to me, again. “You in, or not?”

Chapter Eleven

The Mission

“When in difficulty to know which of two things to do, he must ask himself, “Which is my duty?” that is, “Which is best for other people?”—and do that one.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

For one short minute, I hesitated. But it was just enough for Boone’s face to get the same look it did when he thought I was going to desert him last night and go home. Gave me the same punch-in-the-gut feeling, too.

Like as if that was the answer, Grampy set the Bible down on the rock and said, “Give him the phone, Junior, so he can call his dad.”

“Wait—can’t a guy even think about something first? Sheesh—” I looked back at Grampy. “What exactly would I have to swear?”

“Nothing that isn’t in the code.” He picked the Bible up, again. “You just swear you’ll stand by the Boones like you would your own brothers. No matter what. All the way to the very end.”

I touched the cool dark leather as careful as I could, raised my right hand, and said, “I swear I’ll stand by the Boones like I would my own brothers. No matter what. All the way to the very end.”

“That’s it,” said Grampy. He handed the Bible off to Boone, then. “You’re one of the brotherhood, now, boy. So, don’t you never—never—go back on it.”

“I won’t.”

“Can’t just skin out to save yourself anymore, either. From now on you gotta do what’s best for the whole bunch. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

All of a sudden Boone walloped me on the back like I just came in first on the hurdles. “Way to go, Hud!” Then he walloped me, again. “Way to go, man!”

“Now, how long do we have to wait for supper around here?” Grampy knocked some other crawly thing back into the desert. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast and it’s nine o’clock, already.”

“Uh-oh.” Boone raced over to the fire, expecting everything to be burnt up, then gave me a thumbs-up when he realized I took the pot off a long time, ago. “It’s all ready, Grampy. Just have to pour off the water to make gravy.”

I don’t know what came over me since I got out here, but that burnt meat with potatoes and gravy was just about the best stuff I ever tasted. Better than Thanksgiving even. But it wasn’t just me because we were all eating like we’d been starved for three days. Afterwards we did the dishes like I never saw in my life. Just scooped up sand in everything and then rubbed them clean with a dried up piece of bush. I was on my last plate (Boone was doing the pot and pan) when I recognized that same wonderful smell that usually came off the desert.

“Hey—what kind of a bush is this?” I stuck it up to my nose and took a deep breath of it. “I love the smell of this stuff.”

“It’s sage,” Boone tossed his scrawny used-up piece into the fire and got a fresh one. “Grows all over out here. You can crumble it up and cook with it, too. Tastes great. Gran even used to make cough syrup out of it. I like the smell best. Especially after a rain. Makes you feel good all over.”

We packed everything back into the wooden boxes (it was amazing how it all fit into each place in there) and then put the two boxes away in the Rhino. Grampy was settled back on one of the hammocks, again, and I was getting pretty tired, too. Right when I was thinking we were probably going to flip a coin to see who got the other hammock, Boone dragged me back to the fire for hot

chocolate.

“Come on, you don’t want to miss Grampy’s chocolate. It’s so good it’s dessert. Then I’ll take the first watch because I already had a nap.”

“What watch?”

“The fire watch. Somebody has to keep the fire going and watch out for hazards while the others sleep. But we all take turns. Besides that, we haven’t heard what’s going on up at *Padre Gordo*, yet.”

I don’t know why it was called Grampy’s chocolate, because it was Boone that did all the mixing and heating up in the coffee pot. Maybe it was Grampy’s original recipe, or something. Anyway, I never did see him put any milk in there, and it was black as tar when he finally poured it out of the pot. He handed me a tin mug and took one over to Grampy. Then we sat down on one of the rocks closest to the hammock so we could all talk for a while.

“How’s things look at *Padre Gordo*, Grampy?” Boone took a loud slurp off the top of his chocolate because it was still pretty hot. “Everything all right up there?”

“Not if we’re gonna get visitors it isn’t.”

“Hud already swore not to tell. But we don’t have to go there if you don’t want us to.”

“I’m not talking about Hud, I’m talking about the others. I need you two to help me get ready for the rush.”

“All the way up at the hotel?”

I blew on my chocolate to cool it off a little more and gave it a try. It was thick and sweet, with a taste of cinnamon, and—thank gosh I swallowed before I started choking, or I would have sprayed everybody. The stuff was full of hot chili peppers, or something. For a minute, I could hardly breathe.

“You like it?” Boone walloped me on the back, again. “Has a punch, doesn’t it?”

All I could do was nod because my swole tongue felt about to explode. I think maybe my eyes were watering, too, but it was dark enough nobody would notice. If it’s one thing I learned first when we moved to Arizona, it was how much everybody loved hot stuff.

They even put red pepper on pizza around here. But I sure wasn't going to say I couldn't take it because it was sort of a local thing.

"Stuff really grows on you." Boone turned his ball cap backwards so he could get at his better. "Wait and see. What makes you think there's gonna be another gold rush, Grampy?"

"Not talking about a gold rush. That we can handle. Couple days work and we can fix things for that."

"What kind then?"

"Talking about a rush on everything else because of these hard times. I'm talking about a panic run on our stores so we can't do what we have to."

"Like the Great Depression all over, again?"

"Like the end of the world for the first time."

I figured this was going to be the start of a whopper of a story (Boone was always bragging what a great storyteller Grampy was). I even expected him to do the silent laughing thing, again, when he saw the look on our faces after he said that. The end of the world—sheesh—that was worse than ghost stories for giving a person the goose bumps. On account of you could almost believe it, considering what sort of things had been on the news lately. But he wasn't joking.

He was dead serious.

"Boys... " He looked over the top of his tin mug at us and the corner of his mustache gave a nervous twitch. "Gold goes cheap when the food gets scarce."

"What's there gonna be—riots over food?" Boone set his mug down like he couldn't drink any more all of a sudden. "You want us to hide all the food?"

"No, just the source of it. So we can dole it out a little at a time. Town's a lot bigger than it used to be." Grampy took a long drink of his chocolate and thought for a minute. "Gonna be tricky business trying to stretch our resources. But I figure *Padre Gordo* can still handle it. Just like it always has."

"Why can't we just let people dig their own gold out of the river and open up the main shaft, again? Like it was in the Depression.

You sure can't pack enough food away for the whole darn town, Grampy. Think about it. A week or two would be the best you could do to feed everybody. Even if you emptied out all the grocery stores."

"I'm not talking about buying out the grocery stores, Junior. None of them will last long after the first rush, anyway."

My mug felt like it suddenly weighed a ton. I let it crash down with a thump onto the rock beside me, and when some chocolate splashed onto my jeans I could feel the heat soaking in. "Are you saying all the grocery stores in Ashbury are going to run out of food?" I finally came straight out and asked.

"Not just Ashbury, boy—everywhere. Especially after the cities collapse."

"Holy crud—when's that going to happen?"

"Soon as the government stops picking up the slack for everybody and can't pay their bills. When all these little wars roll over into the last big one, and the radicals start lobbing nukes at each other."

"You mean, nuclear bombs? Holy crud, Mr. Boone—that's worse than running out of food! How's anybody going to survive that?"

"Somebody always survives, don't they, Grampy. We just have to keep our heads and hold on, right? Just like we always do." Boone stood up so fast he knocked his mug off the rock, and then kicked some sand over it to clean up the mess. "Somebody always survives. Right?"

"Nobody can survive the end of the world."

"But what about the heroes?"

"Not even the heroes."

It was quiet for so long after that I heard another coyote pack running by somewhere off in the distance. Grampy reached down to set his empty mug on the ground and the ropes made a little creaking sound when he bent over. The fire popped and crackled some. When I looked over at Boone, he was standing there like a statue, staring dead ahead with his mouth open, like he could maybe picture the

whole world gone crazy in his mind.

Then he startled awake from whatever he was seeing—Boone always wakes up in a panic—and said, “Course not right away. Right? We’ve got plenty of time before all that happens. Maybe years before it even starts!”

“It’s started already.” Grampy folded his hands across his chest like he had mentioned tomorrow might be a good day for fishing instead of just announcing the end of the world. “What do you think all these hurricanes and earthquakes are? Weather gone so crazy it freezes in the places it’s supposed to be hot and roasts out the ones that need a good snow pack just to get water? Earth’s started her death throes, that’s what it is.” He sighed a big sigh and looked up at the stars. “And that doesn’t even count what us humans are busy doing to each other.”

This time it was only quiet for a second before Boone exploded. “For cripe sake, Grampy! What are you telling us all this for? If there’s no hope for anybody—man—I’d rather not see it coming! You know? What good is it to scare the spit out of us if there’s nothing we can do about it?”

“I didn’t say there’s nothing we can do about it. I said nobody can survive it. But this old world’s been around for a lot of generations. She could take a long time to kick off all the way. There’s plenty we need to do up till then. Better meet me at the hotel tomorrow so we can start in on it. About seven.” After that he closed his eyes and stopped talking. Sort of like a droid shutting down.

Boone grabbed the sleeve of my shirt and practically dragged me back to the fire.

“He sure can fall asleep fast,” I whispered when we got far enough away so Grampy wouldn’t hear. “Man! One minute we’re talking about the end of the world, and the next he’s dropped off like the conversation got boring. Sheesh.”

“I’m worried about him! Really worried! I think maybe you were right about old people going crazy!”

“He didn’t actually say anything that wasn’t true. But who the heck wants to think about that stuff? It’s like dying. Right? Nobody

wants to think about it. Even though it happens to everybody on the planet sooner or later.”

“Yeah, I bet that’s what this whole thing is about. Dying. Now, I’m sure he’s heard the singing bone! Why else would he drop everything back there in the tunnel and run off so fast?” “Maybe he heard something about the end of the world,” I suggested.

Boone picked up the coffee pot, swished it around a couple of times and tossed what was left out into the dark. “Forget camping or gold digging. I guess he just wants us to meet him at the hotel and get ready for it. Like who’s he think we are? The end of the world—cripes—what can a couple kids do about it?”

“I don’t mind going to a hotel—I could use a shower. I feel like somebody plastered a mask to my face. I feel like I got buried alive and finally dug up. I even feel like—”

“There’s no hot showers up there.” He scooped a handful of sand into the pot and started shaking it around. “I told you it’s a ghost town.”

“Well—” I picked a clump of sage off the nearest bush and handed it to him to scrub with. “It’s going to take way more than a little spit on a rag to fix me up. I even got sand in my pants.”

“Man—will you quit? We’re talking about Grampy, here!”

“Sheesh, Boone, it’s not like we can change his mind, or anything. What do you think going crazy is? It means nobody can talk sense with you anymore. Just like your mom said, Sunday, When they wanted her to talk him into going to the hospital. She’s never been able to talk sense into him. Ever. That’s what she said. Remember?”

“He’s just a little hard-headed. That’s all.”

“You can say that, again.”

He handed me the coffee pot to put away while he stashed the old baking powder can (that was full of Grampy’s hotter-than-fire chocolate powder) back into Miss Jenny’s saddlebag. That old mule didn’t even twitch. Just stood there between the two hammocks where Boone tied her to the bumper, sawing Z’s right along with Grampy. I knew she was old because she had long white hairs

sticking out from her chin. She was like a statue. Except every once in a while she would stamp one of her feet like something was crawling on her. Which made me keep looking down at mine to make sure nothing was headed for me.

Boone signaled me over to the fire, again, so we could talk some more. Right when I was figuring I'd just sleep sitting up in the Rhino if I got the tail end of the coin toss, he said, "Did you mean it when you said you're not afraid of ghosts?"

"I said I never saw one, and I've been to a lot of ghost towns around here. I never got the creeps when I was in them. But that doesn't mean I wouldn't fall all over myself trying to get away if I actually saw one coming at me. Who wouldn't?"

"I don't even have to see one to get the creeps in *Padre Gordo*."

"Why? Was it one of those gun slinger towns? A lot of murders happen there?"

"Naw. *Padre Gordo* wasn't around in those times. It just sprung up after the turn of the century, when Mad Maude started paying people to get the gold out for her. There was a depression back then, too. Not like the Great Depression that went around the whole world. But enough so people were moving around looking for jobs. It was just a town full of regular people who needed work. That's why they all left when the gold started tapping out and the war came along. The war in France."

"So, why does it give you the creeps, then?"

"Because of the stories, I guess. A lot of people have seen ghosts up there, and I'm related to most of them."

"The ghosts?"

"Some. But mostly the storytellers. So, don't make me tell you any of those things, because I don't want us both to be scared." He kicked a huge crawly thing away with his foot, like it was nothing but an ant, and it wiggled about a bajillion legs when it landed on its back.

Now, that gave me the creeps.

"Holy crud—look at the size of that thing! What if it would have flung up on your leg and bit you? Why didn't you use a stick, or

something?”

“It’s just a centipede and they’re not that fast. Most of them don’t even bite.”

“Well, I don’t know how you can be afraid of something you can’t see, one minute, and then bold as iron the next, when some creep thing’s headed for you straight on. What if it was the biting kind?”

“They don’t bite that hard.”

“You mean, you’ve got bit before?”

“Sure, lots of times. Once there was one that crawled right up my—” There was a rustling sound somewhere out by the wash and we both froze. “Man—help me get some more wood before you go to bed. If it’s one thing I hate is scrounging around in the dark all by myself for wood!”

“You still figure to take the first watch, then?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Besides, there’s a few things I still have to think through about my plan to save Grampy.”

“Your plan to save Grampy? How in the world are you going to do that when he’s already got his mind set on putting his things in order? You heard him on the phone tonight—your mom couldn’t talk him out of that, either.”

“I’m not gonna try to talk him out of it.” Now, he got the same sort of look in his eyes that he had when he said we would have to ride the Rhino.. Only with the firelight flickering in them this time, he actually looked like he might be going sort of crazy, himself. “Instead, I’m gonna get rid of that singing bone curse on this family once and for all!”

“What?”

“And you’re gonna help me!”

Chapter Twelve

Ghost Hunters

“The ordinary boy has no chivalry—at least, he has got it all right under the surface, only he is in the silly-ass stage, and he forgets it.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Boone’s plan was seriously crazy. If I hadn’t just sworn on a Bible to stand by his family and do what was best for the whole bunch, I wouldn’t even think about it. Not in a million years. I have never seen a dead person except for on TV. The only skeleton I ever saw (outside of cartoons) was the one Mrs. Hooper brought to science class in a six-foot metal locker so we could learn about our body. Even though she promised it was just a look-alike and really made out of plastic, half the girls wouldn’t even touch it.

But this was way different.

Because Boone had it in his head that if the fat priest’s bones wouldn’t quit hollering out to people who were about to die, we maybe should bury those bones. For all the trouble they caused, he couldn’t figure why somebody hadn’t done it a long time ago. I could think of a few reasons why nobody had. Like the major curse a person could catch for disturbing sacred Indian burial grounds. Or the rumor that messing with people’s graves gives them permission to haunt you. I don’t know if any of that stuff’s true, but I wasn’t too excited to find out.

What I did find out, was that he didn't know exactly where the bones were. Something about him not being old enough before his dad left for the war. I guess it was sort of a Boone family tradition to be taken there for the first time by your dad. Anyway, he had a couple of hunches where we would probably find them, and I guess we would have to start from there. Which I didn't mind so much on account of it would give me time to figure out some things. Like exactly how long Indian curses lasted, and how a person could get rid of one.

It was sunrise when I woke up, and the first thing I noticed was that Grampy was gone, again. It was Boone sleeping like the dead in the other hammock instead of him. The fire only had a few hot coals left in it, and I was pretty sure nobody woke me up to take my turn watching for hazards. Either that or I went back to bed. Sheesh, I hoped not. It was hard enough doing the right thing out here without having to worry about sleepwalking on top of everything else. I admit there have been times when I've had a little problem with that, but it usually only happens when I'm over tired.

Which is exactly what Boone was, because he just grumbled like a zombie, tossed the blankets in a heap behind the seats, then crawled on top of them to go back to sleep. He said I would have to drive because he was way too tired. Not that I minded because I'd been wanting to drive that Rhino ever since I saw it. The only thing was I didn't have a clue where I was going.

"Just follow this old dry riverbed and it'll take you straight to *Padre Gordo*. You can't miss it. Wake me up when we get there."

That was the last I heard from him.

I have to say it was a pretty amazing feeling winding my way in and out of a trackless desert wilderness all by myself when only a few days ago I was home playing games. All right, so I wasn't alone and I was following a trail. It was still the coolest thing I ever did. We had poured a gallon of gas into the tank from a plastic container Grampy brought along for us, last night, and there was plenty more stashed up at *Padre Gordo*. I guess Boone running out of gas was sort of a common thing around here.

I wasn't worried about walking around *Padre Gordo* as much as actually touching those old bones. I wondered if it would make a difference to put gloves on. I figured the only reason Boone was really spooked about the ghost town was because maybe he saw a ghost there, once. Or at least something that looked like one. Then again, maybe he was just upset about Grampy telling us it was the end of the world. I don't mind saying that sort of hit me like an avalanche, too. Mostly because I have a lot of plans for my life. Not to mention the whole scary thought of the idea. Yep. It was easier just to think Grampy was going crazy.

But what if it was true?

If it was, I for sure wasn't going to break any promises. And definitely not one I swore on a Bible. Sheesh. That would be way worse than an Indian curse. So, I guess I would just have to deal with it. The curse, I mean. Because—like Grampy said—nobody can deal with the out-and-out end of the world. No, that wasn't right. He said nobody could survive it. The reason we were headed for *Padre Gordo* right now was so he could show us what to—

All of a sudden I smelled bacon.

Which was really weird because all I could see was desert. No sign of a town anywhere.

“What the—” Boone popped his head up and looked around. “Cripes, Hud—we could walk faster than this!” He crawled up front and buckled himself in. “Step on it, will you? Before Grampy eats all the bacon.”

“You want me to wreck? The only motorized thing I ever drove before was a go-cart on my last birthday. But I'm getting the hang of it.”

“The worst you can do is get stuck. Even if we did wreck we wouldn't get hurt. That's what the roll bar and seatbelts are for. Besides, we're—yuk—we're eating our own dust!” He sniffed, sniffed harder, and then spit over the side. “Come on, this thing will go anywhere. You'd have to drive it off a cliff to wreck it.”

“I'm not sure where I'm—”

“Punch it, Hudson!”

I punched it. Like a little tank shifting down to some serious climbing gear, there was a pause, a clunk, and we started charging up the hill I was only crawling over. We got to the top so fast the front wheels came off the ground for a second and then crashed down with a bang. When we started to race down the other side I was scared stiff, but I was trying so hard to steer I forgot to holler. We hardly got to the bottom before we started plowing up another steep place that was even worse than the last one.

We were bouncing along so fast and hard over little rocks, it was all I could do to swerve around the big ones without crashing into them. “Maybe we should get out of this riverbed.”

“Heck no, this is the the only way I know to get there. Take my word for it. You could get lost if you don’t stick to what you know out here.”

I spun around one boulder and then barely squeezed between two others. “Well, it feels like we’re climbing straight up the mountain.”

“We are. This here is the foot of *Padre Gordo*.”

“Look how deep these rocks are—what if we get stuck?”

“We won’t. Just keep your speed up. I been over it a bajillion times.”

I threw him a look like he was telling the biggest lie of all time and I wasn’t buying it.

“All right. Maybe not a bajillion, but a lot. And I never got stuck once. Leads straight up to the town. I promise. Did you bring a sweatshirt?”

“Oh, right. I always carry one around in my backpack during hundred degree summers.”

“It’s not a hundred degrees in *Padre Gordo*. Besides, there’s cold spots.”

“What the heck does that mean?”

“It’s freezing cold in places where the ghosts like to hang out. Cold spots.”

“Ho-lee—”

“Look! There’s the first building. See? Used to be some kind of

a store with a post office inside. You can still see all the mailboxes built into the wall. My Uncle John found a letter in one once. When he was a kid.”

“What kind of a letter was it?”

“Just a bill from the *Sears and Roebuck*. You can climb up out of the riverbed, now. Road starts in front of the building.”

I got to admit that building looked pretty creepy. Not just because it was old and gray and broken down in the front. Mostly because the door hanging off its hinge looked like a big moaning mouth between two busted out windows that looked like eye holes. I guess all Boone’s talk about ghosts was finally getting to me. We bumped up and over the rock bank and down onto a dirt road that veered off just past the building and around a huge piece of rock sticking out of the mountainside. That’s when the rest of the town came into view.

It was like somebody chopped a wide main street out of a piece of the mountain, and then built houses and buildings along each side of it. But everything was so old and busted up under about a hundred years of dust, it was hard to tell what was what. The only movement anywhere was a tumbleweed bouncing across the end of the street way far down.

Without thinking, I slowed the Rhino down to a crawl.

I gave it a little more gas when I realized, expecting any minute Boone would holler, “Punch it!” only he never did. That’s when I looked over and noticed he was staring dead ahead, gripping the sides of his seat like we were about to go over a cliff. Like you do in one of those scary rides when you don’t want to be a wimp but you’d rather not see what was going to pop out around the next corner.

“So,” I tried to sound normal but I hardly had spit. “Which one’s the hotel?”

“That two-story building all the way down at the end. Across from the airport.”

“The airport—what’s an airport doing in a place like this?”

“Half the people in my family are pilots. I’m going to be one,

too, someday. Just like my dad and Grampy.”

“Grampy’s a pilot?”

“Yeah. But the only thing he drives anymore is Miss Jenny. Along with the electric rail car to get in and out of the mine. And—ever since Gran died—he only drives that in the tunnel. Until yesterday.”

“I see a two-story building down there, but nothing that looks like an airport.”

“It’s just that big barn, Has an old biplane in it. I been up in it with my dad a couple times, though. Here we are—you can park right here, in front of the hitching post.”

I pulled the Rhino over, set it in park, and turned off the key. The total quiet after that was sort of eerie. Mostly because there were these little gusts of wind that came and went. Each time, you could hear a whispery “whoosh,” then a creak and a bang from some door or shutter hung on a rusty hinge somewhere slapping against a wall. I undid my seat-belt and climbed out, just in time to kick the tumbleweed away from my legs as it passed by.

“Hey, Hud?”

“Yeah?”

“Whatever happens—” He looked up at a faded signboard hanging off the second-story balcony that said, *Hotel Padre Gordo*. “Remind me to fill up that gas tank before we leave, will you?”

“Sure.”

“Ready?”

“For what? I thought we were going to go eat bacon with Grampy.”

“We are. But the kitchen’s way at the back. We gotta pass by all sorts of creepy things before we get there.”

“Holy crud, Boone—are you trying to make me lose my appetite? What sort of creepy things?” I followed him up onto the wooden porch and had to side-step around a big hole in front of the door.

“Oh, like—” The screen door made an awful screech when he opened it. “Like the front desk where all the guests had to sign in.”

“So, what’s so scary about that?” We stood there for a minute, letting our eyes adjust to the gloom, and the first thing I noticed was a rickety narrow stairway against the wall. It had an old-fashioned wooden post at the end, where the rail sort of curved around from the landing and made a place for a high wooden counter. Behind that were a bunch of open boxes for messages with room numbers painted above each one. Some of them still had keys dangling from little nails in front of them.

“The old register.” Boone pointed to a big dusty thing on the counter that looked like a picture album. “It’s a haunt. Probably because of all the names wrote in it from people who are dead now. Don’t touch it—whatever you do. Bothers old Mr. Penders something awful. Sometimes he even throws things.”

“You told me there wasn’t anybody here.”

“Except for the ghosts.”

“What?”

“Mr. Penders was the last manager of the hotel. Knew Granny Maude personal. I guess he feels responsible to sort of watch out for things for her.” Boone bent down and picked something up off the floor and set it beside the register. It was a dirty old ink bottle. “See that? Must have thrown it at Grampy when he came in. On account of nobody’s been here for so long.”

“Like I’m really going to believe that, Boone.”

“Whatever. I’m just telling you because he might be a good lead for us to find out where the bones are.”

“Oh, right. Long as we’re here, why don’t we just ask him? Mr. Penders? You wouldn’t have any idea where they buried the fat—” The ink bottle rolled off the counter and dropped onto the gray wooden floor, again, and I almost jumped out of my skin.

“I told you.” Boone picked it up and put it back.

“You just didn’t stand it up right, that’s all. Look here. Rolled right off on account of the counter’s on a slant.”

“Whatever. Come on. We gotta brace ourselves for walking through the dining room.”

“What’s up with that? Somebody die in there or something?”

“Bunch of gangster guys had a shoot-out with some G-men who followed them here one night. During the prohibition days.” Boone was like a walking history book the way he kept talking about this stuff like he was right there when it happened. All of a sudden he put a hand out. We stopped dead in our tracks and just stood there for a few seconds in front of a couple of double doors that opened out into the hall. Then he whispered, “Ready?”

“Will you quit asking me that?”

“It’s a spooky place, though. You can still see one of the bullet holes from the shoot-out in the old mirror hung up over the bar. Bartender left it there on account of it was fired by John Dillinger, himself. I don’t know if it’s true, but that’s how the story goes. Anyway, I guess it was good for business.”

“Heck, I heard John Dillinger died in Chicago. The police shot him dead in front of some theater there.”

“He got shot lots of times without dying, you know. It took a lot of bullets for a person to die back then if they didn’t get hit someplace vital. Besides, him and his gang were always hiding out somewhere—everybody knows they were in Tucson—they have Dillinger days there every year. We’re not that far away from Tucson, you know. So, it really could have been him.”

He leaned closer and whispered, “John Dillinger. *Public Enemy Number One.*” Then he took a deep breath—like he was getting ready to dive into deep water—and stepped inside.

It looked more like a saloon than a dining room. Probably on account of the long wooden bar that stretched practically across the whole back wall. There were six or seven tables with chairs around them, and a big broken out window facing the deserted street. Two swing-type doors were beside the bar, and I figured they must lead to the kitchen. Not to mention the bacon and biscuit smell was coming from in there. My mouth started to water.

“Wait!” Boone grabbed my shirt before I could head over. “I want to show you something.”

“I’m starved. Can’t we save the rest of the spook stuff ‘til after breakfast?”

“This is for breakfast!” He ducked behind the bar and brought out two sparkling clean glass mugs. “Grab one of these and take it over to that big barrel over there.”

The barrel at the other end of the bar was so huge you could have made a boat out of it and paddled down a river. It was lying sideways on a wooden stand and had a big spigot sticking out of the front. Boone shoved his glass under and twisted the handle. A bunch of dark bubbly stuff with about three inches of foam on the top gushed out. He took a long swig that left a cream-colored foam mustache on his upper lip and said, “Ahhh! Go ahead, try some!”

“I better pass. Nobody in my family drinks beer.”

“It’s not beer—that is too hilarious, Hudson! It’s Sas-pa-rilly. Sort of like root beer only better. Grampy’s been making it for all the grandkids for years.”

I filled my mug half-full to try some. “You told me he hadn’t been up here since your Gran died.”

“He hasn’t. We have lots of this stuff. There’s enough more barrels down in the cellar to last till I grow up. You like it?”

“Yeah. Tastes sort of like licorice. I love licorice.”

“Licorice root and sassafras, with a touch of vanilla thrown in. Least that’s what Gran always used to tell me.”

“Mmm. How’s it stay so cold?”

“Everything stays cold in the cellar. Grampy probably brought it up for us this morning.” He bent down to add some more to top off his glass before we went into the kitchen.

While he was busy, I looked up at the big mirror hanging above us, thinking I maybe could spot the bullet hole. Instead, I saw this little shriveled-up black face in there with hair sticking out all over. Before I knew it, I let out a holler you could have heard all the way to Tombstone. Boone dropped his Sasparilly all over the floor and practically ran me over trying to get out of there.

I guess what happened next was another chain reaction.

Chapter Thirteen

The Inheritance

“It is expected that a Scout will save every penny he can, and put it in the bank, so that he may have money to keep himself when out of work, and thus not make himself a burden to others; or that he may have money to give away to others when they need it”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Boone must have busted through the double doors the instant Grampy was headed out to see what all the hollering was about, because they both crash-landed in a heap on the floor. I was running so close behind I took a major spill on top of them, and caught one of the swinging doors on the seat of my pants and the other on my head at the same time.

Grampy yelled something I really shouldn't repeat, and tossed us both off him like a couple of basketballs. I couldn't figure how somebody his age could still be that strong.

He pulled his cane out from under him, and raised himself up slow. Like maybe we had crunched his missing toe, again. “I'm too old for this stuff, Junior! Hear me? If you can't quit scaring yourself with your own stories, stop telling them!”

“Well, if Hud hadn't hollered first—”

That was the second time he put the blame on me when the chips were down, and I don't mind saying that's about as low as a person can get, in my opinion. Trying to make me look bad in front of

Grampy bothered me even more. Which is probably why I blurted, “You’re the one had to point out every spook spot in the place! I wouldn’t even noticed that mirror!”

“You’re both a couple of pansies!” Grampy hobbled over to sit down at a big wooden table, and got back to eating his breakfast. “Nothing a little hard work won’t cure, though.”

“Uh-oh.” Boone took a blue tin coffee pot off a huge black iron stove that took up practically the whole end of the room, and refilled Grampy’s cup. Like he could maybe make it up to him. “What kind of hard work?”

“We got to get everything out of the hole, today.”

The way Boone gasped when he heard that, you’d have thought somebody punched him in the gut. “Everything? But Grampy—it took years to get it all down there!”

“Gonna take it all back to the stronghold. Wipe out every evidence of what we been doing up here before the trouble starts. Can’t look like anything but a heap of work to get something out of this mountain. Pushy ones will be hard enough for the three of us to deal with by ourselves.” He broke some bacon up into little bits and pieces and mixed it in with his eggs and gravy until it looked like a big gray mess.

“Maybe we should wait until Dad gets back.” Boone took a couple of blue tin plates out of a cupboard and handed me one. “Or how about calling up Uncle Gar?”

“No time to wait for your dad. And Garfield?” He sopped up the last puddle of mush with a piece of biscuit. “He’s too fat for this kind of work. We can manage it. I’ll get the ropes set up while you two finish breakfast.” He shoved his chair back from the table and stood up. “And, Junior?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Put a lid on those stories.” He ran a hand over his mustache to clear away any crumbs, then headed for a stairway in the corner. That thing was so steep he looked like he was sinking down into the earth as he walked down.

“They lead to the cellar,” Boone whispered after he totally

disappeared.

“Well, don’t even tell me what happened down there,” I warned in my growliest voice while I piled my plate up with food. “I got enough worries thinking about ropes and holes!”

“Ah, it won’t be so bad with both of us working.” He heaped a bunch of stuff onto his own plate and sat down to dig into it. Like what just happened was totally normal. “Stuff’s awful heavy, though. Hey—” He started to make a mess out of his food just like Grampy had. “Which one of them did you see? *Public Enemy Number One*?”

“Heck no. I saw a burnt up black kid with hair sticking out all over. And if you say one word about how there was a fire in this hotel, back in nineteen-something... ” I grabbed the pepper instead of the salt and didn’t notice until I shook about half a ton on. “Crud! I mean I don’t want to hear about it, okay? Dead kid stories are worse than any *Public Enemy Number One*!”

Boone started with his hyena laugh—like the whole thing had been a joke all along—and I felt like punching him. Seriously. Only I had this feeling if Grampy heard us fighting, he’d do more than toss us around like basketballs. I just plain wasn’t up to it. So, instead, I tried to keep my cool. “Eat your breakfast, will you? I don’t want to have to do your work, too, on account of you fainted from hunger down in the hole.”

“That is too funny, Hud—dang!” He slid his chair back and stood up—almost the exact same way Grampy had. “I need some more sassparilly. Want some?”

“You’re sure brave all of a sudden.”

“How could I be scared of a black-face kid with hair sticking up when I been seeing one all day long? You were looking in a mirror, right?” He started laughing again and went on through the swinging doors without even waiting for an answer.

“Very funny, Boone!” I shoveled a whole fried egg into my mouth and got up to see for myself.

The place wasn’t half so scary knowing Grampy was in hollering distance and he’d be back any minute. I eased through the swinging

doors just as Boone was bent down filling up his mug, again. Mine was still lying on the floor in a puddle of sassparilly. I figured if he could face it, I could, because I knew I was at least as brave as him. So, I took a deep breath, got a grip on myself, and threw a quick look up into that mirror.

“Holy crud, Boone! Why didn’t you say something! No wonder Grampy was laughing at me last night!”

He was beside himself with the hyena thing, by this time, and scooted past me back into the kitchen—just out of the reach of my swing. After he was gone, I just stood there looking at myself, feeling like a total idiot. This early in the morning it was still cool, so neither of us had thought to put our ball caps on. I do not have a bunch of dark wavy curls like Boone does. His hair looks good even when he has bed head. Mine is just straight and wiry, with a cowlick that only stays down if I plaster it with water.

Two days of sweat and black smoke without even a comb run through it, and I looked like somebody who just stuck their finger in a light socket. Top that off with a crust on my face made out of dirt and more smoke that only two half-moons of white showed through under my eyes where the sweat gathered up, and I could see why I hadn’t recognized myself. My Ashbury T-shirt might have given me a clue except I noticed it was inside-out.

Besides that, I was standing in front of the sassparilly barrel the first time I looked into that mirror, and only saw myself from the neck up. From where I was, now, I could even see the giant rip in my jeans and the dirty sock still tied around my hand. Major embarrassment! I decided right then I was going to wash up even if I had to pour ten bottles of water over my head. After breakfast, though. Right now, I was going to eat about a dozen pieces of bacon, ten biscuits, at least five more eggs, and two quarts of sassparilly. I felt like I hadn’t eaten for a week.

As it turned out, I didn’t have to waste our water supply. Seems there was running water everywhere in *Padre Gordo*, on account of all the buildings had pipes tapped into an underground river that came from inside the mountain. It just wasn’t hot. But what did I

care? While Boone washed up the dishes (turns out he had a bucket-bath while he was on fire watch last night), I washed up myself. I even cut the legs off my jeans for a pair of shorts. Had to. It was the only way to get rid of the rip and that sticky, two-foot long chocolate spill from last night.

I was about as ready as I could get by the time Grampy quit hammering and banging away down in the cellar. You'd have thought he was trying to bust the place up. Boone and I headed down the minute he called us. About the time I was wondering exactly what kind of a hole I would have to crawl into, I saw he really had been busting things up down there.

First of all, the place was huge. It was made of big slabs of red rock on the floors and walls, and there were boxes and barrels piled up everywhere you looked. There was even stuff hanging off the ceiling. In one corner, there was a narrow passageway that led to another room. This one was smaller, with walls and shelves made out of wood all around it. Mostly filled with jars of fruit and vegetables. Way at the back of that, Grampy had tore down the shelves from the top two rows. There was a high- beam camping flashlight hanging from a hook in the ceiling, shining down into a big hole where the shelves on the back wall used to be. The hole had a couple of ropes hanging out of it.

Boone grabbed two headlamps from a side shelf by the door and handed me one. "I'll go first and you follow right behind me."

"Take your time," said Grampy while he fiddled with some pulley thing connected somewhere inside the hole. "I don't want anything busted up down there."

"Okay." Boone climbed past him like he had done it a hundred times before. I don't mind saying I felt an awful chill go through me watching the bobbing light from his headlamp fade away and finally disappear entirely. I mean, that thing was deep.

I was trying to tell myself to get a grip—it was always cold like this down in cellars—when Grampy said, "Get a move on, boy." He gave me a leg up over the bottom shelves. "We got a lot to get out of there. Get in the basket, now, and I'll lower you down."

It wasn't really a basket. Just a wide flat board with short sides, connected to the ropes and a pulley sticking out of the rock ceiling. I held on tight and tried to look around as Grampy lowered me down. It wasn't very wide across—sort of like the tunnel we were in yesterday. It smelled like a swimming pool at night, too—I hoped there wasn't water down there at the bottom. Sheesh, no wonder they called it the hole.

It seemed like forever until I got all the way down, but at least it was dry. Boone held the basket steady while I climbed out. The way our two headlamp beams danced up and down every time we moved our heads, made everything look like an old silent movie going on. Pile after pile of little sacks flickered and flashed in and out of the light as we looked around.

“Come on, let's load it up.” Boone started tossing the sacks into the basket like we were entered to win some prize in a game show.

So, I reached for one to pitch in but it hardly budged. “Holy Crud—” I had to use both hands. “What's in these things?”

“What do you think?”

“Gold? Oh, don't tell me! You mean all these sacks are full of—”

“You're not gonna lose your head, again, are you?”

Just the thought made my heart pound faster, but I didn't let on. “No, I don't think so.”

“Good. Because I stuck my neck out telling Grampy how much I could trust you.” He stopped tossing sacks and yanked twice on the ropes. “Don't want you to make a liar out of me.”

“Well, if I do, just blame it on me. Like you do everything else goes wrong around here.” There were only about ten sacks in the basket, and I noticed he had loaded at least three every time I managed one.

“I told you a dozen times I gotta answer the truth when Grampy asks for it.” He looked up to watch the basket squeaking and straining its way up toward the light. “You hollered first both those times. If he'd asked me why, I'd have told him.”

“Yeah, and said what?”

“I’d have said I scared the pants off you!” He started with his hyena thing, but this time, I couldn’t help laughing, too.

I had to admit, he was right. I couldn’t remember ever being that scared.

How he kept coming up with logical explanations for everything he did, I don’t know. But it didn’t seem to matter much at the moment. I guess I was starting to trust him a little more, too. Like maybe his logic was actually starting to make sense to me. I even found myself wishing I could do more things the way he did. Like not driving the Rhino like an old lady, or having enough muscle not to give out when things got hard. Which is probably why—when the basket came down empty, again—I kept picking up one bag after another without complaining. Not even once.

After a while, I quit counting how many times the basket went up and down. My arms felt like two baseball bats with boots on, but I decided to just let them fall off before I’d ever quit on Boone, again. About the time I thought they were actually going to, Grampy boomed down like the voice of God from the top of the hole, and told us to stop. Which was a whole lot better than keeling over, or having my arms fall off.

“That’s enough,” he said after hauling us up into the cellar, again. “Better to go light on the first run, anyway.” He pulled a red handkerchief out of a back pocket, wiped the sweat off his face, and sat down on top of a barrel that had the words ‘*Dickerson’s Dills*’ stamped on it in big black letters. “In case anything’s shifted along the tunnel. How we doing, Junior?”

“All right so far,” Boone answered. “I’ll get us some water.”

That’s when I knew he was just as wore out as I was. Otherwise, he would have went for more sassparilly. I figured if Boone was just drinking water, he was pretty near thrashed. So, I didn’t feel so bad about myself, after all. I wasn’t in any hurry to follow after him, though. Instead, I sank down onto a wooden box of something and waited for my arms to quit shaking. There were so many little sacks piled up everywhere, it was the only place left to sit down.

I was just starting to feel better when I noticed one of the sacks

had a rip in it and a stream of shiny gold pebbles was pouring onto the floor. I guess my eyes must have bugged out of my head (I couldn't help it) because Grampy turned to see what I was looking at.

"Sort of takes your breath away, doesn't it, boy."

I opened my mouth to answer but nothing came out.

"It's a heap of gold, all right. All this here," he waved a hand to take in the whole place, "shows for a lifetime of hard work. About three generations worth."

"Y-yes, sir."

"We don't spend it lightly."

"No, sir."

"But we don't just hoard it, either. One of the family has a need, like college, or a house, or a doctor." He eased his hurt foot up onto the edge of one of the lower shelves to rest it awhile. "Then we use it."

"Yes, sir."

"You ever see gold in the raw before, boy?"

"No, sir."

"Well, come on over here and run your hands through it, so you won't be bowled over any time you catch a glimpse."

You might have thought I'd been hypnotized, the way I slid off that box like a zombie and went down on my knees just to do it. Cool to the touch and glittery, it was like heavy sand the way it slid through my fingers. It was all I could do to quit messing with it. I had never seen so much treasure—this was real treasure!—and I knew there were a lot of rich people who never got to see something like this.

"It's the Boone family treasure," Grampy said, almost like he'd been reading my mind. "Stays right here until somebody needs it. There's a few of us—just a few—that watch over it for the rest of them. Most Boones don't even know where it is, even though they'd like to. They're the ones that just plain can't handle it."

He was quiet for so long I looked over at him. But he was just sitting there watching me. I thought maybe I should scoop up what

leaked out and retie the bag, so I would be doing more than just gawking.

“It’s a big responsibility being a treasure keeper,” he went on. “You’ve got to be a strong soul not to give in to everybody, but you’ve got to do right by them, too. Anybody that pitches in with the work gets a share. The rest have to borrow from the ones that do. Sound fair?”

“Yes, sir.” But I don’t know why he should care what I thought about it all.

“I reckon that puts you in with the workers.”

“What?” I looked over to see if he was joking, or maybe doing the silent laugh thing, but he was dead serious. “But I’m not one of —”

“We adopted you in, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, but that was just the brotherhood and everything.”

“What do you think a brother is?”

I was so shocked at what he was getting at, I opened my mouth to answer but nothing came out, again. I just couldn’t believe it.

“With Junior’s dad so far away, he’s the next in line treasure keeper. But he’s awful young for such a big job. Think you could help him some?”

“Yes, sir. I—I sure would do that.”

“What if he asked you to help him with something wrong?”

“Boone would never.” It popped out so fast, I was surprised I said it.

“How do you know?”

“I just know, that’s all. It isn’t in him.”

He got quiet, again, and I thought maybe he was thinking about all the things I couldn’t do half as good as Boone, and he should maybe change his mind. I was about to point out how there were some things I could actually do better (if you counted academics) but I suddenly remembered how—if Grampy asked for the truth, you had to give it to him.

“I might not be as strong as he is,” I admitted then, “but I sure wouldn’t quit on him. Is that good enough?”

Then he got that smile that comes into his eyes and said, “That’ll do.”

That’s all he said, but—just like last night—I felt it right down to my toes. Like I had passed some gigantic test, or something. Whatever it was, I realized right then how I cared more about what Grampy thought of me than anything else. And for him to call me one of the workers when I’d mostly just been running around half-dead and dirty most of the time—to get a share of the treasure when I hadn’t done anything to deserve it—gave me a lump in my throat. Nobody had ever respected me like that before.

Enough to actually count on me if things went wrong, I mean. At that moment, I felt like I really had joined the out-and-out *Knights of the Empire*. Like I could be strong forever if I had to. Feeling that way made me sure I could. That’s when I decided that nothing—and I mean nothing—could ever keep me from siding with the Boone family on anything. Ever again.

But it only took about an hour of the worst trouble, yet, to change my mind about that.

Chapter Fourteen

Trouble on the Way

“A manly fellow will speak out, and always say exactly what he wants or what is the real state of the case; he will be believed and will generally get his way.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Boone came back with a canteen full of the coolest, freshest water I ever tasted, and we all sat around for a while drinking it. We didn't say much, just held a hand out to whoever had the canteen if we wanted more. Grampy even took one of his naps, where you couldn't tell if he was sleeping or just listening. I bit the dead flap of skin off my blister that had popped sometime during the night.

Then Grampy startled up, slapped his knee, and said, “All right—let's get back to work!”

You'd have thought it was five in the morning the way Boone and I dragged ourselves up and reached for our headlamps. But nobody breathed one word about being too tired, so, I sure wasn't going to be the first. Right about the time I was hoping I could at least keep up, we found out we were done working in the hole for the day. What we had to do, now, was round up the mules. I don't mind saying I was pretty relieved about that.

Not that I knew about rounding up mules, but at least we wouldn't have to carry them.

“Come on, we're gonna make a detour.” Boone told me, once we

were outside. We turned into a little alley that went between the hotel and another building. Then we started climbing up the steep mountainside that was close up against the row of buildings at the back. “Don’t worry. There’s lots of hand-holds. Just do what I do.”

“Shouldn’t we get the mules, first?” I wasn’t exactly up to climbing a mountain. “I mean, won’t Grampy be waiting for us?”

“He’ll just think we’re taking our time climbing the tower.”

“Holy crud—how high of a tower?” A piece of rock broke off under my foot but I didn’t dare look down to see where it landed.

“The airport tower. Has a siren to ring them all in from out in the desert. But it’s not half as high as the ledge we’re heading for, so we’ll just look for the herd from up there. Then go chase them in with the Rhino.”

“What’s wrong with having a siren on the ground?” I had to make a long stretch to reach a handhold Boone had just used and it gave me the willies until I grabbed it.

“We have to be up high to spot where they are, anyway, so we just put it up there. If they haven’t been around for a long time, they get excited about all the good stuff to eat along the way. Course, if they haven’t come into the valley, yet, we might have to—watch it!”

Another piece of rock broke off, but since it was under his foot, this time, it bounced off my head on the way down. “Thanks for the warning, Boone—what was I supposed to do—hop out of the way? Thing got me right in the forehead!”

“Sorry. Only about fifty feet farther and we’ll be on the road. Then it’s easy going.”

“Why didn’t we take the road in the first place?”

“Because it starts way back at the post office. If we were gone that long Grampy would come looking for us. Take my word for it.” He stopped talking long enough to climb up over a tricky piece of outcrop, then turn around to look down over the tops of the buildings for a second. “You don’t ever want to make him mad.”

“He was pretty mad this morning.” I hauled myself up next to him and just sat there. No urges to look down whatsoever.

“He wasn’t mad, just got the wind knocked out of him. When

he's really mad, he starts swinging, so you gotta keep out of his way."

"Yeah, so what are we doing up here, then, when we're supposed to be doing something else?"

"Gotta check out the graveyard."

"Sheesh, Boone—that's something we ought to do on our own time, not Grampy's. What do you want to take chances for?"

"Because I wouldn't sneak around the *Padre Gordo* graveyard at night if you paid me a million dollars. Hard enough in the daylight. Cripes, the only mule in the corral down there is Miss Jenny." He turned around and started climbing, again.

"So, what's the hurry? Those bones will be there tomorrow, you know."

"Way he's working us, Grampy could have us halfway to the stronghold by then. We gotta get rid of this curse thing before everything the family's been working on for all these years gets put back. I figure it's the only way to bring him to his senses."

"Well—in case you haven't noticed—you're not making much sense, either. We didn't even bring a shovel, so what good is all this?"

"We gotta find him before we can bury him." He climbed up onto the edge of the road and then leaned down to give me a hand up. "The fat priest isn't in the graveyard, he's—"

"Do not—I repeat—do not start telling me any more spook stuff, Boone. Seriously."

It wasn't a good road. Just a winding dirt trail that I had my doubts a car could even use anymore. But it was solid, so, I didn't hesitate to look around. You could see the whole town up here. Down in a big fenced area behind the airport, with the gate wide open, I saw Miss Jenny munching on a huge pile of hay. I could see a tower next to that, too. It wasn't anything much more than a long tall ladder with a big light on top.

"That's for guiding the planes in." Boone explained before I even asked any questions. "It's another haunt, though. Because sometimes that light comes on all by itself for no reason. Anybody

that can stand it long enough to hang around after that usually hears the sound of an engine far off. Like a plane coming in on approach. Old Washington Boone, that's who it is. Out there looking for—"

"Did I not say I don't want to hear that stuff? Sheesh! Let's just find the bones and get this over with! Don't know what we have to go fooling with graveyards for if he isn't even in there."

"We're looking for the entrance to the stronghold—that's where he is. The only thing I know is there's a graveyard at the end of it. That's why we gotta look in the graveyard."

"Okay, so, which way do we go?"

"Toward the post office. Remember that big piece of rock we had to drive around this morning? Right across from there is the town graveyard. Cut right into the side of the mountain. Only Boones in it are an aunt and uncle, though. Ol' Washington and his wife—my great-aunt Mercy. They were the first of the Boones."

"Like I really believe that. There's Boones all over the place." We started jogging along at a fast pace, side by side. "How about Daniel Boone? He's from all the way back in the seventeen hundreds. He Probably wasn't the first, either."

"I'm talking about the first Boone to hook up with *Padre Gordo*. That's his plane in the old barn down there. He married my great, great, great—"

"I get the picture."

"Great-aunt Mercy. She was a nurse during the war—the war in France—and he got shot down in some field. Anyway, he escaped from behind enemy lines, they got in love, and then he married her. It was true love, too. The real thing. After the war, she brought him back here and they helped Granny Maude with the business."

"The hotel business?"

"The gold business. By then Ol' Maude Louise had started a big time gold operation, paying good money for people to work for her. That was before the Great Depression, though, when things were still booming. That's how the town sprung up here. It was a mining town."

"Last time we left off, you said she was hiding out on this

mountain going crazy. Mad Maude, remember? Now, you're saying she ran a gold company and had enough money to hire a private nurse. Do I look like a fool, or something? People don't need medical attention just for eating too much ice cream—what do you take me for?"

"That is too hilarious, Hudson!" He laughed his hyena laugh. "Medical help for eating too much ice cream!"

"I meant I'm not buying it! You don't always have to be putting one over on me, Boone. Just tell it plain the way things happened. It's weird enough without exaggerating. I been feeling like I'm stuck in some horror movie ever since we got here. "

"Okay, okay. Aunt Mercy was Maude's daughter. From Henry Ashbury. They had a true love, too, only they couldn't get married. Because there were laws against it back in those days. Whites marrying blacks. You could go to jail for it."

"You mean, Mad Maude was black?"

"Sure. She helped her family run the boarding house for black railroad workers back in the old days. Until the fat priest came along and adopted Henry, those people were the only ones he could go to where they'd give him a bed and a decent meal when he needed one. Him and Maude knew each other since they were teenagers."

"Wow. So, she hid out up here on the mountain till they changed the laws?"

"No way, they didn't get changed all the way up until nineteen fifty-nine. I remember that date exactly, on account of Grampy got married to my Gran the day after it passed."

"You mean your Gran was white, too? Man, you sure had a lot of mixed-up marriages in your family."

"Not all of them were mixed up. My Gran always said it would cut down on half the problems in the world if everybody was the same color. Think about it. Anyway, two whole other wars went by and we were started on another by the time that law finally passed. The Vietnam war. It never did any good for Mad Maude, though. She just holed up long enough for people to think she was off living with the Apaches. No laws against blacks marrying Indians."

“Man.”

“But she was really building her and Aunt Mercy a house hid up here in the stronghold Henry told her about before he died. Digging into the mother lode while she was at it, too, but she only let that secret out to the next in line, just before she died. Somewhere along the way the actual location got lost altogether. Which is why so many of us Boones have been——”

He stopped dead in his tracks. Not because he was tired. Boone and I both could jog along like this for a week if we had to. I figured we were getting close to the graveyard, and he was just getting a case of the nerves, again. Except the only thing up ahead was a curve away from that giant rock and a big wide view of the desert valley we had driven all over, yesterday. You could see a ton of mesas, the whole dry winding riverbed, the boxcar with the Dragon’s nest tottering over it, and even the Interstate Highway away off in the distance.

“Ho-lee—crud!” I yelled, when I finally hit on a big plume of dust roaring up behind a car racing over the dirt road leading out to the boxcar. “That’s her! That’s the county nurse coming to check up on Grampy!”

“Dang, Hud—Mom’s gonna kill me if I don’t get him down there! Otherwise Grampy will, if I let anybody from the county come poking around up here!”

There was no time to talk anything over.

We just did what we had to. Like we had the same brain, or something. Without saying one word, we both turned around and started running down that road a whole lot faster than we had come up it. If climbing up the rock place was scary, climbing down it was even worse. But I just kept my eyes level, put my hands and feet wherever Boone did, and we hustled.

I bet it took us less than fifteen minutes to get across what took us half an hour before. By the time we crashed into the hotel and practically tumbled down the stairs to where Grampy was working in the cellar, we were thrashed. It’s a good thing it wasn’t too hot up here on the mountain, or I’d have dropped dead altogether.

I guess Grampy thought we were just up to more of our games because all he said was, “How many mules did you get?” Without even looking up from where he was tying gold bags together with ropes, making little bundles of them.

Four to a bundle, so two could hang over each side of the mules. That’s when I realized we were going to need a way lot of mules to carry all that. How many mules did they have around here? Then I got a little worried, since all we had to show for being gone so long was Miss Jenny. So, I did what I always did in those situations. I let Boone handle it.

“Grampy—it’s Wednesday!” Boone gasped from where he was still slumped on the bottom stair, catching his breath.

“So?”

“So, the county nurse is coming to change your bandage, remember?. She’s on her way right now! We gotta get down to the boxcar, Grampy! Fast as we can!”

“I’m not wasting my time with any county nurse. Never intended to. Let her come. She’ll just look around, see we’re not home, and head back to town. Probably heave a sigh of relief I’m not waiting for her with a gun.”

“But the county people—”

“The county people are just covering their tracks. Want to make sure I don’t get any grounds to sue them later on, should I come down with gangrene, or something. Now, quit fooling around, boys, and get those mules in here.”

“Grampy... ” Boone sounded miserable enough to drop dead, himself. “Grampy... ”

The old man finally turned around to look harder at him. “Well, what is it, Junior?”

“She’s not coming just to change your bandage.” He stood up with one hand on the wall, like he was going to take off back up the stairs—or down into the piles of stuff—to get away from Grampy’s swing if he had to. “She’s—she’s coming to check up on your brain!”

“My what?”

“Mom said the county people are just looking for an excuse to put you in one of those places, Grampy—they think you’re going crazy! They told her they’re gonna check up on what you’re doing out here, even if they have to chase you all over the mountain to find out!”

You’d have thought somebody punched Grampy in the gut. He looked mad enough to bust before he finally let loose and said something. “Why didn’t you tell me that before? Let us haul everything we own out here in plain sight—” Then he roared, “Junior—I’m gonna wear you out!”

Boone went for the piles of stuff. He snatched the flat top off a barrel to defend himself, and—if Grampy hadn’t had to hobble around all that stuff on his missing toe—he’d have had him in about two seconds flat. I’m telling you—I saw it with my own eyes and I still couldn’t believe such an old man could move that quick. It looked like somebody was going to get seriously killed if I didn’t do something. So, I jumped in.

“Wait!” I hollered. “Maybe we could still head her off!”

They both froze.

Grampy stood still for a few seconds and thought about it, “We maybe could.” Then—like he wasn’t just trying to kill somebody only two seconds ago—he started barking out all kinds of orders. As if this was the last charge and we were all there was left of the army. “Grab all the gas and fishing poles you can carry! Fill up that Rhino.! Everybody meet out front in five minutes!”

“Fishing poles—” The danger was past, because Boone dropped the barrel lid and started looking for some, like we were all on the same side, again.

“On the double, boys! No fooling around! This is it—this is war!”

Chapter Fifteen

The Great Sacrifice

“The men knew that they had got the order to “charge,” and it was their business to carry out the order, and not to look at the danger in doing it. So they charged.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

I might have been worried if he told everybody to grab a gun, but what’s the worst we could do with a fishing pole? At least him and Boone were done fighting. Outside, I stashed the poles and Boone hadn’t even finished pouring the gas into the tank when Grampy came busting through the screeching front door with a huge picnic basket on his shoulder.

“Junior, drive for your life!” He stuck his cane between the seats. “Boy—get out the binoculars and set yourself down on top of the basket. Hold onto that roll-bar. You’re gonna be the lookout so we can decide which way to go when we get to the cut-off.” He got in the passenger seat and strapped himself in. “Let’s hope they sent us out a young one.”

I hardly had myself settled before we were barreling down the mountain like a freight train, on a way narrower trail than we came up this morning. Must have been the back way out, or something. We were going even faster than yesterday, when Boone was showing off, but this was real life now, and every second counted. I just held on for life and kept my mouth closed so tight my jaw ached. I had

to, on account of we were bouncing so hard over rocks and deep ruts I'd have bit my tongue clean off if I got caught off guard.

"Coming up to the ridge, now, boy—" Grampy hollered back. "When you spot her, tell us where she's at."

It was impossible to spot anything through those binoculars while we were bouncing all over the place. But I could see with my naked eye, a black Jeep was stopped in front of the boxcar, already. "Her car's parked but I don't see anybody out there walking around."

"Maybe she's still in it," Boone's voice sounded hopeful. "Too afraid to get out!"

"Might be a young one, then," Grampy sounded hopeful, too. "They're easier to scare off. Could be she'll head back home without us even having to show up."

But that Jeep hadn't moved an inch by the time we got to another look-out just above the crossroads. This time, we pulled up behind a tall saguaro, so I could hold the binoculars still enough to focus. For a few seconds, I didn't see anything at all. Then—right when I was trying make out if someone was inside the car, or not—I saw movement.

"Oh, no!" I almost fell off the basket. "She looks just like—no, she looks exactly like—"

"Spit it out, Hudson!"

"Young or old!" snapped Grampy.

"She looks like—Mad Maude!" I practically choked on the words.

Grampy snatched the glasses away to see for himself, and the strap I had around my neck almost strangled me. I ended up with my face pressed up against his shirt, so close I could smell sweat and bacon grease on it.

"Lordy. It does look like her. Must be Lucinda Parker, one of the city cousins. Traipsing around like she owns the whole—look at that, now! Just pitched a pan of black rocks right out the door."

"Uh-oh." Boone must have remembered the rabbit stew he left cooking, yesterday, at the same time I did.

“Junior?”

“Grampy, I didn’t expect we’d be gone so—”

Then he leaned forward to get a better look and hollered, “What the devil happened to the porch?” I had to gag and choke before he finally let go of the binoculars. “Looks like a bomb went off down there!”

“You always said you have to tear things up sometimes before you can fix them. We were tearing it up. Which way do we go?”

“Better head for the swamp hole.”

“That’s the steepest trail. Maybe you should drive.”

“You can handle it better than me with this bandage on my foot. Let’s go. Boy? Keep a lookout and let me know if she heads for that Jeep.”

“She’s heading for it.”

Grampy breathed a couple of swear words that the engine mostly drowned out when Boone tromped on the gas to back up.

“Maybe she’s leaving.” I suggested at the same time I grabbed for the roll bar to hold on, just as Boone made a hard right and charged straight down the side of the cliff. Which yanked a yell out of me that could have popped all the ghosts out of Tombstone, but I couldn’t help it.

It was a wild ride but a short one. The trail took us down into a gully filled with round river rocks that turned into a raging flash flood wash whenever it rained too hard on the mountain. But just now it was dry as a bone and made a long easy slide down to the bottom of *Padre Gordo*. We bumped up at the end of the gully, crashed through a clump of bushes, swerved just in time to miss a giant saguaro that had so many arms it looked like a tree. Then we chugged up the side of a whoop-dee-do to see what we could see from the top. Even after Boone stopped, I felt like I was still bouncing.

We all strained our necks like turkeys to see what was happening, but now that we were down off the mountain, the only things we could make out were the Dragon’s Nest and part of the roof of the boxcar. The Jeep was totally hid by a little mesa. I tried

standing on top of the basket but that didn't help much, either.

"Way Lucinda was throwing things around down there," Grampy figured, "she's either gonna call the county down on us, right now, or head out to *Padre Gordo* on her own to nose around, first."

"How could somebody that's related to us do something like that? Doesn't she know it's for the good of the whole bunch?"

"Always been a bit of bad blood between the city cousins and the heroes, Junior. Not enough sacrifice in them. Rather make a few people rich quick, instead of take care of the whole bunch for the long haul."

"We gotta stop her! Before she gets to *Padre Gordo* and sees all the family secrets laying out!" Boone threw the Rhino into reverse and started to back down the whoop-dee-do so fast I was glad I hadn't let go of the roll bar.

"Wait just a minute, now," Grampy said in a way I was starting to recognize as his thinking-about-it tone. "If she heads out the back road, you'll never catch up to her in this thing."

Boone lurched to a stop at the bottom, not sure which way to go. "What do we do then?"

"Boys, when you're outmatched and outnumbered, there's only one thing you can do. You gotta create a diversion. So, point this thing toward Boone Lake." He reached for a handhold on the side of the dash and got ready for speed. "And let's fly."

Funny how you can stop being scared of something by doing something scarier. Yesterday, I was afraid of snakes, bugs and dark tunnels. Today, they didn't look so bad compared to Indian curses or being haunted by some ghost for all eternity. Now, even ghosts and curses didn't bother me as much as worrying about what we might have to do down at that swamp hole, just to save the whole bunch. Because I sure wasn't going to break a swear off the Bible.

No matter what it did to me.

It only took about ten minutes for us to get there the way Boone was driving like a crazy person. And when we pulled up to the prettiest little lake I ever saw, tucked into a clump of juniper trees, it

looked better than paradise. No kidding. I guess I was expecting a toxic swamp to look sort of poisonous and evil-smelling. I wouldn't have called it a pond (like Boone's mom did), and I sure could see why they named it a lake. Because it could have been on a postcard.

Besides that, it was up to a hundred degrees, again, now that we were down off the mountain, and I actually started to think it might not hurt anything to at least stick my feet in a little. Just to cool off. That's how fast a temptation can change your mind when you look at it close enough.

"You boys start a signal fire while I set things up." Grampy's voice snapped me out it.

We didn't flip a coin or argue over who was going to do what job. Nobody even said a word. I just reached down for some rocks to stick in my pockets in case I ran into any snakes while I was looking for wood. At the same time, Boone went for the shovel and started digging like he was in a war zone and there were no fox holes around. Like any second a bomb might hit if he didn't wear himself out trying to fix everything he messed up.

I was headed for an old dead bush to use for kindling, when all of a sudden I heard a hiss. I was more glad it wasn't a rattler than scared. So, I lobbed a few rocks in that direction to chase it off anyway, and about fell over backward when a Gila Monster jumped out instead of a snake. Those things are way poisonous. But I was so amazed at how good the rock trick worked, it was gone before I could even worry about it.

We had a huge smoking fire going in no time. Meanwhile, Grampy set up a hammock and got out the fishing poles. He even got a couple of hot dogs from the picnic basket and stuck them on the end of sticks he wedged into the ground close to the fire. You'd have thought we were out for a Sunday picnic instead of saving the whole bunch.

"What if she doesn't come this way?" Boone still looked worried enough to keel over.

"She's too nosy not to come. Should be hearing her engine roar up this hill any minute now." He sat down on a big rock then and

threw a perfect cast out into the lake. “Soon as we do, you boys start hooping and hollering. Then take a flying leap into the hole.” He adjusted his line a little. “After that you can have yourselves a nice swim while I do the talking.”

He said it like we should be so glad for a little holiday. Had he forgot what he told us would happen if we came near this place? What was Mrs. Boone going to say when she found out he actually took us for a picnic out here? She’d be hollering halfway to Mexico, that’s what. Not to mention my parents would probably never let me hang out with Boone, again, when they found out about all this.

And they were going to find out.

I could tell just by the way that look-alike for Mad Maude went huffing and puffing around the boxcar, she’d tell the whole world maybe. We’d might even end up on *Sixty Minutes* when they did the next story about toxic waste. I looked over at Boone, expecting he would bring all this up to Grampy, any minute, and then we’d have to get ready to run. On account of Grampy would probably start swinging if we didn’t follow orders and do what was best for the whole bunch. But Boone was already peeling off his shirt, and I knew just by looking he was fixing to do a cannonball right off the nearest rock. I’d seen him do it a hundred times that way down at the pool.

For a minute, I wondered if one person flopping around in there would be enough. Then I felt ashamed of myself for thinking it. After that I was embarrassed for all of us getting into such a mess and acting like this. But then I thought about all that gold. And the way I felt when Grampy told me I was one of the workers. A treasure keeper. It made me hope I had it in me to be brave. In fact, I didn’t think I could take it if it turned out Boone had enough guts to be a hero and I didn’t. Man—I had so many different things going through my head at that minute I felt about to bust. I just plain didn’t know what to do.

I’ll never forget those last few seconds.

It was quiet except for the plop, plop of Grampy’s red and white bobber every time he jiggled it, and Boone taking a bunch of deep

breaths to get ready to go underwater. Then—real faint at first—I heard a motor. As if the little hill we were behind had been blocking the sound, it blasted out loud all of a sudden when the Jeep turned the corner and came to a sliding stop in a lot of loose gravel.

Boone let out a rebel yell and jumped in so hard it made a splash that poured over Grampy and me like the whale show at *Sea World*. Next thing I knew I was right behind him, flying through the air and hollering like an Indian on the war path at the same time.

I didn't even take my shirt off.

Chapter Sixteen

Foolish August

“The soldier does not go into a battle because he likes it. It is a dangerous place, and he feels inclined to run away; but he commands himself, and says ‘I must go whether I like it or not, because it is my duty.’”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

By the time I came up for air, there was a lot of hollering and yelling going on. Only it was all one-sided. Grampy just sat there fiddling with his fishing line, like he was having the time of his life, and doing his silent laugh thing every once in a while when that nurse looked about to pop like a balloon. If I didn’t know she was a nurse, I’d never guessed it.

She was wearing one of those sun-helmet things like you see on Tarzan movies, with a long green scarf tied over the top of it and under her chin. To keep it from blowing off, maybe, but there wasn’t any wind. She had some kind of uniform dress on that looked more like for Girl Scouts than nurses, and the hugest pair of army boots I ever saw. In case she stepped on a snake, I guess. If she did step on one he’d be killed because she was huge.

“This is no laughing matter, Mr. Jackson Boone! Hear me? If I have to—” She caught sight of us coming up for air. “You children

get out of that water! Right now! You want to drop dead of—”

Boone took a deep breath and went under, again, but I figured somebody better try and make the peace, so I started to paddle over. My dad always said being polite to adults made them respect you. Only right when I was trying to think of something polite, she grabbed Grampy’s cane that was leaning against the big rock he was sitting on. The way she was waving it on the way down to the edge of the lake made me forget about polite and head back for deeper water.

“William Hudson, you come back here!”

I don’t know how she knew my name when I never met her before in my life, but that was the last second I had to think about it. Because—right then—she hooked the neck of my cougar shirt and dragged me back toward the bank. Just like a fish on a hook. She practically yanked my arm off when I got close enough, and then whacked me on the butt with the cane as soon as I came up out of the water. You think that didn’t hurt? Man—I let out another yell to wake up the dead bandits in Tombstone.

“Look out, Boone!” I hollered when he came up for air without a clue what was going on.

But a lot of good it did. Mad Maude Number Two grabbed him by the ear as he floated by and hauled him out of the water right behind me. *Thwack!* Boone yelped and danced out of her way like he was hopping across hot coals.

“You boys get in the car—don’t make me come after you—get back here!”

Usually, I do what I’m told. But when Boone took off and hauled himself up the side of a little mesa that went practically straight up, I was right behind him. On account of I’d rather be grounded for the rest of the summer than get clobbered with that cane, again. Not that it would help things for very long. This was going to put me in the deepest trouble I’d ever been in. Because there was absolutely no way out of it. She could call in the whole darn county to help her. Might take a couple hours for them to get here, but any way you looked at it, we were sunk.

“Come over here and sit down, Lucinda,” Grampy’s voice sounded like she had just dropped by for supper. “Before you work yourself into fits.”

“Tell them to come down! Those boys directly disobeyed me!”

“How about a cool glass of cider? Got some in the basket, here.”

“I’m not falling for any of your tricks, Uncle Jack. Hear me? I’m a registered nurse, out here on the county’s time. I’m not interested in picnics!” She untied the green scarf and wiped her forehead with one end. “Horrible—filthy place—that place of yours looks like the wrath down there! Food burnt to a crisp—sour milk spilled all over —”

“Must have been varmints busted in while we were out camping last night.” Grampy finished pouring apple cider out of a jug into a clear canning jar and handed it to her.

“It was varmints, all right! And they’re sitting right up there on that rock!” She took a long drink, wiped her forehead with the scarf, again, and then drank some more. Like she hadn’t just said she wasn’t interested.

“The boys been working hard ever since they got here, Lucinda. Helping me rebuild my porch. I guess you heard about me falling through the porch when I lost this toe.”

Grampy stuck his bandaged foot out for her to see, and I heard Boone whisper, “Uh-oh,” when he caught a look at the way the bandage was so dirty—not even white anymore—and coming all unwound like a mummy dragging his wrappings everywhere he walked.

“Just look at that mess! If that thing’s not crawling with infection, I’ll—” The nurse handed her empty jar back to Grampy and headed for the Jeep. “Better take care of it right now.”

“I gotta get that pill out of my backpack and plopped into Grampy’s cider!” Boone whispered to me. “Before she starts poking around on him!” He started climbing down the side of the mesa as quiet as he could. “Cover me, Hud!”

“Heck, no—she’ll cane me, again.”

“You gotta create a diversion!”

There was a *ding, ding, ding* sound when the car door opened, and she came back lugging a medical bag in one hand and mopping her forehead with the end of the scarf in the other. Grampy picked up his cane and stashed it behind the rock he was sitting on, so it wouldn't be so handy for her to grab next time.

Boone froze partway down the rock face, until she got involved in setting things up, and I thought I maybe should take the opportunity to get down then, too. I didn't know what kind of diversion I could make, but I figured I at least better think about it. Meanwhile, she kept harping about things to Grampy like she had forgot all about us.

"You know I don't do this kind of work, anymore?" She unfolded a camp stool and waved a hand for him to stick his foot up on it. "Nobody else would come, that's why they asked me. Even those cocky young ambulance drivers wouldn't do it. Had to get somebody to cover my shift over at Ashbury General. Know why? Because you got every soul in town scared to death of you! What'd you shoot at that census man for?"

"Didn't mean to shoot at him." Grampy winced when she started cutting his ratty bandage off with a little pair of silver scissors. "Gun went off when I fell through the porch."

"That's how accidents happen, isn't it. Wave a loaded gun around and sooner or later it's gonna go off. Look here—see that? You got half the sand in the desert worked into this! Gonna hurt like the dickens to clean it out but I don't feel a bit sorry for you."

I flashed a glance back at Boone, and saw he was hunkered down behind the Rhino, pulling everything out of his backpack to find those pills. Soon as he heard the words 'hurt like the dickens' he looked up long enough to wave his hand at me in a panic, and mouth the words, "Go on!" without any sound coming out. I was thinking I'd need one of those pills, myself, if I had to take another hit, but I headed on over there.

Right in time to see her opening up a scary-looking bottle of something that smelled like alcohol. Man—that stuff burns like fire even on a flee-bite you scratch the top off. I just knew Grampy

would start swinging if she poured something like that on his missing toe. There was no time to lose. I raced over close and stuck my hand in front of her face when she was getting ready to pour.

“Look at this giant blister I got pulling boards off the porch, yesterday!” I wiggled my fingers about three inches away from her eyes.

“Do you see I’m busy here?” She stood up and looked hard at me. “I’ll tend to you in a minute. Bad enough trying to work in this heat.” She wiped her face with the scarf, again. “You know this is the hottest August on record? Drives people crazy, this kind of heat. All kinds of foolishness going on!”

“Boy—why don’t you pour Miss Lucinda a little more cider.” Grampy handed me the empty jar he was still holding. “Keep her from doing anything foolish.”

“Me? Hmph! Wouldn’t find me letting children swim around in toxic waste!”

I hauled the jug out of the picnic basket and poured fast. Just as she was getting back to his foot, again, I handed it over to her. She looked all kinds of irritated at another interruption, and might have ignored me if Grampy hadn’t spoke up.

“No commercial mining gone on here for over sixty years,” he said. “What do you want to bet that water’s cleaner than the city water they’re drinking in town, now.”

“We don’t drink the town water. It’s no good.” She took the jar and drank some apple cider. “Mmm! This sure tastes homemade.”

“Comes from our grove up on *Padre Gordo*,” said Grampy. “This here’s some left over from before my Mary passed away.”

“I was real sorry to hear about that.” It was quiet for a few seconds while she finished her drink.

I heard a big bee buzzing over by one of the juniper trees, and the sound of a footstep nearby. Boone had snuck up behind a bush and he held the pill up to show me he found it. I looked over at Grampy. That’s when I noticed he had a sad, far away look on his face, and it made me feel awful bad for him. Even Miss Lucinda was sad-looking. Sort of like somebody just punched the wind out of her.

“You want some more apple cider, too, Grampy?” I asked.

“Might as well, I guess.” He handed me his empty jar.

“She sure was a fine lady.” Miss Lucinda shook her head like it was a real shame what had happened, then set her half-full jar down on a flat rock close by. “A fine lady.” Then she started opening up the alcohol, again. “But what she saw in you, I’ll never know!”

I held the jar out behind me for Boone to plop the pill in, and then poured the apple cider on top of it. I handed it over to Grampy. He started drinking it down so quick I was worried that pill wouldn’t have enough time to dissolve. Then we’d all be in for it. But he just sort of choked, swallowed, belched a bit, and said, “Must have swallowed a—a stinking bug!”

But a person didn’t have to be in the medical field to know those things aren’t instant, so, I had to go for another diversion. “Look at this—” I got right up in Miss Lucinda’s face, again, and stuck my tongue out at her. “Almost bit my tongue in two, yesterday.”

“What did I just tell you?”

“But it hurts awful!”

“It doesn’t hurt half as much as having a toe blown off, does it? Now, go sit down! That or you could start putting some of this stuff in the car, because I’m taking you all back to town with me. Soon as I’m done here.”

Boone popped up from behind the bush. “Mom said I could stay with Grampy!”

“Don’t you sass me, Junior. Minute your mom hears what’s been going on out here, she’ll agree with me. That boxcar’s not even fit for animals!”

“But we’re not staying at the boxcar.” He wiped at some water dribbling down the side of his face from his hair. “We’re staying up at the *Padre Gordo Hotel*. We just came over here to Boone Lake after work, for a picnic and a swim.”

“I don’t care. Whole town knows Boone Lake is swamp hole, and you don’t belong swimming in it.” She bent down to rummage through her medical bag for a minute and then came up with a handful of cotton balls. “And if your Grampy doesn’t realize that,

then it's just like everybody says. He's not responsible."

Boone gasped at the words, and we both looked over at Grampy at the same time to see how he'd take it. But he was just sitting there on the rock, staring off into space with that same sad sort of look in his eyes, and finishing off his apple cider. Right when I was thinking he must have been too lost in his own thoughts to hear what she said, he looked straight across at her.

"How's that boy of yours doing in college, Lucinda?"

You'd have thought he smacked her. She dropped half the cotton balls, then set the alcohol bottle back on the rock so she wouldn't drop that, too. "That is not fair, Uncle Jack—not fair at all!" She sat down on the rock next to her stuff. Then she took her safari hat off and fanned her face with it. "You wouldn't expect me to lie, would you?"

He didn't answer.

She leaned forward, unzipped a pocket on the side of her medical bag and pulled out a bunch of papers to wave at him. "This here is an evaluation I'm supposed to fill out. Living conditions? Deplorable! Following doctor's orders? Absolutely not! Taking medications? Why, I'll bet two cents—"

"He is taking his medications—" Boone held up the little brown bottle. "They're right here! Isn't even time to take another one, yet!"

"But the worst of it," Miss Lucinda went on talking to Grampy like she hadn't heard a word Boone said, "is you letting these children swim in the swamp hole. That is just about the most foolish, irresponsible thing." She stuck the papers away, again, like it was no use even to talk about it. "Once their parents hear about that, I'd lose my job if I left them here!"

"That's not true!" Boone was ready to get in her face, too. "You can call my mom right now! Go ahead! See what she says!" He reached into his pocket for the cell phone, but when he pulled it out it was dripping water. "Oh—no—my phone!"

It doesn't take a genius to know those things don't work after you dunk them underwater. But even though they're expensive, and I knew Boone was probably going to get in some serious trouble for

doing a cannonball into the swamp hole without taking it out of his pocket, I have to admit I was a little relieved. Because if that nurse was to call my parents right now, there's no way they wouldn't side with her. On top of that, I was going to be in some big time trouble once I got home, too, because they'd say I should have known better.

I haven't been spanked since I ran across the street without looking when I was five. But I had a feeling my dad wouldn't care how old I was, now. If he had to hear the sort of things we'd been doing out here—from somebody else—I could see it happening all over, again. Seriously. Not to mention what he'd think about the Boone family.

"I appreciate what you've done with the family college fund, Uncle Jack—but what am I supposed to do, here? Show me a way out and I'll take it. Because I sure can't see one!"

"You could take some water samples back to town with you," said Grampy. "That would be the responsible thing. Then you could ride on up to *Padre Gordo* with us and check out our living conditions at the hotel."

"But Grampy!" Boone looked about to keel over.

"Hold your horses, Junior. Miss Lucinda has a job to do, and we can't get in the way of it. She represents the county."

"Nothing I can do about that," she said.

"Course not. And—I agree—nobody in their right mind could sleep down here on the flat this year," said Grampy (even though we did, night before last). "That's why we're up at the hotel. Better food up there, anyway."

"Grampy—what are you saying!"

"Course it takes about three hours to get up there, but if you have to make a report on it, Lucinda..." I guess he wasn't going to tell her about the shortcut we just barreled down in less than an hour. Instead, he grabbed his fishing pole and started making like he had a bite all of a sudden and there was a big one on the line.

"Mercy! Don't tell me that's a live fish coming out of that swamp hole." She got up to see for herself.

“Well, it’s no snapping turtle!” Grampy yanked on the pole and a huge catfish came sailing up past her and landed in the bushes.

I think he flung it there on purpose. Because the next thing he did was jump in after it, wrestle around a couple seconds like it was flopping too hard to grab, then whomped it with a stick. After that, he came out holding it up by the gills for everybody to see.

“My- my!” raved Miss Lucinda. “Look how big he is—if he isn’t pretty!”

“That makes more than enough for a good catfish supper.” Grampy made a show of getting him off the hook and then flinging open the basket to stick him in. But before he did, he tipped it toward her with a big smile on his face, so she could see inside.

There were three other big ones in there.

“Well, what do you say!” Grampy laughed his silent laugh and did a couple steps of a victory dance before he remembered his toe. That pill had to be working, now, though. Because he’d been all over the place without even a bandage. Just a giant black scab where his last toe should have been. But he didn’t seem to mind about that, either. He just said, “If we get a move on, we can make it up there before dark.”

“How’d you get that boxcar in such a mess if you weren’t staying in it?” Miss Lucinda sounded suspicious, again.

“Boys have been working down there to fix the porch.” Grampy started reeling in the line on his fishing pole like he didn’t have a care in the world about what she might see up at *Padre Gordo*. “Get a move on, boys. Lucinda, you might as well follow along behind us in your Jeep.”

Chapter Seventeen

Plan B

"Boys, Be Prepared!"

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

"I can't go all the way up there at this time of day—I wouldn't get home till two in the morning!" Miss Lucinda got up and motioned for Grampy to put his foot back on the stool. "But I'll tell you what. I will take some samples of that water back with me. Then—instead of coming Friday afternoon, I'll get here early in the morning, so I can take a decent look at the hotel."

Then she poured a big stream of the alcohol-stuff over his foot, and I figured we were going to hear the biggest collection of swear words ever gathered up in one place. Only Grampy didn't make a peep. She sloshed and dabbed and sloshed some more, and you'd have thought she wasn't doing anything worse than painting his toenails.

I got to admit my respect for him climbed sort of high, right then. On account of—when it came to something that hurt—I could broadcast all the way to the moon without even trying. I figured Grampy must have had Special Forces training, once. The kind where they teach you how to stifle that stuff.

"Don't know what I'm going to do about you letting these children swim in the swamp hole, though." She unwound a big lot of white gauze and started re-wrapping his foot. "I at least have to

notify the parents and let them decide.”

“They’re probably still at work,” said Boone.

“They let people answer their phones down at *Pickler’s*, Junior. The library, too, for that matter.” She started rummaging around in her medical bag, again. “Now, what am I going to use for those samples?”

“We have some empty water bottles in the Rhino,” I figured it would help more than hurt to try the polite thing, again.

“That’ll work all right. You can fill a couple up for me after I take a look at your blister.”

I backed off toward the lake. “It doesn’t hurt anymore. I—” The last thing I needed was any of that alcohol-stuff poured on me. “I just thought you might be interested in seeing it, on account of it’s big enough to be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.” Then I ran off to the Rhino without waiting for an answer.

In the end we all settled on a compromise. We got to stay with Grampy—at least until Friday—as long as our parents approved. We used Miss Lucinda’s cell phone, and Boone and I each had to come right out and say we had been swimming in Boone Lake, while she was standing right over us listening. Grampy talked to Mrs. Boone, first, then handed it off to Boone while I was still busy getting the water samples. I decided to call Dad at the library when my turn came around, even though Mom had summers off from teaching and was probably at home. I figured I had a little better chance telling him about swimming in toxic waste than Mom. Not much, but a little.

Yesterday, I wouldn’t have been too broke up about going home, on account of I spent most of the day feeling half-dead. But yesterday seemed like a year ago. Today, I felt like I might miss out on something big if I didn’t get to stay. I don’t know what, but it was big. Which was probably why I pulled sort of a fast one on Miss Lucinda when it was my turn to talk. She might have known my name and where my parents worked from her paperwork, but it didn’t say a thing in there about us only being in Ashbury for eight months. So, when I told Dad we went swimming in Boone Lake, he

just said that sounded great. He had no idea it was a swamp hole.

I tried my best to get a worried look on my face—like I was getting the lecture about the dangers of toxic waste—and then said, “Yeah, I know. I won’t do it, again.” After that, it was quiet for a few seconds and I just rolled my eyes like he was going on and on about it. But Dad was starting to wonder by then and asked me what was up. So, I blurted the first thing that popped into my mind.

“Dad, do you think we can maybe get a Rhino? We been riding around all over the place in one, and they are way cool. Seriously!”

Then I really did get the lecture. Not about toxic waste. He just reminded me how Mom felt about motorcycles, that dune buggies were practically the same thing, and the chances of her changing her mind were zero. Normally, I would have argued. But instead, I just said, “OK. I guess I’ll wait till I graduate, then. See you Monday!” And hung up.

I don’t know if Boone had it so easy, because he looked totally upset when he was talking to his mom. Probably told her about the cannonball, and found out how many dirty pizza pans it would take for him to work off that expensive cell phone. One thing I have to say about Boone. He never backs off about owning up to things, and meets whatever’s coming to him, head-on. Even if it scares the pants off him. Which it usually does.

All this thinking and figuring got me behind in my sample collecting and Miss Lucinda ended up taking only one bottle of swamp water back with her. The other was the one I turned pink from my severed tongue but hadn’t emptied out, yet. I tried to tell her—seriously—but she just grabbed it out of my hand, brushed me aside, and was in such a hurry to go that she stashed it into her bag with the other one. I didn’t know how those tests were going to turn out, but I wasn’t in any rush to tell on myself. So, I let it go.

After she left, we all just stood there frozen for a minute, listening to the sound of her engine fade away. The sun was starting to set. That’s when I realized we hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast and I was starved. Even though our fire was nothing more than coals now, those hot dogs looked like fat, burnt up cattails. But

I didn't care. I yanked one up and ate it anyway. Didn't even wait for mustard and a bun.

"Man—that was a close one." Boone was still standing next to Grampy, looking at the spot in the trail where the Jeep disappeared. "Didn't think she'd ever change her mind!"

"She didn't change it," said Grampy. "Probably come to her senses about halfway home but she'll be too embarrassed to admit it. I figure that gives us a little less than two days."

"Grampy, what if she decided to come with us? She'd have seen everything!"

"Then we'd have switched to Plan B. Always got to have a Plan B, Junior."

"Sure was lucky you caught that fish right then!"

"I caught those fish out of the Poco Rio Creek this morning, a little before sunrise. Forgot they were in the basket till I was throwing the hot dogs and jug in there. Seemed like a bit of Providence, though, because that's what finally turned her. Might as well cook and eat them right here. Coals should be just about right by now."

I had already inhaled another burnt hot dog and was just pouring myself a jar of apple cider when Boone hollered at me to stop. Like there was a rattlesnake, or something, coming up behind me. I looked up, then all around me, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he came over and flipped the lid closed on the basket and stuck the cork back in the jug.

Then he whispered, "Anything in a jug around here isn't just apple cider. Get it? You and me got to stick to water. Better take it over to Grampy. Then we gotta clean the fish."

It was a lot of work to clean those fish, and then a lot more to cook them. It was way worth it, though, because I never tasted such good catfish in my life. Heck, I didn't even know I liked fish—that's about how often we ate it in our family. Boone just fried these up in a little bacon grease, crumbled some dried sage over the top, along with a little salt and pepper, and then we ate them with a couple boiled potatoes. I was starting to see how Grampy could stay so long

in the desert without ever going into town, the way you could just catch something and eat it around here.

Anyway, that's why it was way past dark by the time we finally pulled up in front of the *Padre Gordo Hotel*, again. Turned out it was a lot easier hauling down a rocky wash than crawling back up one; So, we had to take another trail. Since it only took us about an hour and a half, I figured there were a lot of different ways to get up that mountain. You just had to pick whichever one suited what you were doing at the minute.

On that long way back, Grampy filled us in on Plan B.

It had to be a Plan B, because he didn't mention a thing about getting ready for the end of the world, anymore. Not even once. He only listed all the stuff we would positively have to get done before Miss Lucinda showed up Friday morning. Said we would have to work in shifts, practically around the clock. He decided to take the first shift since he already had a long sleep in the hammock while Boone and I were frying up the catfish.

He sent us off to bed for a few hours, until it was our turn, and I don't mind saying I was beat, and way ready to crash. I didn't even care that we had to pass by the same hotel room *Public Enemy Number One* slept in, once. That was the rumor, anyway. We just headed up to the third floor, where all the rooms had real beds in them and were clean as a regular hotel.

Only they were decorated like an old-fashioned western bunkhouse. There weren't any sheets or blankets, though, so we rolled our own Indian blankets out over the tops of the bare mattresses, in a room that had two sets of bunk beds in it. I think I was asleep almost before I laid down. Then—just like the first night I was here—I felt like it was only three seconds before Boone was shaking me awake, again.

Come to find out it was two in the morning.

I was so tired I forgot to be scared walking by all the haunted rooms on the second floor, and I think maybe Boone was, too, on account of he didn't say a word about it. Not one story about any of them. We just stumbled our way down to the kitchen, where there

was food still warm on the stove and a note from Grampy that said we should start lowering all stuff he piled in front of the pantry down into the hole. But before we headed down there, we slid fried eggs onto a couple thick slices of bread and grabbed a mug of Grampy's hot chocolate. That woke me up, all right. Felt like my whole head of hair reared up on end right along with my cowlick. But I drank it down.

It was pretty darn dark down in that cellar.

"Grampy?" Boone felt around for the light switch at the bottom of the stairs, but when it came on he wasn't anywhere down there.

It didn't look like the same place. For one thing, there was another hole punched into a wall, only this one went right through the rock under the stairs. It led into an old dark tunnel. Even though there were lights hanging from a wire strung out along the ceiling, it looked way too wicked dark for me. Besides that, I knew—just by looking at it—this was a real mine tunnel. The kind with all those hazards we weren't supposed to fool around with. I don't mind saying I got the creeps just staring into that thing.

Boone went to the edge but he didn't go in. He just held onto the side (like he might lose his balance and fall in if he didn't), stuck his head as far in as he could and hollered, "Graaaaam-pee!"

No answer.

That's when I noticed almost everything had been moved around down there. Most of the barrels and boxes were shoved up against the pantry room, where we had pulled all the gold up from, and I guess that's the stuff we were supposed to put down in the hole. There was a smaller pile over by a big double wooden door that was standing wide open. The air was so still and all the same temperature everywhere, I hadn't even noticed the big outside before.

"Hey, Boone—look at this." I headed over there. "Maybe he's outside somewhere."

We stepped out onto a gravelly driveway that led to the road between the mountain and the buildings (if you turned right). If you turned left, it went out to the main street. We went left. That is, Boone went left and I followed. There was a huge moon out, and

you could see everything pretty well without a flashlight. I wasn't too thrilled about every door and window we passed looking black as pitch, but I didn't mention it.

I just followed along (like I walked through ghost towns at night all the time), telling myself to get a grip, and trying to think of something else besides ghosts. Only nothing was coming to me. So, I looked up at the stars and tried to find the warrior. About the exact minute I spotted him, Boone stopped so fast we crashed into each other.

“Oh-h-h no-o-o” His voice sounded like he was about to holler his head off but hadn't busted loose, yet. Like he was still maybe halfway under control but the other half was going fast. He started to back up without even turning around. Like if he took his eyes off whatever he was looking at, it would grab us. “Oh-h-h NO!”

Funny how you can catch feelings from someone faster than a cold. I didn't see what he was looking at, but I didn't have to. The minute he went ballistic, the top popped off my own nerve so fast, I was the first one back to the cellar. Man—if I'd have done that good in the four hundred, I'd have earned myself a medal.

We ducked in behind the pile of stuff that was just inside the doors, falling all over each other to get hunkered down. We tried to at least shut up enough to hide, but the best we could do was a good imitation of somebody freezing to death up at the North Pole.

Nothing happened.

We sat for five minutes that way, until we finally started to calm down. After a while, I took a chance on a quick look over the top of the nearest barrel. Not because I suddenly felt so brave, but I figured we'd be stuck there until the next ice age if I had to wait for Boone to get a grip. Nothing looked any different than when we first came down.

“What—” Something moved out of the corner of my eye, but when I turned my head nothing was there. I finished off with a whisper, anyway. “did . . . you . . . see . . . out there?”

“The light! With my own eyes. I saw the light!”

“You mean, like a God thing?”

“No, the airport light! Bright as day! How could you miss it? Unless. Oh, my—”

“Ah, I was just star-gazing. Looking for Orion, that’s all.”

“What if it was ol’ Washington, himself! What if—”

“Sheesh, Boone. Will you get a grip? It was probably just Grampy down there looking for something. Rounding up mules, or something. He’s nowhere around here, is he? That’s the only explanation.”

“You can’t round up mules in the dark. They’re hard enough to spot in daylight.”

“Whatever. You didn’t hear an airplane, did you? Can’t be ol’ Washington Boone if you didn’t hear the plane. You made me drop the best half of my sandwich out there, too. I’m so hungry I feel like going back for it.” I was just trying to cheer him up, because, to tell the truth, I wouldn’t have gone back if you paid me.

I heard half a hyena laugh, so it must have been working. “I think I stepped on it because there’s a smashed-up piece of bread on my shoe.”

“That’s real hilarious, Boone.”

We were talking too loud, but at least we weren’t whispering anymore. I went over to the doors and looked outside. Mostly to prove to myself there was nothing to be afraid of, and partly to show off to Boone. He stood up but he didn’t come out from behind the barrels.

“Is it still on?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah.” I raised up on my toes for a minute. “Can’t actually see it, but I can see the glow of it. Just over the top of that chimney, next door. There, so you’re not haunted. Like I say, it’s probably just Grampy.”

Not two seconds later, I heard a plane.

Chapter Eighteen

The Last Chance

“In any annoying circumstances, you should force yourself to smile at once, and then whistle a tune, and you will be all right.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

I might not be the bravest person in the world, but I’m not the worst kind of coward, either. And if I hadn’t been totally (and I mean totally) embarrassed by being scared of my own face in a mirror this morning, I would never have done what I did next. But—man—I was sick of making a fool of myself. Especially when most of the times I let that happen, it ended up being for no reason. That’s why I decided—from now on—I wouldn’t do it anymore unless there was a darn good reason.

Besides that, whoever heard of going ballistic over the sound of a plane engine? *Public Enemy Number One*, maybe. But how dangerous could just the sound of something be? So, I grabbed the nearest headlamp, jammed it onto my head like some kind of helmet, and said, “I’ve gotta check this thing out!”

“Hud, don’t! If he looks at you, you’ll be—”

I got out of there as fast as I could. Mostly because I didn’t want to hear one more spook story from Jefferson Boone Junior. He was just too good at telling them and my imagination was working at hyper-speed. I also wanted to get by all those dark windows and

doorways without thinking about stuff jumping out at me.

I got all the way to the end of the driveway, whistling *Dixie* to keep up my nerve. Then I turned right onto the main street and headed straight for the airport. The light was shining bright as day all around it. The airplane engine seemed to be getting louder, but who's to say there wasn't somebody else with a big ranch out here? Maybe they flew in and out of it all the time with one of those little private planes. That would explain all the other times people heard an airplane out here, too.

Like I say, seems to me there's always an explanation for stuff like that.

Which is why I started to feel pretty good about myself walking towards that light. A whole lot better than hiding behind a bunch of barrels waiting for the boogeyman to get me. I'd rather see a boogeyman straight on than have one sneak up on me, anyway. I didn't know that before, but I knew it now. Come to think of it, I found out a lot about myself over the last two days that I never knew before. Most of it I wasn't too happy about—but, hey—a guy's gotta start figuring himself out one way or the other. Right?

I felt better and better the closer I got. Right up until that plane sounded like it was coming in for a landing. I actually saw the shadow of it pass right over the top of me when it came between me and the moon. That's when I got a full-on look at it just before it disappeared behind the big old barn they used for an airplane hangar around here. After that, I lost whatever courage I had about as fast as a garbage bag with a hole in it.

Because I knew in an instant it was Washington Boone's plane, all right. Two sets of wings and an outside seat (like the kind you see in those Red Baron dogfight movies about World War I). I even had a flash of the pilot's head sticking up, looking over the side for a good place to land. He had one of those old-fashioned flying hats with goggles on. I wish I could say I got a grip on myself. I wish I would have walked right up to him and said, "Hi, Mr. Boone, what are you flying around out here in the dark for?" Only I didn't.

After all that thinking about how much better it was to be brave,

I stopped dead in my tracks. Then took off back to the cellar like I was being chased by the devil. I even let out a holler, too, which I am way not proud of. What's worse, I dove right over the top of the barrels when I got back, and landed on top of Boone. Knocked the wind clean out of him. That shut him up in the middle of a long yell, and for a minute he was so still I thought I killed him. Which pretty much knocked the wind out of me just thinking about something like that.

I grabbed him by the shirt and rolled him over. His eyes were wide open and he was gasping for air, so, at least he wasn't dead. "Holy crud, Boone! Sorry—but I saw him with my own eyes!" I shoved one of the barrels we had fallen over out of the way so we could stand up. "He landed right on the other side of that—"

"We—we—" He still couldn't breathe right but he moved out anyway. "Gotta—hide!"

I was right behind him and hollered, "Head for the hole!"

"No—if it's him—he—knows every—hide-hole around here." He popped the top off one of the *Dickersen Pickel* barrels, dumped it over, and a whole bunch of pickles and juice ran out. "Best place is—in one of these barrels." He bent down and crawled in. "It's how I—hide from Grampy—come on!"

"But the minute he sees all these pickles—"

"Hurry up!"

I crawled in, too. Usually I like dill pickles. But sitting in a puddle of juice, squished in tight with Boone after he slid the top part-way closed in front of us, I got to admit it was pretty strong. I mean, I had a hard time breathing in there. We sat waiting for so long, I figured by the time all this was over I'd probably never want relish on my hot dogs, again. About two minutes later I was feeling even worse.

"Hey, Boone, I think I'm gonna puke."

"Shhh!"

"Seriously. I gotta get out of—"

We heard footsteps crunching along the gravel in the driveway and we both froze. We even stopped breathing. They sounded like

heavy boots on the ground—like the kind soldiers wear—and we knew just by listening he was coming right into the cellar. Closer and closer. My mouth started to water, just the way it does about three seconds before whatever you ate last comes roaring out like a volcano. That’s about how long it took before there was used bacon and eggs all over the place.

Boone popped out of the barrel like a jack-in-the-box and I rolled out after him. For a minute I thought he was going to puke, too. But instead he just backed off, leaned over and spit twice, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said, “Dang!” All before we noticed Washington Boone was standing right behind us.

I forgot everything I believed about ghosts in the next two seconds. Two seconds after that, it all came back to me, again. That’s because right when I was being totally amazed by how real he looked. I mean, those leather boots that went practically up to his knees, and that old-fashioned flyers cap, leather on the outside and sheepskin on the under-part, with long straps hanging down on each side that weren’t buckled, and the goggles pushed up onto the top of it— not to mention he walked like somebody out of hero movie—and, man, I don’t even know how to describe the look on his face. It was... it was...

“Dang, Grampy!” Boone’s voice cracked into a high note he was so scared. “You scared the spit out of us!”

“Well, it sure didn’t take much.” Grampy took the flyer’s cap off, tossed it onto a shelf halfway across the room, and looked hard at us. “Nothing but a couple of pansies! No good to anybody when you’re like that. Either one of you! Especially in a time of war!”

There he went with the war thing, again. I sure hoped he wasn’t going to carry it so far as to put us in the brig, or something. I hadn’t seen any jails around here but I knew most towns had one. I didn’t think he’d shoot us because we weren’t deserters. Cowards, for sure, but not deserters. What I did know, was something really strange had come over Grampy. He even looked different. What the heck was he doing in that airplane stuff?

The only reason I could come up with was that he finally lost his

last marble. Which meant even if there wasn't a war going on here, there was to Grampy. Now, things would probably get way more serious than before. Maybe even dangerous, depending what he had on his mind for the rest of Plan B. That's when I figured I better come up with a Plan B of my own. I'd talk it over with Boone the next chance we got though, because I sure wasn't going to ditch everybody and only think about myself, anymore. Not when I swore on the Bible I wouldn't. But—man—I'd never been in a mess this big!

"If you don't want us around, just tell us!" Boone was so upset, he didn't realize the danger of getting Grampy any madder. It was like he was trying to pick a fight. "What are you dressed up like the ghost for! We're not soldiers, Grampy—we're kids! And you scared the spit out of us!"

"Everybody gets scared, Junior. Doesn't matter how old you are. It's how you handle things that tells if you're a soldier, or not. But by the looks of this place..."

He looked at the mess all over us, and between the pickle juice and the puke we stunk to high heaven. "Even a little girl with a lollypop could have scared the spit out of you two." He sighed, real disappointed-like, and shook his head. "Nothing but a couple of pansies!"

"What else can you expect when you come at us looking like that?" Boone kicked a couple of pickles out of his way and came out from behind the barrels. "Dang, Grampy! If you weren't trying to scare us, what were you doing!"

"Nobody makes high-tech clothes for biplanes, Junior. We're running out of time, here. I had to take the plane up to get the herd in, and I used what gear was in there."

"You can't find mules in the dark!"

"You can if you have a spotlight and know where they're at. Now, I plan to leave for the stronghold by noon tomorrow. You boys can come, or not. It's up to you."

He took off a pair of leather gloves he had been working in, banged them against his leg once (to get the dust and dirt off), and

then stuck them in his back pocket. “I’m going to catch a couple hours of sleep. But whether you’re in or out of this thing, you two better have this mess cleaned up by the time I get up.” He looked hard at us, again, and I knew he meant every word. “Or I’ll wear you both out.” Then he turned around and headed for the stairs without even waiting for us to answer.

The weird thing was, he didn’t even limp.

For a minute we just stood there with our mouths hanging open. Then Boone startled awake like somebody pinched him. He went over to where there was a hose coiled up and hanging from a low hook in the wall, and turned on a faucet. As soon as a stream of cool water gushed out, he stuck his head under it. Then he put a thumb over the nozzle and started squirting himself all over, clothes and all. After that, he handed it over to me without saying a word.

I don’t have to mention how good it felt getting that yuk stuff off of me, except for the fact I found something else out about myself after I did it. When things aren’t going so good, a nice cool shower does wonders to clear my mind. The pickles weren’t much good without any juice to sit in anymore, so we had to bury them just outside the door. After that, we hosed the whole floor down, and the place looked better than when we first came down.

We still hadn’t talked anything over. But I knew by the way Boone was acting, he had figured the same things out about Grampy I did, and he was just way more upset about it. Who could blame him? I guess he knew if that nurse came back on Friday and caught Grampy running around in last century’s clothes, flying airplanes, there wouldn’t be much any of us could do to cover for him. To tell you the truth, I felt a little sad about that, myself, on account of Grampy was the most interesting adult I was ever around before. Whether he was crazy, or not.

By the time we got all the stuff that was piled up in the pantry room down in the hole, it was starting to get light, already. It was still quiet as a tomb in the hotel rooms above us, though, and we hadn’t caught a sight or sound from Grampy. Maybe he wasn’t really sleeping. I heard some crazy people could go days without

sleep.

“He’ll get in a better mood if we have breakfast waiting.” Boone’s voice was starting to sound like his old self, again. “He likes to wake up to the smell of coffee and bacon.”

I didn’t care if I never ate any more bacon and eggs myself, and decided to make do with a jelly sandwich. Boone must have felt the same way because he said I might as well make four. I figured it was now, or never, if we were going to have any kind of a talk, so I went ahead and jumped in.

“Hey, Boone.” I licked at a big glob of jelly that had dripped onto my hand. “Do you still think it would do any good to bury the bones?”

“I think it’s our only hope, that’s what I think.” He finished filling a blue tin coffee pot up with water, and then threw a handful of coffee grounds into it from a can by the stove. “Ol’ Grampy’s getting weirder by the minute.” He set it on one of the electric burners to boil (everything in this whole place was run by electricity) and then dropped half an eggshell in before he put the lid on.

“What the heck?”

“That’s how Gran always did it. Grampy likes it that way.”

“Sheesh. So, uh, does that mean we’re going to the stronghold with him?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because it’s a long way off, right? Which means he’ll miss his appointment.” I slapped tops on all four of my jelly sandwiches. “That Miss Lucinda nurse-lady will be madder than a hornet. Probably cane us, again, when she finds out we helped him get away.”

“Well, by the time she finds out, she won’t be able to do anything about it. We’ll be long gone.”

“Are you kidding? She can do something about it, all right. She can call the whole darn county out here to help her. Search and rescue people and everything. The whole enchilada. Then we’ll really be in trouble.”

“They won’t find the stronghold. Nobody’s ever been able to find it, and people been looking for years.”

“When we come back, then. They’ll get us as soon as we show up.”

“Grampy’s not coming back.”

“What?”

“When him and Gran lived up there, he only came out to visit the family every couple years. Now, that he knows the county’s trying to get him in one of those places for old people, he’ll just go on up there and never come down, again. I know the way my Grampy thinks, and that’s what he’s thinking.”

For a minute, I didn’t know what to say. Two days ago, I would have said nobody can stay out in a wilderness place forever. But now that I knew it was like some kind of a free grocery store out here, I figured he probably could. Which I didn’t blame him for. Not many people would choose locked up if they could go free. But all that didn’t change the fact that Boone and I were going to end up in the biggest trouble of our lives.

All of a sudden, I wondered if kidnapping laws could work backwards. Like if kids could get in trouble for stealing adults. Because if Boone and I came down off this mountain without Grampy, when the county was looking for him for his own good, we’d be accessories to the crime. That’s what they would call us. Accessories to the crime. I still didn’t know exactly what the crime was—heck, it’s no crime to be looney—but I knew we’d catch it for something. Otherwise my conscience wouldn’t be bothering me, right now.

I had a strong urge to talk it over with my dad, on account of it seems he can always make sense of things I can’t figure out. Two seconds later, I realized it was probably a good thing Boone’s phone was whacked, because if I called home and said something like, “Hey, Dad is it a crime to kidnap old people?” He’d be out here so fast even Grampy wouldn’t get away. Which would be the worst thing that could happen to the whole bunch.

“Cripes, Hud, you’re not getting cold feet are you? We gotta

save Grampy—it's our last chance!"

"Don't get mad at me, Boone, but there's one thing I absolutely have to ask."

"What."

"What if there is no stronghold?"

"Sure there's a stronghold! My parents aren't crazy—they've been telling me about it for years. My Gran, too. When her and Grampy would come visit us wherever my dad was stationed. Besides that, there's those family get-togethers we had right here at this hotel a couple times."

"Sure, everybody knows about the mines and the gold. Heck, it's even in the history books. But only the treasure keepers know about the stronghold, right? And there's only a few of them. Yesterday, Grampy told me there's only you and him, right now. Asked me if I would help you out sometimes, on account of you're really not old enough to do it all by yourself."

"It's because he's thinking about dying so much—that's why he talks like that. I'm telling you, Hud, he heard that singing bone! And that's why we gotta bury those things!"

"Your mom said to stay out of the mines."

"Yesterday, on the phone, Mom made me promise to do whatever Grampy told me. Really. I swear. So, if he says we're going to the stronghold, I'm going. Besides, he knows those mines like the back of his hand. What's the worst that could happen?"

"He could forget, that's what could happen. We could all get lost in there forever."

"Then you and me will mark our trail as we go along. Even if there's a cave-in, we just have to hike out another way. There's other ways out of there, Hud."

"If you have a hundred years to look for them, maybe."

"So, there's some risk involved. We have to do what's best for the whole bunch, don't we?. Anyway, I have to. I might never get a chance to save somebody, again, so, I'm taking it. Doesn't matter if Grampy's right or wrong about the end of the world. This is best for him. That's all the reason I need."

One thing I had to admire about Boone was that he was always sure of what he had to do. Then he went ahead and did it. Even if it killed him. Me, I go through all kinds of torture trying to decide if I should do something, or not. Like right now. I couldn't help wondering if sacrificing myself for the whole bunch would be a good enough reason for my own family not to have me around anymore. At least for the couple years I would have to do time in some juvenile jail.

Because—even if we did make it back out of the mine—I was pretty sure that's where this whole thing was headed. Right or wrong wasn't the issue. The county runs the show when it comes down to most things. It's just the way things are these days. The trouble is, there was something else that was nagging at me. What if everything Grampy told us was true?

Boone turned the burner off under the breakfast, then sat down at the table to wait for Grampy to show up. He grabbed a jelly sandwich and ate about half of it before he finally said. "Can't blame you for not wanting to go through with it. See, I been listening to stronghold stories ever since I can remember, so it runs deep for me. But I keep forgetting you never heard of this stuff before."

I didn't know what to say, so, I started eating the crusts off my jelly sandwich, instead.

"All you have to do is wait here for Miss Lucinda to show up tomorrow." Boone finished his up and then washed it down with sasparrilly. "She can get you back to town."

Man, that was worse than if he'd begged me to go. Somewhere along the line, letting Boone down had turned into my worst nightmare. I don't know how it happened, but there it was. To top that off, I was starting to feel just as much conscience about going back on my Bible swear as doing whatever I'm told by whoever feels like telling me something. The truth is, I was in one heck of a turmoil right then. I mean, whose side was I on, anyway?

Sheesh, I didn't even know, myself.

Which is why I hadn't answered anything at all when we

suddenly heard Grampy's boots clomp-clomping down the stairs. Then he walked through the saloon whistling the *Star Spangled Banner* (did he think he was back in the Air Force, again?) before he finally busted through the swinging doors like it was D-Day and time to move out. I don't know what kind of a nap he took upstairs, but—no kidding—he looked ten years younger. He grabbed a cup out of the cupboard and poured himself a cup of coffee.

Then he leaned back with one hand on the counter and the other wrapped around the cup instead of using the handle (made me wonder why he didn't get burned), and threw us a smile as big as Texas. No explanations, no lectures, no threats, and no orders.

He just said two words, "In or out?"

Chapter nineteen

Fire in the Hole

*“If, by his conduct, a Scout can in this way
save one fellow, he will at any rate have
done something in the world.”*

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Boone was staring at Grampy like he never saw him before. “In,” he answered sort of amazed. Then he blurted out, “Doesn’t your foot hurt anymore, Grampy?”

“Sure it does. Probably won’t be able to get this boot off for a week. But at least I can walk around in it.”

“Where’s your cane?”

“Still sitting behind that rock down at the swamp hole, I guess. Thing just got in the way most of the time, anyway. You boys get everything cleaned up down below?”

“Yes, sir. We got all the stuff you wanted in the hole put down, too. Even got the boards back on and the shelves and canned stuff up in front of them.”

“Good.” He piled a plate up with bacon and eggs. “Only thing left to do, then, is load up and move out.” He came and sat down at the table with us and reached for one of the jelly sandwiches. “Better rest some while I bring in the mules. Been a long time since they’ve been in harness. Too much for kids to handle. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to go.”

We didn't argue. It was only about eight in the morning, but when you've been up since two, and doing as much lifting and stacking as we did—not to mention all that emotional stuff—we were beat. We stretched out on our blankets in a corner of the cellar, and fell asleep listening to the sounds of the wind banging that loose shutter back and forth somewhere out on the street.

The two outside doors were still wide open, and now the sun was making a slant line halfway across the stone floor. I drifted off still trying to make up my mind if I was in, or out. In a way, I was glad Grampy hadn't come right out and asked me personal, because then I would have had to admit I wasn't sure, yet. But he had just sort of taken it for granted when Boone said, "In," that it meant me, too.

By the time he got around to shaking us awake, everything in the cellar had changed, again. It was practically empty, now—just a few barrels and some hams hanging from the rafters. Across the room and under the stairs was a whole string of white mules that looked exactly alike. Seven of them, all tied together.

Their backs were loaded high with the bags of gold and other stuff Grampy had set aside for the stronghold. The whole line was standing just inside the entrance to the mine—all quiet and behaved—like they'd been doing this sort of thing every day, and were just waiting for Grampy to say, "Go." The first three mules had saddles, with our backpacks tied on behind.

Boone leaned close and whispered, "If you don't want to go, now's the time to tell him."

I dragged myself up off the floor like I weighed two hundred pounds. I never felt so miserable in my life, and it made me sort of irritable. "How are you going to mark a trail in a gold mine? Leave crumbs like *Hansel and Gretel*? The varmints will get it all!"

"Don't worry about me." He was more calmed down than I ever saw him before. Like he was getting stronger and stronger by the minute. Sort of like Grampy. "I'll find my way back, all right." He folded his blanket in half and rolled it up. "Every time we turn, I'm gonna chip a hole in the wall with my rock hammer. Then I won't make any wrong turns coming out."

“The whole town will be waiting for you.”

“Then why don’t you create a diversion for us? You know, make a false trail for them to follow so it looks like Grampy and me lit out for Mexico! Nobody would follow us into Mexico. Even the county people.”

That’s when I knew for sure we were all going to get caught. Boone wasn’t thinking straight, or he’d have figured that out, too. Maybe a few people had been looking for the stronghold every once in a while, but none of them ever had helicopters and high-tech equipment like search and rescue teams did. Heck, forget the helicopters. They had dogs that were so well trained, all they had to do was smell your socks to lead everybody right up to where you were hid. Even if you were dead and buried somewhere. I’d seen those K-9 units at work a dozen times on TV.

That’s how I finally made my decision. I figured as long as I was going to get in a heap of trouble, anyway, I might as well get into it for saving somebody else instead of just myself. It might even make the judge go easier on us. On account of we were only kids and easy to influence. I also felt better about getting back through the mine after hearing Boone’s plan. Making holes with a rock hammer seemed like a pretty sure thing to me, too. So, since it all boiled down to whether I wanted to get in trouble now, or later.

I chose later.

That’s how it happened that I rolled up my Indian blanket the same way as Boone, and buckled it on behind the third saddle with a couple of leather straps attached to it. Other than pony rides at carnivals, I have never been horseback riding before. I took a long look at my mule to try and figure out if it was a mean one or a nice one, but I couldn’t tell just by looking. It didn’t have any chin whiskers like Miss Jenny, so it must have been a younger one. Not as well-trained, maybe. But they were all tied together, so, what’s the worst that could happen? Still, I thought it would be best to try and make friends.

“What’s this one’s name?” I gave it a firm pat on the neck like you see in western movies. The short white hair was course but

smooth and I could feel hard muscle underneath.

“Miss Jenny.” Boone went to the front of the line and just stood there. “They’re all named Miss Jenny.”

“All of them?”

“Yep. Boone family tradition. Ol’ Granny Maude got worried about people trying to follow the fat priest’s mule to the gold, so she bought a whole herd of white mules to wander around on this mountain. Called them all Miss Jenny. We’ve been buying white mules to keep a herd going ever since. Go ahead, hop on. Only you better go around to the other side. Always get on from the left.” Then he called, “You ready, yet, Grampy?”

“Just about.” He was standing inside the mine, twisting a couple wires together. “Take them on down to the first turn, Junior, and I’ll be right behind you.”

Boone grabbed hold of the lead mule’s halter and said, “Get along, get along, get along,” real soft and almost like a song. The line started to move and my Miss Jenny followed right behind. I don’t know if I was more scared or excited. The only way I can think to describe it was the first time I ever jumped off the high-dive at the pool. There were a ton of kids waiting in line all the way up the ladder behind me, and once I was up, the only way down was to jump. I was scared all the way down. But when I finally hit the water and came up alive, I felt like a million bucks. Now, Boone and I did cannonballs and everything else off that high dive. Which just goes to show what a person can get used to if they do it enough times.

Just like the tunnel behind the dragon’s nest, the mine smelled like wet cement after a rain. It was cool like air-conditioning the way the other one was, too. The string of lights on the ceiling seemed to go on forever, as far down as I could see, anyway. Boone was walking along up front, still holding onto the old Miss Jenny’s halter, and every once in a while he’d say that sing-song, “Get along, get along, get along,” again, just to keep them all moving.

My Miss Jenny didn’t seem to care a bit that I was hitching a ride on top of her. So, after I realized the only way to fall off was to

throw my own self over the side, I turned around to catch a look at what Grampy was doing behind us. It was a darn good thing I did. If I hadn't turned around just at that second, I would have never known how to operate the outside door to get back, again. Because that's how they closed off the mine entrance under the stairs.

Grampy bent down and connected the wires he had been twisting together to a car battery stashed off to the side. A few seconds later, a big stone wall rumbled across and closed us off from the world. It looked exactly like the stone walls of the cellar. I figured there must be another battery with wires, hidden up under the stairs somewhere, and that was how Grampy opened up the mine in the first place. After we were shut in, he disconnected the wires, again, and slid the battery back into some hole in the wall. Then he started walking to catch up with us.

Just when I was wondering if we shouldn't maybe wait up for him, my mule started making a turn and I faced front, again. As soon as the whole line got inside the new tunnel, Boone stopped. It was pitch dark in that one, and it gave me the creeps. He reached down and felt along the wall. Then he threw some kind of switch, and a string of lights in the ceiling lit up ahead of us.

"Get down, quick!" He pulled a rock hammer out of his belt. "I need you to hold Miss Jenny while I make the first hole. We gotta do it before Grampy gets here!"

I slid down and went to the head of the line. I took hold of the halter (it was the old Miss Jenny, I recognized the whiskers) and just stood there listening to the *ca-chink, ca-chink, ca-chink*, of Boone's hammer. Right when I was wondering how we were going to recognize one hole from another around here, I saw he was going for a long shallow line. Sort of like an arrow with no point. He stuck the hammer back in his belt, and we had barely changed places, again when we heard Grampy's boots crunching along the tunnel behind us.

"I thought you said you never been here before," I whispered. "How come you know where everything is around here?"

"I haven't been in this one. But I've done a lot of work in the

tunnel and they're all set up the same way. All these lights run off batteries. You just turn them on and off as you pass through to different work areas. If you keep an eye out, you can see traces left of the veins they dug gold out of."

"What happens when the batteries run out?" By now, I had seen plenty enough gold. At the moment, I was more interested (all right, I admit it, I was nervous) about that big door getting shut and all the lights maybe going off in here. I almost felt like putting one of the headlamps on, so I could click it on fast in an emergency. But I didn't want to act like a wimp in front of Boone.

"We charge them up, again, at the electric plant." He was still on the subject of batteries.

"All the way back in town?"

"Heck no. We have our own. The one up here at *Padre Gordo* generates from water out of the river. One at the dragon's nest is solar." He went over and peeked down the other tunnel and hollered, "Ready to shut her down, Grampy?"

"Go ahead." His voice sounded close, now, and just as Boone bent down to switch off the lights in the main tunnel, Grampy stepped through into this one.

"But there was nothing but dried-up rocks in that river!" I guess I was still a little worried there weren't enough brains left between those two to make one bag of sense, because they were starting to act too much alike. I knew I could get back from here by myself, but I was jittery about getting too far away from that door.

I wondered how far away the stronghold was.

"That wash we drove up is just the overflow that heads down the mountain." Boone let go of the lead halter and climbed up on the mule that was next in line. "The river coming from inside the mountain never runs dry. Even with all of *Padre Gordo* piped into it."

"Hop up on the lead, Junior." Grampy reached into one of the packs and pulled out a handful of headlamps. "I've got some work to do here, and the next turn's about half a mile down. Might lose the lights for a few minutes, so I want you boys to put these on. Take

the line all the way into the next tunnel you come to, and wait for me there.”

Half a mile! My stomach did a flip-flop, and for a minute, I thought I was going to lose whatever nerve I had saved up so far. Mostly because I knew for a fact those headlamps only had about six hours of good light in them, and Boone and I had been using them down in the hole for at least four.

Grampy undid a few buckles and unhitched the last mule. Then he slapped the rump of the one in front of that one and said, “Get along, now!”

At the sound of his voice, all the other mules started off at a trot. Boone almost slipped off but caught himself, and I had to hang onto the saddle horn to keep myself from falling. Not that we were going fast. It’s just that trotting is about the bumpiest way to travel there is. Even a flat out run is smoother. Only I didn’t learn that until later. Right then, I was busy thinking my brains would probably fall out my nostrils if I had to do this for very long.

“Stand up in the stirrups!” Boone looked like a jockey leaning in to the finish-line with his butt sticking up and his head and shoulders all hunkered down over Miss Jenny’s neck. “Keep your head down, though, or you’ll knock it off on the ceiling!”

“Oh, holy crud.” I stood up in the stirrups and gave it a try. Doing it that way, all the leg-muscles took the bounce and my head glided along smooth. I didn’t know how long I could keep it up though, because my legs were tired out after only a little while. So, I had to alternate between muscle-torture and brain-bashing.

Just when I was going to tell Boone I was ready to settle down to a walk, again, we slowed down and made the next turn. He slid out of the saddle before the team even stopped, and hit the ground walking. Right when I was going to say that I seriously did not want to be left by myself in the middle of six runaway mules, he called out, “Hold it up!” and they all came to a stop like horses on a merry-go-round.

“Might as well get down.” He took the rock hammer out of his belt, again, and headed back toward the entrance to start another

hole. "When Grampy says he has some work to do, it could mean anything from a few minutes to a few hours. "I gotta get this done, first thing, in case he's only gone a few minutes."

"Why would he get mad if he knew we were marking our trail? Just plain sense, if you ask me." I slid down off my mule and fell on my butt when my knees buckled under me. I finally managed to get up, again, but my leg-muscles were shaking.

"Because when you mark a trail, others can follow it, too, that's why." Boone started banging away with his hammer. "It's just I don't trust myself to remember exactly if there's more than a few turns. This mine here is the original shaft." He brushed off his arrow-hole, decided it wasn't deep enough, and then started banging away, again. "It's got miles and miles of tunnels fanning out in every direction. All that commercial mining that went on in it."

"There." He stepped back to admire his work for a minute, then found the battery nearby and switched the next string of lights on overhead. "Now let's have something to eat."

It seems all we'd been doing for the last three days was work and eat. But I had to admit that jelly sandwich was long gone, and I was getting hungry, again, too. So, when Boone reached into one of the packs the mule right after mine was carrying, and tossed me an apple, I was glad to have it.

"Hey, how'd you know where to look?" I took a huge bite and felt some of the juice trickle down my chin.

"We always keep the food in the first pack mule of the line. Cook stuff on the right and snack stuff on the left." He sat down and leaned his back against the cold stone wall. "Might as well rest. Who knows what Grampy will have us working on, today.

"How long till we get to the stronghold?"

"I don't know. I never been."

"We gonna just get Grampy settled and then hike out, again?"

"Yeah. Mom said she'll pick us up Monday at the hotel."

"Your mom knows the way to the hotel?"

"Sure she does. I told you we used to have our family get-togethers here before Gran died. We all stayed at the hotel. That's

why the third floor's fixed up so nice." He finished with his apple and started eating the core. Boone always ate the core. "Busted up stuff on the lower floors is just to keep snoopers away."

"Man. You Boones sure thought of everything."

"Grampy says when you've been at something over a hundred years, you pretty much have all the bugs worked out."

"Wow." I went over and offered my apple core to my own Miss Jenny. She took it real gentle, and the warm breath from her soft nose against my palm felt kind of special. I patted her strong neck, again. "Where do you pee around here?"

"Against the wall. If you have to do anything else, you use the rock hammer and dig a hole."

"Oh." I looked ahead, but this tunnel seemed to go on for another forever and I couldn't spot any turns. "What do you think Grampy's doing back there?"

"I don't know. Setting up an alarm or covering our tracks, probably. He's got alarms rigged all over this place. To warn him in case of intruders. I guess that's what makes him a good treasure-keeper. Because he takes everything so serious."

"Yeah, well, trying to get ready for the end of the world is taking things way too serious, if you ask me."

"We'll see what happens after we bury the bones. Meanwhile, we better just go along with everything. Something way weird is going on with Grampy, but I haven't figured out if it's good or bad, yet."

"He sure has got a double dose of energy from somewhere! Did you notice how he can just put a lid on whatever's hurting him and keep on going? Better than normal even."

"Yeah." Boone picked up a few pebbles and started lobbing them over the top of the mules to bounce off the wall on the other side. He never sat still long for anything unless he was asleep. Or in one of those frozen trances he fell into when just the thought of something scared the pants off him. "I thought sure he was Washington Boone come back from the dead, last night. It was the walk that got me. Even more than the clothes."

“That was too weird. Seriously.”

“Must be the boots. Holding his foot together. It’s like he’s walking in armor.”

“Way weird. At first I thought maybe he was—”

All of a sudden the lights dimmed, flickered, and then came back on, again. Boone and I must have had the same thought, because we both switched our headlamps on without saying a word. Then for a minute we just sat there and listened. We couldn’t hear anything but the mules stamping a foot now and then. You couldn’t even hear them breathe.

About two seconds after that, there was an explosion.

Chapter Twenty

Face of Death

“He did not, as some people might have done, give up all hope; he wasn't going to say die till he was dead.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

For the first time in my life I was too scared to holler. The thought of Grampy accidentally blowing himself up made my chest feel like it was caving in. On top of that, being trapped in a dark place that nobody even knew existed was enough to make me start gasping for air before we even ran out of it. Forget the rescue team. Even if dogs led them to the hidden door under the stairs, it would take a genius to figure out what they were even looking at. What the heck was I doing here?

My brain must have kicked into hyper-speed, then, because in less than a second, I had three serious thoughts. Number one was how fast poisonous gas could travel (I read once that underground explosions sometimes release poisonous gas that can make miners drop over dead if they don't get out fast enough). Number two was if Boone and I would be able to find another way out of here if the explosion had caused a cave-in between us and the door. Number three was how long it would take two kids to dig their way out of a mountain with just a rock hammer.

I thought all those things at about the speed of light. After that, I

was going for a prayer because I figured, if a person got himself in trouble trying to keep a promise to God, it only made sense He would help you out of it. But all I managed to say was, “Oh, God. Oh, God,” on account of my throat felt squeezed tight like somebody was choking me.

Right then, Boone jumped up and grabbed old Miss Jenny’s halter and said, “Whoa, now. Whoa, now.” The whole line was stamping their feet, snorting, and getting ready to take off.

It was pretty amazing. Every one of them settled down and stood quiet, again, after he did that. I was shocked Boone could be that cool-headed in a situation like this. But, like I say, he was turning into a Grampy-clone right in front of my eyes. He stood there for a few seconds, until he was sure they weren’t going anywhere, and then looked over at me so fast his headlamp blasted into my face. I held a hand up until he clicked it off, and then I clicked mine off, too. The lights above us were still on, but the tunnel we had come from was darker than night, and the air smelled like fireworks coming out of there.

“Don’t worry, we’re safe.” Boone must have noticed I was scared enough to pass out. “That was just Grampy covering our tracks. Most people are so afraid of cave-ins they won’t walk past a rock slide.”

“I don’t blame them!” My voice busted up into a high note. “Holy crud! What if Grampy blew himself to pieces back there!”

“No way.”

“What if the whole place caves in? We could get killed, here!”

“Trust me, he knows what he’s doing. Listen, you can’t spend most of your life in a hard rock mine without turning into a demolition specialist. Probably just sealed off the other end of that tunnel.”

“Sealed it off! Sealed it off? How the heck are we supposed to get out of here, now?”

“I told you, there’s lots of ways out. There’s escape ways all over the place.”

“Then let’s take one. Hear me? I want to go home!”

“I don’t know where they are, you’ll have to ask Grampy.” He walked past the mules, turned his headlamp back on, and peeked into the dark tunnel. “It’ll take him a while to get here, though.” He turned it off, again, and came back to sit down. “His headlamp looks like he’s doing a slow walk. Like he’s out on a Sunday ride.”

“Holy crud, Boone! He must be stark, raving crazy! Blowing things up could kill people! He’s a fruitcake! He is way past weird, now, and I mean waaaaay past. Seriously!”

He crossed his legs, leaned his elbows on his knees, and started pulling one of the curls over his forehead straight, and then letting it spring back, again. Over and over. After a while, he said, “Maybe he’s just been working too hard.”

“I’m telling you, he’s got Alzheimer’s, or something! What if he says we gotta stay down here and wait out the end of the world? How are we gonna get out of here by ourselves?”

“He could get us out of here even if he did have Alzheimer’s! What do you know about it? I trust my Grampy, Hud.”

“Yeah, well,” I felt like side-punching him but I just didn’t have it in me. Instead, I choked back the lump in my throat, took a deep breath, and tried to get a grip. “If you trust him till you’re dead, I’m never talking to you, again!”

Grampy showed up about fifteen minutes later. He came riding up on the last Miss Jenny like he didn’t have a care in the world. He looked like he was riding a camel, on account of he was sitting on top of her pack. Man, those mules were strong! He gave us a big smile—like he had something even weirder up his sleeve we were gonna have to gear up for—and slid down off that mule like he wasn’t a day past fifty. Which made me think we were maybe all dead already. Like we had died in the explosion and just hadn’t taken off for anywhere else, yet.

I did a quick look for our dead bodies lying around somewhere, and, after I didn’t see any, I started to wonder if going crazy was catching. Because I suddenly remembered how Sir Robert had mentioned in the book that, *“If you listen to what is wrong, you get to think about what is wrong and very soon you get to doing what is*

wrong.” But what was a person supposed to do if he didn’t know it was wrong in the first place? Now, we weren’t only in deep trouble, we were in some serious danger, too.

First, Boone said, “Did you seal up the tunnel, Grampy?”

Then Grampy answered, “Right up to the top.”

Which made me pop off with, “Great! That’s just great. Now, what if that was the only way out of here.”

Grampy didn’t even slow down buckling the last mule back in line. He just said, sort of matter-of-fact, “Then I guess we’d have to clear it all out of the way, again.”

“That would take weeks!” My voice came out louder than I meant it to.

Grampy turned around and took a long slow look at me. He pulled his leather gloves off, banged them on his leg, and then stuck them in his back pocket. I could tell he was trying to decide how much to let me in on. I just knew it. “Boy, we have six months worth of food and water right on top of these mules. Shoot, we could punch a hole clean through the mountain in that amount of time.” Then he looked over at Boone. “Junior, how come you didn’t explain things better? Boy looks like he’s seen a ghost.”

“I told him as soon as we heard it go off.”

“Why didn’t you warn him before? What did you think I was doing back there? Looking for left-over gold?”

“Well, I—”

“Maybe you forgot how your dad couldn’t get you back in the tunnel for a week the first time you heard an explosion like that.”

“No, sir. I guess I was just distracted.”

“Distracted with what?”

“With trying to—”

“It wasn’t his fault!” I shouted right over the top of Boone’s voice, on account of I knew he was about to blurt out the whole truth about the arrow-holes, just because Grampy was asking for it. So, I started rattling off every excuse that came to me as fast as I could. “If I hadn’t kept him so busy answering questions like, why all the mules are named Miss Jenny, or how’s a guy supposed to take a pee

around here, he would have got around to it!” I looked back to throw Boone a Grampy-sowl, being careful only he could see it. “Right, Boone?”

“Sooner, or later,” he finally answered.

“Well..” For a minute, I wasn’t sure if Grampy was going to buy into that. But then he said, “Considering you probably felt like the whole place was coming down on top of you... ” He broke the stare-out between him and me, first, and started for the front of the line. “You’re not as much of a pansy as I thought.”

Then a strange thing happened. All of a sudden, I understood how Boone could trust him so much, no matter how bad everything looked. Right then, I didn’t care if Grampy was crazy, or not, either. Because hearing those words from somebody who was tough enough to put a lid on his pain if he had to, and had probably looked death in the face fifty times over...

Words like that coming from somebody like him, made me feel ten feet tall.

I’m not proud of how fast I kept changing my mind back and forth from one minute to the next. If I’d have seen one of those escape places right after the explosion, I’d have run out of it by myself if I had to. But, like I said, I’m going for telling the whole truth, here. Just the way it happened. And the way it happened after Grampy said those words to me was, I would have followed him anywhere. Because for the first time in my life, I thought there just might be a little bit of that hero stuff somewhere inside me, too. There had to be. If a real-life hero like Grampy had noticed it.

I also figured if Boone could stifle his fears and keep a cool head when it really counted, then I had a chance at training myself to be that way, too. But, man, you have to learn that stuff from somebody who already knows it, because it’s impossible to practice something you don’t even know exists till they let you in on it. Isn’t something that comes natural. What comes natural is hollering like a baby and making a fool of yourself.

And just because Grampy was going crazy didn’t mean I couldn’t still learn it from him. Because he still had it in him. I’d

seen it with my own eyes. Whatever he grabbed hold of deep down inside himself when he needed to face something hard, made him stronger every time he used some of it. I think it actually energized him. That had to be the only explanation for why he kept looking younger, instead of old and broken down like when I first met him.

It was the hero stuff showing through.

Whenever that happens, it's like a light going on, or something. Nobody, no matter who they are, can help but admire that kind of thing. It's got a shine that covers up all their weak spots. I had a hunch those weak spots might even fade away some if a person let that hero-shine show through them often enough. I'm not sure that's exactly how it works, but that's how I was thinking about it then.

Right then, I felt that close to grabbing some of it, myself. All I had to do was let a little more of it slosh over on me from Grampy. Anyway, that's how Boone seemed to be getting it. And I was starting to think whatever Boone could do, I could do. No, let me say that different. By that time, I was feeling like whatever Boone had turned into, I had to be that, too. Because I just plain didn't like who I was before I found out about all this stuff. Not anymore, I didn't.

That's why, when Grampy climbed up on Miss Jenny and said, "Everybody mount up!" I climbed back up in my saddle just as fast as Boone did. We were almost a mile into the mountain by then. But I didn't care if it took all day to get back out of there. I was going along with them. I had a feeling the way my whole future turned out might depend on it.

Whatever was left of it.

Grampy raised his hand, like a cavalry officer about to say "C Troop, yo!" just before they all started out on patrol, deep into Indian territory. Instead, he said, "Everybody raise your right hand, and say, I do solemnly swear... "

Holy crud. We were going for another swear. But at least it wasn't on the Bible, so I stuck my hand up in the air along with him and Boone. I figured if worse came to worst and I ended up having to face the county, I could at least tell the truth without having to

break a promise to God. I could plead I was just a kid, acting under the influence of a real-life, bona fide hero and couldn't help myself.

"I do solemnly swear..." Boone and I spoke the words together.

"That what I am about to see," said Grampy, "I will not reveal to anyone except treasure keepers. Whether they be Boones, or adopted in according to the code of the brotherhood. So help me God."

There was a few seconds of silence, but when Boone started rattling off, I joined right in. And I might as well admit—just for the record—that I was in my own right mind when I did it. Because I knew that swear was as good as the one I did on the Bible, on account of I was swearing on the swear I made on it in the first place. The one I did lay my hand on the Bible for, at the campfire. It was real, all right. As real as it gets. And at that moment, I wouldn't have gone back on it if you would have put a knife to my throat. Because I had a feeling it was the actual real doorway.

Right into that brotherhood of heroes.

Chapter Twenty-one

To the Gates of Hell

“Their loyalty to him made them wish to follow their leader wherever his duty led him. So they became soldiers like himself and all went together”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

We didn't all charge off at a trot. Which I was glad for because I wasn't sure how much more brain-bashing and muscle-torture I could take right then. Instead, we just headed off down the passage like we were at some amusement park and had just handed over our tickets for the ride. Grampy was like a tour guide, directing our attention to points of interest along the way and doing a lot of explaining how things were done in the mines.

I reached into my backpack behind me and pulled out a little notebook I always kept in there, with a pen clipped on. Mostly I had used it for writing down school assignments, or stuff my sisters sent me to the store for. But now, I figured I better take notes, and do my best at drawing some sort of map where we were headed. Because I had a feeling Boone wasn't going to risk hammering many arrow holes along the way with Grampy looking over his shoulder.

I had no idea if we were going north or south, on account of I had got way turned around down there and couldn't see the sun. Boone always carried a compass in his backpack, but I figured it would be way too risky to ask for it until I could get him aside, out of Grampy's earshot somewhere. Until then, I would just have to do

the best I could.

By my watch (for once I was glad I had a watch instead of a cell phone to tell time, because it wouldn't have worked down here) I could tell it only took us about twenty minutes to come to the first turn. The tunnel looked pretty much like the others we had passed through, already. So I just made a line and wrote "twenty minutes" alongside of it. Then I drew another short line to show where the turn was, and an arrow pointing that way. But then we went right on past it, so I had to scribble out the arrow and print "keep straight!"—underlined two times. To make sure I didn't forget.

About ten minutes after that, we came to a place where the tunnel branched off in both directions. Up until now, we had taken every right turn we came to (so, I made a note of that), but this time we went left. I hardly finished writing all that down when we came to a dead end. With a huge pile of rocks in front of it. Just when I thought we were going to have to move all those things—and right when I was thinking it was starting to look pretty obvious you could find the stronghold just by clearing away every rock-slide—Grampy stopped about fifteen feet in front of it, and stood up in his stirrups.

He reached up high and felt along one of the big wooden roof supports, and then flipped a switch. There was a low rumbling sound, and in a minute, a narrow side door opened up right in the wall. Sort of like the one under the stairs back at the hotel, only smaller. It was half hid behind a wide beam that held up the last roof support. Since there were no lights past there, you might miss seeing it, even if it was open. On account of you'd be looking up at the rock slide that was mostly in the dark, and thinking you had come to nothing but a dead end.

"Everybody dismount." Grampy got down, himself, even as he said it. "Have to walk the mules through here because, for the next mile and a half, it's gonna be steep and narrow."

Steep and narrow. If there's one thing I don't like, it's tight, closed-in places. But I figured if Grampy was that old and had gone through it all the way (and come out) as many times as he probably had, we would, too. So, I got down, grabbed my Miss Jenny by the

side of her halter, and followed along. I admit half the time I was hanging on her more than leading her, but she didn't seem to mind. The path we were climbing up was hard-packed dirt and rock, and sometimes it was loose and slippery.

It took us about an hour to get all the way through. The tunnel wound around a lot and was pretty steep in places. But there were other spots where it went along level for a while. Other than the fact I could almost stand on my tip-toes and touch the ceiling, I managed to keep most of my jitters to myself. Meanwhile, Grampy was chattering away like we were on vacation. You'd have thought he was having the time of his life.

If he hadn't made mention of the fact that we would be stopping for the night at someplace called Crystal Springs, I think maybe all those dark, closed-in spots would have got to me. Hey. I am not a mole. I never wanted to see the sun and breathe fresh air so much in my life. So, I kept thinking about that Crystal Springs place, and how great it would be to jump in and take a swim. On account of I was starting to feel all crusted over with sweat and dirt, again.

That is, unless it was nothing but another swamp hole with a pretty name, like Boone Lake. Which is why I came right out and asked. On account of, by that time, I was way tired of surprises. He said it had some of the cleanest, purest water in the world, and we were all going to take a dip in it. He even went so far as to say it had healing powers, but I let that piece of information sort of just roll off me.

Because I was starting to get pretty good at telling the difference between Grampy's vital information and his crazy stuff. Which finally made me understand how Boone could hide from him one minute, and then follow him around like a dog the next. I was thinking about all that when we finally got to the end of the long tunnel and came to a stop. Right in front of another dead end. About the time I was starting to get sort of sick at the thought we might have to turn around and go through that thing, again, Grampy got down off his mule, and then disappeared.

I mean, totally. Right into thin air. If I hadn't seen it with my

own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. But I had seen it. And the only explanation I could come up with, was that we really had been blown up back at the hotel. All of us. The reason I hadn't seen any bodies lying around was because they were buried under a thousand-pound rock pile. Either that, or my own brain had finally cracked. Which didn't make me feel very good, either.

So, I just stood there in a daze, feeling terrible about what my family would have to go through (especially Mom) when they found out I had been acting like a jerk out here, and went and got myself killed. Maybe I was looney before I even started out. Like if it hadn't happened here, it would have happened on the Apestoso, anyway. Why else would there be a hundred-year old rule about kids staying out of it? That Apestoso River was probably a death-trap just like everybody said it was. And if I was stupid enough to—

“Get a move on, Hudson!” Boone smacked my shoulder from behind. “What's the matter with you?”

He must have walked around the whole team from the other side to sneak up on me that way. Either that, or—

“You take them around the turn from in front as soon as Grampy whistles, and I'll push the rest through from behind.”

“Where's he gonna whistle from?”

“From outside the mine. As soon as he checks to make sure the trail hasn't shifted or slid away down the mountain since he's been here. This is one of the escape places. Weren't you listening?”

“Sure, but—”

“Then how did you miss that part?”

“Well, I—”

There was a loud whistle that echoed off the walls like a whole bunch of guys out there instead of just one. Boone jumped and hollered, “Tell me later!” as he high-tailed it back to the end of the line. I stashed my notebook in my back pocket and took off for the front. I barely had time to grab onto old Miss Jenny's halter before she started dragging me through. I guess she'd done it enough times to know the routine.

It also helped me figure things out about the disappearing part.

See, this time, there was no door. Just one side of a rock face that only went three-quarters of the way across, standing about three feet in front of another identical three-quarter wall that started on the opposite side. Sort of like those big public bathrooms you see in airports or campgrounds that don't have doors but you can't see into them. On account of you have to make a few turns to even get in. The thing about this one was, if you were standing far enough away from it, you couldn't see any entrance, at all. That's how good everything blended in. So when Grampy walked behind the front section, it looked like he disappeared.

Which made me feel a whole lot better about not being dead or crazy.

Anyway, we took a hard left at the dead-end, through a short hallway that opened up into a giant cavern, like you see every once in a while on the Nature Channel. The kind with all sorts of weird formations pointing down like icicles from the ceiling and sticking up like huge daggers from the floor. Like the one Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher got lost in (if you read that kind of stuff). The one called *Injun Joe's Cave*.

There were a couple of flood-lights shining up from the floor that was about a hundred feet down, and I could see Grampy walking along about fifty feet ahead of me on a narrow trail that wound around the side of the mountain we had just popped out of (only we weren't exactly out). It made me sort of dizzy thinking of walking along that thing. No wonder he was checking it for rocks and slides.

Right when I was trying to get a grip on how fast I was breathing, old Jenny let loose with a loud bawl right next to my ear that practically gave me a heart attack. The next Miss Jenny was stuck halfway around the turn, holding the old one up from following Grampy. And she was bound to follow him, all right. That old mule stuck to Grampy like glue. There was a sign or whistle for everything he wanted her to do, and she hopped right to it.

So, I just let her go and went back to pull the other one through. Then I had to stand there and do the same thing for each Jenny that

came along behind, on account of they balked when they had to make that tight turn into the cavern with all that stuff on their backs. Probably just not as well-trained as the old one.

At the same time, I could hear Boone's "Get along, now!" and a snapping sound as he smacked each one that hesitated on the backside as they went in. After that, he must have turned the lights out in the tunnel, because everything went dark except for the big floodlights shining up onto the walls from down below.

By the time Grampy hollered, "Mount up!" Boone still wasn't back, yet. I wasn't in the mood to have to answer to Grampy where he was, so I stood there for a few minutes, waiting for him to get out there before I had to.

Just when I was thinking I'd rather walk it than risk one of those mules dragging me over the side, Grampy said, "Come on, Boy. These mules are a lot more sure-footed walking along a high, thin ledge like this than you'd ever be. Just be careful getting on."

So, I grabbed the saddle-horn, stuck my foot in the stirrup, took a deep breath and climbed on. I closed my eyes before I could see over the side, though, because I did not want to look down. By the time I was facing straight ahead and had opened them, again, Boone came running past us on the mountainside, and jumped up into his saddle like one of those cowboys that rides into the ring ahead of a rodeo show. Like he'd been riding mules all his life, and trusted them enough to go tearing right down the side of this mountain if he had to.

Talk about different. He looked like he was having the time of his life (just like Grampy), and I was sitting there worried I might never get down off that indoor hill. But that didn't bug me like it would have a week ago. Because if there was one thing I learned from being out here, it was how practicing something made you good at it. I mean, I had no doubts if I wanted to get as good as Boone—at anything—all I had to do was work hard and practice more. Which actually made me feel pretty good about myself, worries and all.

The weird thing was, that good feeling sort of sloshed over onto

my jitters about being on the narrow trail, and I wasn't even as scared about that so much anymore, either. I don't understand how that happened, it just did. Which is a good thing, too, because it gave me just enough more nerve so I could leave the trail-following to the mules and take a better look at where we were. At least enough for my map not to look like a finger-paint project when I tried to read it, again.

Meanwhile, Boone was totally zeroed in on the stories Grampy was telling. I was listening, too (but only with one ear), and that's probably why I missed a few important landmarks for my map. I didn't know that, then, but looking back on it, I'm sure that's what must have happened. Because almost every time I finished writing something down, I'd hear him say a phrase like, "... deadly if you don't use it at just the right time of day. Light only shines through the right channel at two o'clock."

Two o'clock? What channel was he talking about? Something we passed already? That's when I realized Grampy wasn't just telling us stories. He was letting us in on the real-life secrets of the stronghold. While I had been doodling around drawing cave icicles. Sheesh. I made a big circle where the cave was supposed to be and closed up the notebook. From now on, I was going to listen first, and write everything down later. Our lives might depend on it.

Instead of getting down off that trail, we climbed higher. Winding up and up around the inside of the mountain until we came to a wide stone bridge that crossed over into another passageway. Other than stopping for a minute for Grampy to switch the lights off in the cave and on in this new tunnel, we didn't have to get off and walk this time. Even sitting on the mules, the ceiling above us was too high to reach up and touch. But if you leaned a little bit, you could stick your arms out and feel the walls on both sides.

It wasn't as long as the other one had been either. Because in less than ten minutes, we ran into warm damp air coming from somewhere up ahead of us. I thought we might finally be getting close to the real outside. We had to be. On account of Grampy said we were going to camp for the night at Crystal Springs and my

watch already said four-thirty. I hadn't seen a sliver of daylight since morning, and I was getting a sort of squeezed-in feeling.

Which is why I was totally disappointed when we came out into another huge cavern, and started climbing on the next long trail. So, I blurted out, "How much farther to Crystal Springs?"

"You're there, boy." Grampy got down to throw another switch and the whole cave lit up below us. "Few minutes more and we'll be at the camp spot."

"How long till we get outside?"

"Sometime late tomorrow."

"But, holy crud, Grampy!" I couldn't help myself. I was so tired of all this stuff, I felt about to bawl. "I been thinking of outside and cool water all day!"

"Me, too," Boone piped up. "There's not a soul in Ashbury could follow us this far. We ought to be safe enough by now, Grampy."

"Safe enough." Grampy climbed back up onto old Miss Jenny and the line started moving, again. "We were safe enough the minute we closed the door to the cellar. But we sort of sealed our fate right along with that tunnel we blew up. Only way out, now is..." He leaned over and spit into the deep cavern below us. "Right through the Gates of Hell."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dark Passage

“... He should not kill any animal unnecessarily, even if it is only a fly, for it is one of God's creatures. Killing an animal for food, or an animal which is harmful, is allowable.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

I admit I had a moment of panic when I heard those words. And the way Boone jumped like somebody said boo to him, I didn't have to see his face to know exactly what it looked like. He was scared stiff, same as me. But that scare wasn't half as bad as what came next. Grampy pulled a rifle out from someplace on his saddle (I never even noticed he had one) and clicked the safety off with one hand, like he'd done it a hundred times that way before.

“Now, boys.” He rested the butt-end against his hip, with the barrel end sticking up in the air. “It's time for a little mind over matter. Nothing you're about to see can hurt you.”

“Oh, holy crud.” I dropped my head down to where my hands were holding onto the top of the saddle-horn. That put me so close to my Jenny's neck I could smell horsehair along with the leather.

“Then what are you cocking that gun for, Grampy!” Boone sounded like he'd rather argue than go along with it. “If there's nothing can hurt us!”

“Rattlesnake den, up ahead.”

“Holee geeze!” It slipped out, I couldn’t help it.

“Listen up, now. You’re gonna hear a racket of rattling, but not a one of them is close enough to strike. It’s just a warning to show they’re there.”

“Shooting a gun off is gonna make them mad!” Boone stood up in his stirrups for a few seconds. Like he might jump off and run, but then thought better of it and sat back down, again.

“Keep a lid on it, Junior. It’s just in case we see one on the trail. Can’t afford to spook the mules with so many boiling mud pots on each side of us.”

Boiling mud.

All of a sudden a string of red lights came on overhead. They must have been set up on some kind of timer, because the white ones in the cavern behind us went off a few seconds later. All by themselves. Just as we came up to a wide, high, glowing red tunnel with only a narrow trail running through it. There were bubbling mud holes along both sides, and the temperature in that thing went up to about ninety degrees. Some of them even had steam coming off. It smelled like hot clay in there. Like there had been a major blow-up in the arts and crafts room.

With the red glow from those lights making eerie shapes and shadows all around, mud-pots hissing and bubbling, and wisps of steam hanging low and spilling over onto the trail, it really did look like we were passing through a gate into hell. I mean, if it was like everybody said it was, this was it. I felt a chill go up my back at that thought. Then, right when I was wondering if being four months off from thirteen was still safe enough outside the “age of consent” (when a kid doesn’t automatically get sent to heaven if they die), the first rattle went off.

Man, it was so loud I almost fell off my mule. My head snapped up to look around (like I said before, if something’s gonna get me, I’d rather see it coming), and then a whole chorus of others piped in. It sounded like a thousand bones rattling. My heart was pounding so loud in my chest I felt like it was going to bounce right out my throat. There must have been some kind of echo in there because the

noise turned out to be a lot bigger than the actual snakes. When they finally came into view, I saw it was just like Grampy said.

There were dozens of them all right—most of them coiled and sticking their heads up—and they were on both sides of us. But they were up on high ledges near the ceiling and would have dropped into the bubbling mud if they tried to spring. About that time, I could see the end of the tunnel coming up. We were almost through. So far, there had been no snakes on the trail, and when a new string of white lights popped on ahead of us, I saw the trail made a wide turn to the left and then started winding down at a steep slant into the next cavern-room.

It was way bigger than the others we had come through, and even though it felt cooler than the mud-tunnel, it was still moist and steamy as we headed down into it. Something sparkling caught my eye way down on the floor, and just when I was leaning over a little farther to see around Boone and figure out what it was, another loud rattle blasted down from a rock tower we were passing around. Almost even with old Miss Jenny's nose.

Grampy leveled that rifle and shot it off so fast, there was instant silence, and the snake tumbled off onto the trail with a thud. The mules must have been used to the sound of the gun, though, because they didn't even jump. Then he turned around with a smile and said, "Always somebody guarding the gate." He leaned back and scooped the big lifeless thing up with the rifle barrel and flopped it onto the rump-end of his mule. "Rattlers make good eating. Sort of like chicken."

Boone leaned over and spit, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said, "Dang!"

I got to admit I was impressed. I mean, you couldn't have seen any fancier shooting in a movie. And it was right on the money, too, because that thing didn't even have a head left on it when he swung it up behind him. When I leaned over to peek around Boone for a closer look at it, there was still some twitch left in the tail. But it was dead all right. I wasn't too excited about eating any of it, though. I'd rather have chicken.

The trail narrowed down to another uncomfortable-thin ledge as it took a hard right under a gigantic rock overhang, and then wound around on a steep decent to the cavern floor. I was still too relieved about getting away from those snakes and mud-pots to be very worried about the ride, though. Besides that, I was starting to feel a whole lot of trust in my Miss Jenny. She hadn't stumbled once in the middle of all that noise and scariness, just kept plodding right along behind Boone's mule like it was nothing new to her. She wasn't afraid of heights, either.

I had lived in Arizona long enough to know it wasn't good horsemanship to be hanging onto the saddle-horn all the time. Heck, unless they were on a bucking bronco, real cowboys never even hung on. But, hey, I felt lucky to still be alive at that point, and was way past trying to impress Boone and Grampy. There wasn't too much left they didn't know about me, anyway. So, I held on.

Even though it was getting cooler with each foot lower we came down, I felt a little drop of sweat trickle down the side of my face, and my hair felt damp when I ran a hand through to push it back out of my eyes. Crystal Springs had to be getting close by now. Grampy said we were already there before we even started through the Gates of Hell place. I took a deep breath, held on tighter to the saddle-horn, and risked a quick look down.

The bright spot I had seen before on the other side of the cavern was close enough now to tell what it was. But I had a hard time believing it. So, I blinked a couple of times to try and get a better focus. I think maybe my mouth even dropped open.

"Dang, Grampy." Boone stood up in his stirrups, ahead of me, and leaned so far over the deep cavern below, it made me nervous. "Dang!"

It was like a diamond palace down there. No kidding. There were these huge sparkling diamonds all over the wall, and even giant ones sticking up from the floor. I say, palace, because right in the middle was a waterfall that cascaded down from somewhere high up, and landed in a round glowing pool. We had been hearing the sound of it—faint and far off, at first—getting louder and louder

the farther down we came. But it wasn't until I actually saw it, that I figured out what it belonged to.

With the pool and waterfall glowing like that, and the diamonds all around it everywhere, it looked like a throne right out of heaven. Like I pictured heaven ought to be, anyway. Boone and I were so busy gawking at it, Grampy had to tell us to look up as we passed under a big stone archway that was like the main entrance into the sparkling place. Practically the whole thing was gold. And there were thick shining veins shooting out all around it and covering the walls for as high up as you could see.

“Dang, Grampy! Is this the—” He stood up in his stirrups, again. “This is the mother lode!”

“It's the real thing, all right.” Grampy looked back and smiled, again, like he was enjoying just seeing the look on our faces. “The golden heart of *Padre Gordo*, boys. Kept secret over a hundred years.”

I felt like I was walking around in a dream.

The mules started to speed up—like they were excited, too—only they went right on past the sparkling pool so fast, I got worried we weren't going to stop. Grampy didn't even say, “Whoa!” He just let them trot into a sort of alcove-area behind a bunch of rock towers, where there were huge piles of hay stacked up all around. They stopped on their own, then, but Boone jumped off before they stopped all the way, and Grampy slid down right after.

I waited till we came to a total stop, figuring I'd probably land on my butt, again, and I didn't want to get run over. Only I didn't, this time. My legs were shaky, all right, but at least I stayed on my feet. The hay was piled high behind a long wooden board on top of a few posts—like a fence with only the top rail on. Like the hitching-post things they tie horses to, in front of saloons, in all the western movies.

We unhitched everybody, and strung them out along the rail so they could reach the hay on the other side, then looped their reins over a couple times to make sure nobody wandered away. We took their loads off, though, and set them right beside each one. Grampy

said they were close enough to smell the high meadow from here, and would take off the first chance they got if we didn't keep them tied up. Especially since everybody but old Miss Jenny had been running wild for over a year.

After that, we had to take the camping stuff out and set it up close to the pool. That pool was a lot bigger up close, but it glowed so bright we almost didn't need the lights Grampy switched on around it. Then he shut all the trail lights down, which made the whole top of the cavern dark and eerie-looking above us. I guess we were back to using manual switches, again, since the Gates of Hell was the only place you wouldn't want to get off the mules and go feeling around for batteries. He also mentioned that red lights were less agitating to the snakes than white ones would have been.

All that seemed to take forever when I was itching for a swim. But Grampy even made us set up the hammocks, on account of he said we'd be too tired to do it once we got out of the water. He said he'd take care of dinner, though, so Boone and I were in a race to see how fast we could get everything else set up.

"Sleeping on diamonds!" I looped the rope tied to the end of a blanket around a big cluster of them sticking out of the wall. "Is that cool, or what?"

"These aren't diamonds." Boone tied the other end off to another huge cluster farther away. "They're crystals. Diamonds look almost like regular rocks till they're cut. Better try it out, this one's for Grampy."

"Well, they sure look like diamonds to me." I hopped into the hammock and swung it back and forth a couple times. "Safe as a cradle."

"That's a lot better knot than the last one you tied."

"My blister's practically gone, now. Hey." I got up and started helping him with the next one. "You think Grampy will let us take one of these home for a souvenir? Maybe just a little one?"

"Sure. That's why I carry a rock hammer. I love rocks. Been collecting them for years. I've never seen any crystals this big and perfect, though. So, we'll have to ask, first, before we go knocking

any off.”

I looked over to where Grampy was cooking something on a camp stove about fifty feet away from us. “Hey, Boone.” I leaned close to whisper. “I really don’t want to eat any rattlesnake. You know? I’d rather have some of that chicken we cooked up on the desert the other night.”

“Chicken? That wasn’t chicken, Hudson.” He jumped into the next hammock we strung, to try it out. “That was a rabbit from the trap you and me set up when we got there. Grampy just skinned it and brought it in for us. You are too hilarious!” And he started with the hyena thing.

“Sheesh.” I gave him a push that started the hammock swinging. “I guess all those traps and stuff in the Sir Robert book actually work.”

“We been living mostly off rabbit since we got here. Except for the catfish supper last night.” He got up and hollered, “That’s the last one, Grampy. Can we go in, now?”

“Go ahead,” he called back. “Better stick a toe in first so you don’t give yourselves a heart attack, though.”

“Wahoo!” Boone hollered and pulled his shirt off at the same time.

I wasn’t far behind, so when he started breathing deep (getting ready for a cannonball, probably) and stuck his foot in, he almost knocked me over when he staggered backwards, again. I guess it was cold as ice coming from underground, but what did I care? I’d been thinking of a swim all day, so I was going in even if it turned me blue. I would have just jumped in (to get the shock over with all at once) but by that time if Grampy said to do something, I did it. No questions asked. So, I stuck my foot in.

“Hey!” I pulled it out, again, fast. “What the heck!”

That water was hot as a bathtub. When Boone and I turned around—practically at the same time—to look over at Grampy, he was having one of his silent laughing fits. Talk about disappointing! Not that we weren’t going in. It’s just that any temperature over ninety degrees sort of takes all the whoop and holler out of a

pleasure swim.

It sure took the hurry-up out of the two of us, anyway. Instead of taking any flying leaps, we sort of eased in slow until we touched bottom, which was halfway up our necks. I went to a frog-stroke (that's my favorite, I can do it all day without getting tired) and moved out to explore the pool. It felt pretty good, actually. And after a few dunks of my head to get all the crusty dirt and grime off my face, I started to really enjoy myself.

The round part of the pool that stuck out in front of the waterfall was about the size of a classroom. But then it fanned out into a narrow channel on one side that went along the cave wall, all the way up to the archway, where it ended. The gold veins plunged right down into the water, there, winding in and out of the crystal formations. It was so pretty I couldn't quit staring at it, and just stayed still, treading water for a few minutes, admiring the view.

Then it occurred to me it was a whole lot cooler here—almost like a too-warm swimming pool—and I dived down to see how deep it was. The water was so clear, you could see the bottom everywhere, only it was a little hard to judge how far down it was without actually touching. So, I figured I was probably about twelve feet down (I could tell by the head-pressure you can feel on anything deeper than ten feet), when all of a sudden, I felt a strong current pulling at me.

But I was so focused on touching the bottom, I just kicked harder to stay out of it until I felt smooth rock under my hand at around sixteen feet. Then, just as I was getting ready to kick off the bottom and pop to the surface, I felt that current start pulling at me, again. I started kicking my way out of it, not too worried, thinking it was probably some kind of whirlpool effect from the waterfall. Then I caught a look at where it was coming from.

It was an underwater cave about three feet off the bottom.

It was totally dark in there and gave me the creeps just looking at it. I mean, all sorts of things flashed through my mind. Piranas, sharks, cave monsters—you name it—even if it was impossible for those things to actually be in there, just the thought of them running

through my brain at light-speed scared the daylights out of me.
You'd have thought somebody punched me in the gut.

Next thing I knew, I'd lost whatever air that was left in me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Stronghold

“...a fellow has to know how to face risks if he is going to get on at all, and ... he should be able to swim, as otherwise he is not likely to arrive at the end of his trip in the way he had intended!”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Everybody has a survival mode that kicks in during a panic, and mine was working just fine. I thrashed and splashed my way up, and hit the surface coughing and gagging like I just swallowed the mother of all hot peppers. Then I high-tailed it out of that little channel and back into the main pool just in time for Boone to do one of his major cannonballs right on top of my head. Which made me gulp down another gallon of water all over, again.

I'd have probably breathed it right into my lungs and drowned if he hadn't yanked me up by the hair and said, "Sorry, bro! I saw you coming but I already jumped, so I couldn't change course!"

I opened my mouth to answer, but all that came out was a giant belch and about a quart of water. After that, I felt so thrashed, I just dog-paddled over to the side and hauled myself out. I flopped down on my stomach, on top of a big flat boulder, and laid my head on my arms long enough to cough and hack the rest of the water out of me.

Sheesh. If that wasn't the worst swim I ever had in my life, I don't know what was.

"Well, I guess it's going to take an expert to show you boys how it's done!"

I lifted my head up in time to see Grampy come hobbling along, barefoot, and start climbing right up the rock-face beside the waterfall.

"Dang, Grampy. Your foot looks like a squashed tomato!" Boone blew his nose into his hand and then washed it off in the water.

"Got the boot off, though." Grampy tottered for a second and almost fell off before he caught his balance, and kept climbing. "It'll look a whole lot better after I soak it for a while in these healing waters."

He tottered again, and this time I thought sure he was going in. But right when Boone and I both hollered "Whoa!" at the same time, he straightened up and walked right up the side without even hanging on. Just like he was walking up stairs, and he was laughing at us all the way.

"This is no time for jokes!" Boone hauled himself out of the water, then, looking about as thrashed as me. "Hear me, Grampy?" He found a big rock of his own to flop down on. "I'm too dang tired for games!"

"Didn't I say you would be? It's the heat tires you out so fast. Now, if you'd done like me and taken a shower first..." He disappeared into the plunging falls, but we knew he was fine because he kept talking. "You could have got your clothes washed at the same time and then taken it nice and easy for the rest of the night. Nothing like a clean pair of duds to start out with in the morning!"

The thought of putting my dirty, sweat-smelly shirt back on wasn't very appealing, now that he mentioned it, but I was too tired to get up and wash it out. I was figuring I'd just do it in the morning and wear it wet, when I must have drifted off to sleep. Right there on the rock with my head on my arms. I don't know if I slept for a few hours, or a few minutes. Except when I woke up, I woke up

starving.

I wiped the slobber off my arm and sat up. Boone was sleeping like the dead over in one of the hammocks, and Grampy was sitting in a shallow spot in the pool, shaped almost like a bathtub. He was soaking his foot and taking a drink now and then out of a nearby jug. When he saw I was up, he started the silent laugh thing, so I figured my hair must be standing on end and ran a hand through it to push it down.

“Stew’s on the stove, boy. Unless you’re still too tired to eat any.”

“I’m starved.” I went over and helped myself. It smelled so good, I didn’t care if it was rattlesnake, or mountain lion. I felt like I could eat the whole pot. But I settled for heaping everything I could get into my pan-plate, and then went back to stick my feet in the water while I ate. “How far are we from the stronghold?”

“You’re sitting in it.”

“You mean, this is it?”

“The one we been using all these years, anyway. There’s places like these peppered all over the desert. This one’s an old Apache stronghold they abandoned after the fat priest died. Considered this whole mountain a sort of sacred burial ground, after that.”

“How come?” I figured as long as he was talkative, I might as well try to get some information about where the bones might be.

“Indians are funny that way. You might say they out-do us when it comes to respecting the dead. That priest was good to them at a time when everybody else was hunting them down. Kept them supplied with winter food and medicine for a lot of years. Some say he loved them more than the town folk.” He took a drink from the jug, shifted his foot to a more comfortable position, and then sat quiet for a while.

I worked my way down to the bottom of my plate, thinking he’d launch into a story about it, but he never did. So, I tried to at least keep the conversation going. “It’s so well-hid, I don’t know how anybody ever found it in the first place.” I ran a finger over the bottom to scoop up the last bits of gravy. “It’s a good place to put

someone's bones, though, I guess."

"There's no bones in here, it's just a hideout. From back in the days when a hideout could save your life. There's three ways in and five ways out. Every one of them hid unless you know where they are."

"Don't you ever worry someone might follow you, though?"

"Nobody's interested in coming this far into the desert, these days. Too afraid of it. And from the outside, it just looks like another mountain. Hundreds of them around here."

"I bet they don't all have gold like this one does. If there's no bones in the gold parts, how come they had to abandon the whole mountain?"

"It's the water they deemed sacred. And this hot springs, here, flows out underground over there." he waved a hand in the direction of the archway, and I couldn't help getting a shiver all over again, just thinking about that hole trying to suck me in. "Meets up with the the Padre Gordo River. Right at the source, too, so every stream and trickle comes off this mountain is connected to it."

"What's wrong with that?"

"What's wrong with it? The fat priest died one day while he was soaking his tired feet in these healing waters, that's what's wrong. Right on the other side of that wall behind the waterfall. There's an inside and an outside to this pool. Waters connect through a tunnel about twenty feet long. You can get out that way, if you're not packing anything. But only at around two o'clock. That's when the sun shines bright enough through the right tunnel to recognize it.."

"You couldn't just follow the light?" I was hoping I could remember all this stuff by the time I got a chance to write it down.

"Too many crystals. Light bounces around all over the place during the day down there. That's what makes the water shine in here, too. See? Just looks like plain dark water, now."

Come to think of it, he was right. The only light around the pool right now was what was bouncing off our battery lights. I needed more specifics. Otherwise, figuring our way out of here was going to be like trying to solve a major crossword puzzle. Somebody told me,

once, if you started a sentence and didn't finish, the person you were talking to would automatically finish it for you. On account of it's human nature. So, I gave that a try. "But if you knew where the tunnel was in the first place, you could just..."

"That tunnel is smack in the middle of a honeycomb of others that look just like it," he said. "Look. See all the pillars growing down from the top, up there?"

I looked up where he was pointing. The ceiling in this part of the cavern was only about fifty feet above us, but the lights around the pool were enough to see the eerie, dagger-like spikes pointing down. "Stalactites, yeah. I studied about those in science a couple years back."

"Well the floors look just like the ceilings in these caverns. Light bouncing off all those crystal beds make it look like a regular house of mirrors down there. Except around two o'clock. Any other time, it's deadly."

"Sheesh, with all the snakes and hazards around here, how come you spent so much time in it once you had the gold out? Except for the mother lode, I mean. Boone said you used to stay down here for years at a time."

"Not in here, I didn't. Got me a sweet spot up on the high meadow where his Gran and I used to live. This place here isn't fit for much more than snakes and varmints. But it's a good hide-hole when you need one. Good place to stash gold and food supplies, too. So, you boys remember that when I'm gone."

"Gone? Where are you going?"

"I'm eighty-three, boy. Nobody lives forever."

"Well, you're safe from the county, now, anyway. Even that Miss Lucinda wouldn't hunt for you here." I set my plate down next to me on the rock. "I bet she's sure gonna turn *Padre Gordo* upside down, though."

"We'll leave her to Amelia." He laughed at the thought and took another drink. "Now, there's a woman has more tricks up her sleeve than a traveling show. Used to work in a circus."

"Boone said she's supposed to pick us up at the hotel on

Monday.” I watched his face for a minute to see if I could catch any clues whether he was going to give us any trouble about going home. But he just looked straight back at me, steady and thoughtful, like he was trying to figure me out, too. So, I added, “Probably jump and holler if we’re not there. Man, can she holler!”

“Mm-hmm.” That’s all he answered. Then he splashed water on his face and ran both hands through his crinkly black and white hair.

I decided to go on a sympathy tack. “I expect we’ll get in a heap of trouble—Boone and me. They’ll say we kidnapped you. Might even try to put us in one of those—”

“You just leave any county-dealings to Amelia. She can handle it.” He slipped down farther in the water and leaned his head back on the smooth rock. “Help Junior keep the treasure. That’s all you have to worry about. Guard it with your lives if you have to, and—” He yawned a big yawn and it made me do the same thing. “Be smart about the dole, too. Never let anyone see you re-stocking the cellar... careful who you trust...”

His eyes started to close, and I figured he would drop off to sleep any minute. Which made me way nervous because I didn’t want him to slip under and drown. How was he going to hide out all by himself, if he didn’t even know when to get out of the bathtub? I scooted close and shook him by the shoulder, just as his mouth went slack and his head started to droop to one side.

“Grampy?” I shook him, again. “You want me to help you over to your hammock?”

“Shoot, no, I don’t want any help.” He shrugged my hand away and hauled himself out like a whale surging up from the ocean. “The day I can’t get to my own hammock...”

He didn’t have a stitch on, and I saw every muscle on his body was sleek and strong-looking—like somebody way younger who had to lift weights everyday just to keep that way. But the thing that caught my eye most when he stepped out, was his hurt foot. Cross my heart and hope to die if I’m not telling the honest truth, here. Other than a little-bitty, shriveled-up scab where his toe used to be that thing looked perfectly fine.

I was totally amazed. “Man, Grampy! Your foot! Doesn’t it even hurt anymore?”

“Never felt better in my life.” Then he settled himself into his hammock and went instantly asleep.

I was all by myself, again, but nobody said anything about a fire-watch (because we didn’t have one), so I figured I could go to bed anytime I felt like it. Only I wanted to write all the details down in my notebook about how to get out of this place. Maybe make some improvements on my map while I was at it, too. I’d rather have too many details than not enough. You never know what’s going to be important when you’re up against unfamiliar territory.

I felt like I was in unfamiliar territory everywhere I turned. Like a *Journey to the Center of the Earth* experience (if you read that stuff). I mean, if I was to write some of the things I’d been through, this week, for my next “How I Spent My Summer Vacation” essay, the teacher would probably dock me for using too much imagination. Seriously. Course, I never would (on account of that last swear), I’m only saying how I felt right then. I felt like a repeat of *The Hobbit*, that’s how I felt. Like I wouldn’t be surprised if—any minute—a Golem-creature popped out from somewhere.

Which is why I almost jumped out of my skin when Boone snuck up behind me and tapped on my shoulder. “Holy crud! You trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Shhh. You’ll wake up Grampy! We gotta look for the graveyard, Hud. While he’s still asleep.”

“Well, you won’t find it in here. And unless you know another way out, you can’t take the shortcut till two o’clock tomorrow. Otherwise it’s deadly.”

“What’s the water tunnel got to do with it? We’re looking for a graveyard. The stronghold’s connected to a graveyard, and this is the stronghold.” He yawned (like he hadn’t quite woke up, yet), gave a shiver, and started looking around for his shirt. “Cripes.” He peeled it off a rock a little ways away. “It’s wetter than my shorts!”

“Stick your feet in the water. That’s what I’m doing.”

“Are you nuts? There could be a moray eel down there.”

I yanked my feet out so fast I got water all over my notebook. “Now, look what you made me—”

He was laughing too hard to hear me. Then he sat down, stuck his feet in the warm water, and started looking around. “Moray eels only live in the ocean, you know.”

“Yeah, and so do sharks. But any kind of water at night gives me the creeps. Tonight, I could even believe in cave monsters. Or at least rattlesnakes that swim.”

“They like it better above the mud-pots because they’re cold-blooded.”

“That so makes me feel better, Boone. Especially since we’re sitting next to this hundred degree hot springs.”

“Grampy says tomorrow we’ll be in paradise.”

“Are you kidding me? Man, that’s the same thing Jesus said to the two thieves that died right next to him! When did he say that?”

“Just after you choked yourself to sleep, I guess.”

“We better think up our next plan B, then. Seriously! I mean, if he has another Alzheimer’s moment and thinks we’re all on some journey to heaven, here. Did you see the way he went up that rock to the waterfall? He could have fallen and killed himself.”

“He was just teasing.”

“I’m telling you, he doesn’t care whether he lives or dies, anymore. Or us, either.”

“That’s not true! He’s telling us all the secrets of the stronghold, isn’t he? We’re the next treasure keepers! We at least have to stay alive long enough to take care of the whole bunch during the end of the world.”

“He also said nobody survives the end of the world. Remember?”

“I remember he said it might take a long time for the world to die, and there was plenty of stuff that needed to be done in the meantime. That’s what I remember.”

“So, what’s he talking about paradise for, Boone?”

“Because he heard the singing bone, that’s why!” He pulled his feet out of the water and stood up. “Fine. If you don’t want to help

me look for the graveyard, I'll find it myself!"

"You could look all night long and not find it. So, you might as well sit back down. Or go back to sleep. On account of..." I shook off more water that was still shining off my notebook.

"On account of what?" He looked mad enough to start shoving.

So, I answered, "On account of I already know where it is."

Chapter Twenty-Four

The Road to Paradise

“A Scout has to Be Prepared to turn out at any moment in the night. He ought, therefore, to have his important clothes laid handy, so that he can get into them at once...”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

“Then where is it?”

“On the other side of that wall. Behind the waterfall.” I pointed, but I don’t think he believed me.

“Is that what Grampy said?”

“Not exactly. I just put two and two together. Between what he told me about one thing, and you told me about another.” I opened my notebook and draped it over a nearby rock so it could dry. “Here’s how I figure it.”

He sat down, again, crossed his legs Indian-style, and waited for me to explain.

“The fat priest died one day while he was soaking his feet in these hot springs. Hey, Boone, wait till you see. Grampy’s foot’s good as new. No kidding! These waters really must have some kind of—”

“They’re full of minerals, that’s all. We had one where I used to live when I was a little kid, and that’s what my dad always told me. Certain kind of high-grade minerals are better than medicine for healing wounds and stuff. Now, go on about the graveyard.”

“Oh. Yeah, well, but, man, you should have seen it! If that wasn’t a miracle, I—”

“Hudson!”

“All right, all right. OK. Where was I?”

“The fat priest died with his feet in the water.”

“Oh, yeah. But it wasn’t in here, it was out there.” I pointed toward the waterfall. “Grampy told me that. Anyway, it made all the water sacred, so they abandoned this place. The whole mountain. All the gold and everything.”

“Just because he spoiled the water?”

“He didn’t spoil it, he, well, I don’t know, he blessed it, or something. Holy-fied it. That’s what sacred means. Anyway, that’s what Grampy said.”

“But they wouldn’t just leave him there to rot with his feet in the water. Dad told me they gave him a full-blown Indian burial, and it was up in a tree. With big chunks of gold all around him. The gold Henry Ashbury stole.”

“I didn’t say they left him there. See, Indians respect the dead more than most people. Which is why they gave him the whole darn mountain for a sacred place. So, I figure the graveyard’s under the nearest tree to the outside pool. And up in that tree, well, that’s where we’ll find the bones.”

He sat there quiet for a minute, like he was thinking it through. “OK, that rings pretty true. But that means we have a decision to make.” He unfolded and stood up, again, like he couldn’t sit still, anymore. “We either have to talk Grampy into staying here tomorrow, at least till after two o’clock, so we can try out the water tunnel, or—”

“He’ll never go for it.”

“I don’t see why not. There’s no hurry, now. He said we were safe the minute we closed the cellar door. He can soak his foot some more, and we can say we need to see every escape place for ourselves. We gotta see everything, don’t we? If we’re the last ones left, we do.”

“But he says it’s like a house of mirrors down there. Deadly.

That only if your life's in mortal danger of—”

“If we don't, we'll have to remember the exact way back to here, and it's a long, long way. He said we won't even get out of the mountain till the afternoon. And in case you didn't notice, I only got the chance to chip one arrow-hole after the explosion, and that was where the mules got stuck. Even a kid could remember that one.”

“I'm drawing a map, here.” I picked up my notebook and held it up (just for emphasis). “Between you and me, together, we could figure it all out.”

He sat back down and started to pull at that front curl on his forehead. “What about the rattlesnake place we have to pass? I'm no crack shot, like Grampy. I know for a fact I couldn't fire off quick enough, either. That rifle weighs a ton!”

For a minute we both just sat there quiet. Because, hey, I am not *Braveheart*. Just the thought of going through that place, again, gave me the creeps, too. Especially without Grampy.

Boone sighed a big sigh. “Well, dang! I guess you and me ought to be able to kill a snake or two, one way or the other. If we put our minds to it. Knowing where they are, that's the main thing. And, like Mom says, they always let you know.”

I didn't answer. On account of I didn't have a whole lot of confidence in that plan. Not when the biggest thing I ever took on in my life was a garden spider. Then I thought of something. “Hey, you know what?”

“What.”

“I don't think we'll have to come back through here to find the bones. In fact, I'm sure we won't.” I got up to start looking for my shirt.

“Yeah, what makes you so sure?”

“The fat priest.”

A look of plain horror crossed his face. “Honest-to crud, Hudson! If you've heard him, too, then none of us have a chance in —”

“I didn't hear him!” I had to say it fast, because I could see he was about to go ballistic. “I'm just putting two and two together,

here! Now, listen up. He was fat, right? Well, can you picture somebody fat, with sore feet, getting in and out of the kind of tight places we've been through, down here? Can you picture him shooting six-foot rattlers down off walls faster than video games?"

"If he was like that priest in *Robin Hood*, maybe."

"Robin Hood is not true, Boone. It's just a story. In real life, fat people are like marshmallows. So, there has to be an outside way to the graveyard. Especially if there's other people in it, 'cause I can't see anybody hauling corpses around down here, either. And you know there's other people in it, or it wouldn't be called a graveyard. Just a grave."

"We're gonna have to come right out and ask Grampy to show us the bones."

"Well, why not? He's showing us everything else, isn't he? Heck, we're kids. All kids are interested in stuff like bones."

"I guess."

"He'll show us."

We never got around to asking Grampy to show us the bones. Mostly on account of we never made it till morning. Sometime before daylight (I knew it was before daylight, because the water was still dark), Grampy shook us awake in our hammocks. Even though I was getting used to the feeling I only slept for three minutes, I was pretty sure it was true this time. On account of my shirt was still wet where I hung it up on the wall to dry.

"Let's go, boys. We gotta get out of here."

Just the way he said it made me instantly awake. Then when I saw the mules all standing in line and loaded up, already—when I saw their loads were less than half the size we brought them down here with, and how Grampy was back in his clothes and boots and hurrying around like there was some kind of trouble—my heart started pounding before I even got my hammock rolled up. Something had to be way wrong for him to take off without his coffee and bacon in the morning. When he started re-loading his rifle while he was waiting for us, I was sure of it.

"Dang, Grampy. Is somebody coming?" Boone's hammock was

only half rolled up but he buckled it on behind his saddle, anyway, so that some of it was hanging down one side. “Even if they followed us here, you can’t really shoot somebody!”

“This is in case we meet up with anybody in the bear cave on the way out.”

“You mean bears, right?” I finished buckling my blanket on and pulled myself up into the saddle. “Real bears?”

“I’m not talking teddy bears, boy.”

“So, what are we gonna do?” Boone got up into his saddle ahead of me. “Sneak past while they’re asleep? What if they wake up just from smelling us?”

“Might not be any in there at all, this time of year.” Grampy stuck the rifle back in the holder attached to his saddle, and mounted up. “Too much fine weather and good eating outside.”

“Then why do we have to leave in the middle of the night for?” Boone was gonna press for staying another day at the hot springs. I could tell by the way he was leading up to it.

I pushed the little button on the side of my watch to turn on the LCD light. Three-thirty. Man, this middle of the night stuff was getting to be a habit.

“I don’t like the way the mountain sounds.” Grampy did something to make the mules start off, only I didn’t see it or hear it. “She starts rumbling like this, it’s best just to get out.”

Rumbling.

I hadn’t heard any rumbling. But about the time I was thinking Grampy must be having some serious hallucinations, I felt a faint tremor, and knew it wasn’t my mule coming down with the shakes. A few minutes later, when we started climbing up out of the cavern on another long narrow trail, I actually saw a trickle of little rocks and dust slide down part of the wall I was passing by.

All of a sudden my mouth went dry.

That’s when I made up my mind I did not like caves. There were just plain too many hazards to deal with. For every amazing sight that took your breath away, there were two or three scary ones that practically punched it out of you. Then I had the same thought I’d

been thinking over and over since yesterday: what good was all the gold in the world if you were dead?

“How come we had to leave most of our load, Grampy?” Boone asked.

“Always planned on leaving it,” Grampy answered. “There’s an old Indian cellar in the floor under the hay back there. Where you can store food stuff without worrying about varmints getting into it. Besides that...” He leaned over and spit down into the cavern that was getting farther below us. “The way out is too narrow for the mules to get through with big packs on.”

Great. How could anything be more low or narrow than some of the stuff we’d already come through? Then right when I was having a daydream about all of us pushing and shoving the mules through a tunnel on their bellies, there was this huge jolt along the ground. Grampy pulled the mules up and said, “Hold it!” and froze for a few seconds with his arm up in the air.

For a minute I could hear little rock slides cascading down the walls all around us, and I felt sweat break out on my neck and upper lip. What if a piece of this high-up trail busted loose and tumbled away? What if the whole place caved in on us? What if there was an earthquake? What if this mountain was sitting on some gigantic fault line, and the whole thing popped open and sucked us in?

“OK.” Grampy lowered his arm. “Easy does it, boys. Let go of your reins so the mules can take their own lead. And if they start to run...”

“Oh, holy crud!” I took a tight grip on my saddle-horn.

“Grab a handful of their mane hair, lean down low over their necks, and hang on.” He was talking real soft and low, like he didn’t want to spook any of them. For another minute, they just stood still. Then, slow, at first, they started to move out. “The most important thing, no matter what happens, is to trust the mules.”

“But, Grampy, what if... what if—”

“Take it easy, now, Junior. When it comes to this stuff, they got senses we can’t even dream about. So, let them have their heads.” He looked back and flashed a smile. “And they’ll take us right on

through to paradise.”

The next two hours were the worst ones I ever spent in my life. The whole line of mules just plodded along at that same steady pace, while every once in a while little dust streams and rock slides trickled down over the walls, all around us. No more big jolts, though. For a long time, there weren't even any more tremors. Then just when I realized I was making my own jaw ache from clenching my teeth so hard, we started to speed up.

A few minutes later the mules broke into a trot. Boone stood up in his stirrups and leaned down low with his head, but Grampy was standing straight up in his, looking all around, like any minute something awful might jump out at us. We were taking those loops and curves and whoop-de-dooos up the side of that cavern so fast it felt like a carnival ride. Only way scarier because we weren't bolted on or strapped in.

Just when I was trying to make up my mind if it was worse having my eyes closed, or open, a sudden racket of high-pitched screeching came from behind us. I threw a look backward in time to see a cloud of bats come zooming out of a low cave about halfway up the wall across from us, and swoop toward us over the cavern below. At the same time, there was a huge roar from somewhere else up ahead, that sounded like the abominable snowman (they say those things live in caves).

My head snapped forward to see Grampy pull out his rifle at the same time a big black bear went lumbering and growling onto the trail from a ledge overhanging the next wide loop we were coming up to. I figured he was either going to have to knock that thing off the trail in one shot, or pull the whole team to a stop before we all crashed into each other. At that same instant, about a bajillion bats flew past, screeching and squeaking, and the sound of all those wings vibrated the air like an army of kids on bicycles with balloons tied to their spokes. A few brushed my head and shoulders, but no one bumped into me. They just sort of flowed past us like water around an island.

They flew right over the top of the bear, too, then swooped up

about twenty feet into a shaft of light that was pouring through an opening between a bunch of giant boulders. Then the bear clamored up the wall after them, and he disappeared, too. He never set one paw down our loop. He was just booking, as fast as he could, for the outside. They all were. Like they knew something was up.

It was the weirdest thing I ever saw in my life. And, man, that was the real outside up there! Only one long loop across from us. I stood up in my stirrups to try and get a better look. It had to be the way out, if that big old bear got through. Bats could fly out from under any little slit in the rocks, but anything a bear could get out of, we could, too. So there it was.

Shear terror and pure relief, all in the space of one minute.

I must have been holding my breath for a long time, because I had only just let it out and was right in the middle of a big deep breath to revive myself, when there was another huge jolt that practically knocked me off my mule. Followed by a loud, low rumble that echoed for a long time through the whole place, and started little streams of stuff sliding down off the walls, again.

“Hold on, boys!” Grampy hunkered down ahead of us. “Hold on for your lives!”

I let go of the saddle-horn and grabbed two fistfuls of my Jenny’s mane, figuring we were about to get the ride of our lives around that last loop. But they didn’t. Instead, they all took one long flying leap over the side. One right after the other. Straight down into the cavern below.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Hero Shine

*“He had not thought of the danger to himself,
but on the first alarm had, with the true
spirit of the Scout, at once sprung to the
assistance of his comrade in distress”*

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

They say your whole life passes in front of your eyes before you die. I don't know if that's true. All I know is, for me, everything kicked into slow motion the second we were airborne. One minute there was screeching, and roaring, and hollering, and the next, there was total silence as I felt myself falling through space. I could see every little detail around me, perfectly clear. The rump of Boon's mule, with the tail-end of his Indian blanket trailing out behind. I couldn't see Boone, or Grampy.

Both of them had sunk out of sight into the cavern below.

I heard the creak and strain of the leather harnesses, and then all of a sudden it was like the sound of thunder busting loose as all those hooves finally touched down on the steep side of the rocky

cavern wall, and went tearing, kitty corner, across the loop. I couldn't believe we were all still attached. But we were in a flat-out run that felt so smooth it was like flying along in a rocking chair. They were making a beeline straight for that hole.

We hit the uphill side in less than five minutes. But by that time it sounded like an earthquake was going on, and all the little rock and dirt slides were turning into big ones around us. Grampy jumped off just as we got to the hole, but it was practically twenty feet straight up from where he was standing. I didn't see how those mules could ever make it.

"Get down, boys," he hollered. "But don't let go! Hold tight and they'll pull you right through!" Then he did a loud shrill whistle that sounded like an eagle call, and that old Miss Jenny jumped and heaved and stumbled her way up those rocks like a train engine, with Grampy hanging onto her with one hand, and holding his rifle with the other. She put everything she had into it, and the rest of them followed right behind.

Boone jumped off next, and, for the first time, I jumped off on the move, too. Just as my Jenny started plowing and heaving her way up that slippery stuff, dragging me right along with her. We were almost at the top when Boone's blanket-tail snagged between a couple of loose rocks and caught his foot so fast it yanked him off the harness. I doubled my legs up, quick, to keep from running him over, but could only hold my weight for a few seconds before I had to let down, again, or I would have tumbled off right on top of him.

Then there was a blast of white light, and as I cleared the hole I heard Grampy give the hold-up-whistle. He let go of old Jenny and hopped down on the run, headed right back toward the hole, again.

"Where's Junior?" he flung the words at me as we passed each other.

"He fell off!"

I let go as soon as I could and staggered after him, but it was like trying to walk on jello the way the ground was shaking, now. By the time I got there, even the giant boulders piled up around the hole were starting to move. Grampy shoved the rifle at me without

looking back, and heaved his shoulders up under the closest one that was starting to slide. It was hanging right over the top of the opening where Boone was trying to claw his way up, slipping back, again and again, but still trying like crazy.

The scare in his eyes punched me in the gut so hard I could hardly breathe. I flashed a look over at Grampy, but by that time, there were big drops of sweat starting to roll down his face. The rock he was holding up was bending him lower and lower by the second. Almost in half.

What I did next, I didn't even think about.

I jammed the rifle, barrel-end up, under the rock next to Grampy, then threw myself on my belly to grab hold of Boone. For the first few seconds, I felt us both starting to slide. Then it was like he got an extra boost from somewhere because, the next thing I knew, he came charging up over the top of me. After that, it was almost like we planned it. He turned back around and grabbed onto my feet, just as I was starting to go. As soon as he yanked me back, safe, we both scrambled over to get Grampy out. But by that time he was stuck fast.

Even the rifle-butt was starting to sink into the ground.

"We're out, Grampy. Let it go!" Boone was bawling when he hollered that.

I think I was bawling, too, because I kept begging, "Come on. Hurry up! Do it all at once, Grampy! Do it all at once!"

We grabbed on tight to his flannel shirt, and he crumbled to the ground. Limp. Like somebody had shot him. Then, in a split-second, the rifle busted in half with a loud crack, as the boulder came crashing down. But it was just enough time for us to yank him out from under it. One giant yank that took everything both of us had. Then a whole bunch more of them to get him away from there. Rocks were falling all around us but we kept pulling. We pulled till our guts ached. Till we had dragged him away from that rock-pile opening, all the way up onto the trail, and practically under the feet of the last mule in the line.

She danced her two back legs first one way, then the other—like

a kite held on too short a string. Every mule in the line was dancing and bellowing right along with her—wanting to take off down the hill and get out of there. But, up front, old Miss Jenny was holding strong, waiting for Grampy’s next call.

The mountain was still rumbling thunder, and chunks of rock and boulders were starting to tumble down from places higher up, now. Then, for a second, I felt Grampy move a little under my hands and try to raise himself up. But he fell back down, again.

His eyes were closed hard and his face looked like wrinkles in stone. “Quick. Give me a hand up!” He took a deep breath. Boone and I each got under an arm and raised him up on his feet. I sagged a little under the heavy weight of his arm across my shoulders. But we got him up. “Junior?”

“I’m here, Grampy—”

“Take the lead. And don’t run. Boy?”

“Yes, sir?” I could feel my nose running, but I didn’t want to let go of him to fix it.

“Keep a look out.” All of a sudden he tensed up and closed his eyes, like some kind of a pain shot through him. So, we kept still for another second, even though things were skidding past practically on top of us. “Look for big stuff, boy. Coming off the top. Call out to stop the line if you see anything.”

He took a breath and let it out slow. Then opened his eyes. “Just get me up on a mule, I can hang on, now.”

It wasn’t that hard to get him up, since by the time we got to the second Jenny he was finally starting to get the rest of his wind back. All we did was guide his foot into the stirrup, and give him a shove as he hoisted himself on. We both stood there for a minute, though, to see if he was going to fall off, or something. But he didn’t. Instead, he took the reins, smiled a little, and said, “Mount up.”

When we just stood there and kept looking at him, he added, “Squeezed all the breath out of me, that’s all. It’s coming back, now.” He inhaled deep and let it out, again, just to show us. “There. Never felt better in my life. So, let’s go.”

All that happened in a space of less than fifteen minutes. Which

is why I say it was in slow motion. Because even though things were going on too fast to even think about, to this day I can remember every detail of every one of those minutes, as crystal clear as if it was playing out, again, right in front of me. Sometimes, I still get a shudder wondering what might have happened if each one of us hadn't done what we did without even thinking. But we did do it. And that will send good feelings running through me every time I remember. Right up till the day I die.

By the time we moved out, the mountain was finally starting to settle down, again. Almost like it had thrown every hazard it had at us, and together we had won. Like we had passed some kind of test, or something. After that, nothing else was hard.

There were a couple of places we came to along that high trail where the rock slides looked almost impossible to get by. But at those times, the mules always surprised me by side-stepping a little bit down the mountain and going around them. Which—after what we just came through—didn't even give me a chill.

Grampy never said another word to us, but he held on. It wasn't too long afterwards until we started coming down off the rocky summit and into a tree line. Tall ponderosa pines began to show up along the trail edges here and there, and pretty soon, we veered off into a cool shady forest of them. After spending so much time in all those dark tunnels and caverns, the whole outside felt big and fresh and delicious. And just the smell of those trees all around us was—

“Hey.” Boone breathed in such a deep sniff of them, I could hear him two mules away. “This smells like—” He sniffed, again. “Hey, Grampy. This smells like—”

Right then, we came around a bend, and into a wide high meadow. There was a clear rushing stream running through, and off in the distance, the towering peak of Padre Gordo Mountain (that we had come all the way around to the back of) curved along the edges of it like a big sheltering arm. On one end of it was an apple orchard, and on the other—tucked so close up against the mountainside you could barely tell it was there—was a tiny *hacienda*.

That's a kind of traditional adobe house the early Spanish

settlers used to build. It had a red tile roof and three-foot high walls around the yard. The covered porch was made out of flat stone and went around the whole house. The front part of it was so huge there was a swinging hammock on both ends. It even had a couple of long benches for sitting around on, set up against the wall under big wide windows. But they were covered by wooden shutters and closed up tight, right then.

“Grampy!” Boone jumped off the mule and started running before we even got there. “Grampy! This is home!” Then he turned around and shouted, “I was born here!”

For the first time since I met him, I heard Grampy laugh out loud. It was a wonderful kind of rolling laugh, and I think I will always remember him that way. Because it was the kind that made you feel like laughing, too. I just couldn’t help it, on account of it was so catching. Who could have even imagined such a thing?

“Hud! This is where I grew up. ‘Till my dad signed up for the wars. This is Grampy and Gran’s house. Right, Grampy?” He was running backwards, now. “I always thought it was some place far away in Texas. I can’t believe it. We’re home!”

“Been right in your own backyard, all the time.” Grampy gave the stop whistle when we got to the little wooden gate that led into the yard, and then slid down slow and easy. “There’s no place like it anywhere else in the world.”

Boone was so excited, he gave him a hug that practically bowled him over, but instead of being irritated Grampy just caught him up tight against him and patted his back a couple times. Then he put an arm across his shoulders as they walked through the gate together.

“You better rest on the porch for a while, Grampy, till your strength comes all the way back, again.”

“I believe maybe I will,” he answered.

“Don’t worry about anything. Hud and I can unload the mules. Right, Hud? After that, we’ll open the house up. The shutters and everything. Just like it was when—well, just like it was before.”

Grampy didn’t argue, or even give us any advice how to do it. In fact, I think he must have dropped off into one of his instant sleeps

the minute he let go of Boone and sank down into one of those big bright-colored hammocks inside the porch. They had pillows sewed on one end, so you could almost see the whole place stretched out in front of you from there. It was a perfect rest place, cool and breezy from being this high up the mountain.

By that time, Boone and I had got so used to Grampy taking a nap while we worked, we really didn't see anything wrong with it. Besides that, as soon as we got far enough out of earshot we started talking over what we should do next. When we finally got all the packs off and saddles hanging over the low adobe wall, we led the line back onto the high meadow and turned them loose.

We didn't think there would be any worries about tying them up, on account of this was the place Grampy always told us they would run off to if we didn't. Anyway, they acted right at home, and slowed down to start munching grass before we even walked away. Right when I figured we were headed back to open up the house for Grampy, Boone squinted into the sun and then shaded his eyes with a hand for a minute, while he looked off in that direction.

"Good, he's still sleeping. Okay, come on. This is probably the only chance we'll get to head for the graveyard without him wondering what we're up to."

"But, Boone, what if he wakes up while we're gone? We should open the house up first."

"Are you kidding? After what he did back there, I bet he doesn't twitch a finger for a whole hour. Maybe even two. Cripes. Did you see that? Even a power-lifter couldn't hold something so heavy up for that long."

"Seriously amazing."

"He saved our lives, Hud."

"Once a hero, always a hero, if you ask me. You realize you and me would both be dead right now if he hadn't kept it up there?"

"But at least we got him out, too! For a minute, I thought he was gonna get squashed right there in front of us." He shuddered, then started pulling at one of the straps on his backpack like it had gone loose, or something.

“Yeah. Don’t think I could have lived with myself if he, well,” I side-stepped around a big rock sticking up out of the ground. “I mean, what if we hadn’t come? Because it took the whole bunch of us to,” I surprised myself with my own words. “It took the whole bunch—”

“He wouldn’t have got stuck, at all, if we hadn’t come.”

“He asked us to.”

“I’m telling you, Hud, we endangered him. Which is just another reason why we gotta bury those bones. Fast as we can, too. Because we’re here, now. And we don’t want him hearing any voices. If you know what I mean.”

I knew what he meant, but I wasn’t sure I agreed. But his mind was made up, so, I figured we better get it over with before before Grumpy woke up. It occurred to me we maybe should be more worried about him wandering off, instead of us. Only Boone was so sure finding the bones would fix everything, I didn’t mention that.

He must have thought I had hesitations, because he started rattling on like he was still trying to convince me. “I think that graveyard is what he’s been headed for all along. Did you notice how quick he is to drift off into his own sad thoughts, the last couple of days? He’s gearing up for dying, that’s why. Been thinking about it ever since he first heard the bones. Way back in the tunnel. Now, with him feeling so wore out from saving us, he might just decide to let go.” His voice started to catch, and he cleared his throat. “We gotta bury those bones!”

“I say it’s more dangerous to leave him alone for that long. He’s wrung out like a sponge, Boone. Probably faint away more from hunger than anything else. Besides,” I made a long hard stare along one end of the mountain-curve to the other. “Look how big this place is! Those hot springs could be in fifty different spots, from here.”

“They’re not far, at all. I remember exactly where they are!” Then without even waiting for an answer he headed out toward the apple orchard, at a fast jog.

So, I followed. “Well, then, how come you don’t remember

where the graveyard is, too?”

“I was just a little kid, back then. Too little for spook stories. Dang, I was only six when we left here. I just remember playing and stuff.” He took a leap over a fallen log without even breaking stride. “I remember the hot springs, though. We used to go there all the time.”

The smell of apples as we came into the orchard was so strong it made my mouth water. I felt like eating one even though they were still green. I never saw so many apples all at once. Those trees looked like they were about to bust they were loaded down so heavy. There were some on the ground, too, but they were just windfalls, because those were green, too. A few were busted open, turning rotten (probably from varmints chewing at them). But even those smelled good.

We took a hard right turn onto a dirt path that led up into the lowest end of the *Padre Gordo* peak. Up onto the hand of the stretched-out arm, if you were looking at it that way. It was still under the tree-line, though, so there were tall pines dotted all over it, and a ton of pine cones lying around everywhere. The path wound up and over a couple of other small rises, and then—so sudden, we stopped in our tracks—we heard the faint sounds of a waterfall. After that, we moved ahead slow. Because even though we had been gearing up for it for a long time, just the thought that we were within minutes of coming face-to-face with those bones—I mean, the actual real things—gave us both a case of the shakes.

“Sure cold up this high.” I admit I said that mostly to cover up my creeps.

“Yeah, especially when you’re not used to it.” Boone’s voice had sort of a quaver to it, and I know he was having a hard time keeping a grip, too.

We slowed down even more.

You’d have thought we were sneaking up on somebody, the way we inched around that last bend, hugging the rocks, and craning our necks out to see without stepping too far into the open. Except for a wooden picnic table in a little grass clearing off to one side, the

springs looked like a mirror image of the one inside the mountain. Only the water seemed a lot more ordinary under the natural daylight, out here. If there hadn't been a few wisps of steam floating on the surface, we would have had to stick a toe in, to make sure we were in the right place. But it was the hot springs, all right. It was hard to believe we had been paddling around in that same water just last night.

There were a couple of big trees crowded up close to it. With moss hanging down off the lowest branches, and up the sides nearest to the water. I figured it was because of the high-grade mineral steam, on account of—according to Sir Robert—moss naturally only grows on the north side of things. It's one of the ways you can find north without a compass. Those trees didn't have any bones tied up in them, though. And no Indian signs, either.

“How about up there?” I pointed toward a couple more trees, higher up, that looked like there was some kind of iron gate between them.

“Naw. That's just the old family garden, where Granny Maude,” his mouth must have gone dry, because he licked his lips and swallowed before he could finish. “Where Granny Maude laid down for her last nap.”

I got the the chill-bumps all over when he said that, and this time I didn't even try to hide it. “Holy crud, Boone! You know what that means, don't you?”

He answered without taking his eyes off it. “Now I'm older, I do.”

“Then let's get this over with! There could be curses dropping all over us, by now!”

“Okay, give me a shove.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

El Padre

“The shortest and most certain way to happiness is to make other people happy.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

I took the lead, on account of I knew that worked better than a shove to get Boone moving. It was only a short steep trail up to the gate. As cool as it was up there, I was breaking into a sweat trying to brace myself for whatever I was about to see coming up over the top, when, all of a sudden, something really strange happened. Some kind of wave of good feelings came over me. I don't know why. And what I saw when I got there made me forget all about being scared.

It was the prettiest place I've ever been in my life. “Hey, Boone.”

Two giant trees stood on each side of the little fenced-off place, touching their branches together over the top of it. The whole thing wasn't any bigger than half a basketball court, and there were less than ten gravestones in there, all facing away from us. That's because the way they were looking out, you could see all the way down into the valley from there. Not the Interstate view (that was on the other side of the mountain from where we were) but the wild desert part of the valley. The part that stretched all the way to Mexico without bumping into anything but little hills and mesas along the way. And I know this sounds weird, but it was peaceful

there. Totally.

“Boone, come on.” I don’t know why but I was talking quiet. “It’s not bad at all up here. It’s like a church.”

He must have felt the same way, because he came up and stood next to me, and we both just looked over the top of that fancy, black-iron gate without saying anything for a few minutes. While we looked, a cool breeze started to blow against our faces. It had that delicious smell of sage mixed up with it that came off the desert. I guess any hot wind that made it this high up from the desert floor, got as cooled down and quiet as everything else around here. Funny how you could still smell the sage, though.

I waited for Boone to open the gate and go in first, on account of it was his family in there. After a while, he did. But all he said was, “No bones in the trees, Hud,” before heading over to look closer at the graves.

I noticed that right off, too, only I didn’t want to mention it, on account of we wouldn’t be able to make things better for Grampy without a major search that could maybe take forever. So, I just followed him over to the first gravestone we came to, without saying anything. It was a pearly white headstone with a carved-out angel on top. Under that was the name, *Mary Hamilton Boone*, with the word *Beloved*, underneath it. Just that one word. Then the dates.

“That’s my Gran,” Boone whispered. “Dad rented a helicopter to get her all the way up here, but Mom wouldn’t let me come. Thought I was too young for funerals. We were still living down in Texas, then. Where Dad was stationed before we moved out here.”

“Your dad flies helicopters, too?”

“He flies Apache helicopters over in the war. Any planes he takes up when he’s home are just his hobby. He really likes to fly.”

I followed him over to the next gravestone. It was made out of dark marble, and had a silver pair of flyers’ wings molded into it. Boone bent down and ran a finger across them, almost like they were magic. “See that? These are Tuskegee Airman’s wings! They belonged to Wild John Boone. That was Grampy’s dad. But he got shot down in the Pearl Harbor war, when Grampy was about my

age. Course, he isn't really here, they just sent the wings back. The family put up a stone for him, anyway, though, because he was a treasure keeper."

"They were some of the bravest guys in the war." I bent down to look closer, myself. "Those Tuskegee Airmen."

"Yeah. He flew with the Red Tails. They were P-51 Mustang fighter planes."

The way Boone knew something about every one of those people buried there, you would have thought he knew them personally. But other than his Gran he had never met any of them. I decided, right then and there that, as soon as I got back home, I was going to start asking about some of my own relatives. On account of I felt sort of cheated not really knowing who I was, or who to live up to.

Sheesh, the only thing that came to my mind about Hudsons, was that somebody named a river after one of them all the way back in New York. I don't have a clue why, but you can bet I'm going to find out. I was starting to think it would be pretty cool to know my family as far back as Boone did. Just because it made you feel like they were still close by, somehow.

The next couple of stones belonged to Grampy's brother and sister. Alexander Hamilton Boone, and Rose Velda Boone. The Boones were way patriotic (from fighting in all those wars), and all the men in the family were named after presidents. Grampy always took it for a sign that Gran's family name was Hamilton. He said besides her making his heart do flip-flops the first time he ever saw her, he knew as soon as they were introduced she was going to fit right in. That's how Boone told it, anyway.

I asked him how come they didn't bury ol' Washington Boone up there, too. But he said Aunt Mercy (Mad Maude's daughter, that ended up a nurse in the World War I) and him wanted their hearts to stay in *Padre Gordo*. On account of they had built up that place, practically single-handed, just to take care of more people during the hard times. I guess you could say they figured the town of *Padre Gordo* was their best treasure, and they wanted to watch over it for

all eternity.

The last gravestone we looked at was so old the edges were starting to wear away. That one said, Maude Louise Parker, with a pair of praying hands carved over it. Under the dates there was a whole scripture verse. Written out in cursive, so it was hard to make out. I bent down to see what it said, because, man, this was the grave of Mad Maude, herself. The one who outsmarted everybody, and then turned right around and shared whatever she had with them.

I started to read it out loud. “More are the... the... the children of the des-o-let—”

“Desolate,” said Boone. He was walking off to look at something else. “It says, *more are the children of the desolate, than that of the married woman.*”

“What the heck is that supposed to—”

“Oh, no! This can’t be!” I looked up in time to see him drop to his knees like somebody shot him. “It’s him! It’s him. And somebody already buried him!”

“Holy crud. Are you sure?” I went over to see for myself. “I mean, what if it’s just a stone? Like they did for—”

It was him, all right. I could feel it in my gut.

The gravestone was right at the foot of the biggest tree, sort of around to the side (so we hadn’t seen it right off) where—if you looked at it that way—the fingers of Padre Gordo Mountain curved around to shelter it from any strong winds coming up off the desert. But it still had a view of the far-off hills in the distance. Almost like they were pointing out a pathway straight to heaven. At least, that’s how it looked the way the sunlight was shining through just then.

That gravestone was taller and thinner than the others. So worn away you could hardly make out what was there. Except for a fancy cross carved in deep (like the kind you see priests carrying around in old paintings), and the words, “*El Padre*” in big letters. In smaller ones under that it said, “*Friend of all the World.*” After that, there was something else, but it was too worn smooth to figure out what it was, anymore.

All around the grave was a circle of big white stones. Inside the

circle there was a thick patch of white flowers that were deep red in the middle. No grass at all was growing on top of it, like the others. Just the flowers. And right at the top of the circle, at the very foot of the gravestone (almost hid by flowers), was the biggest chunk of pure gold I'll ever see in my life. So glittering and shiny, it was almost like there was a light turned on inside it.

"How can his bones still sing out if they been buried all these years!" Boone looked about to bawl, again, but I didn't blame him. "How are we ever gonna save Grampy, now!"

"Boone, you—" I got a lump in my throat just hearing him that upset. "You did save him. Back up there on the mountain. He'd have been dead, right then, if we hadn't got him out from under that rock."

"But he still wants to die! Look how he got quieter and quieter the closer we got to here!"

"Maybe, he—" I had a second thought about what I was going to say, so I didn't.

"He could fight it if he wanted. He just doesn't want to!"

"Maybe he's tired of fighting, Boone. Did you ever think of that? Tired of living, even. Lonely, too. Without your Gran around, anymore."

He didn't answer. Just sighed a big sigh and put his hands on his head for a minute. Like he was trying to get a grip. That's when I felt a drop of water on my cheek, and before I could even brush it off two more on top of my head. It was starting to rain. Boone got up slow (I guess he felt a few drops, too), and we started for the gate.

"Better get back to the house before it let's loose." He held it open until I was out, and then made sure the iron latch fell into place when he closed it, again. "Before Grampy gets himself soaked and dies of the pneumonia."

It wasn't until we got out from under the trees and onto the meadow, again, that we noticed dark clouds piling up and starting to spill over the peak of Padre Gordo. Almost like it punched a hole in them on their way past, or something. Because all of a sudden you

could see a line of rain come pouring down the mountain and shaking the long grass in its way like some invisible giant was tromping through. It caught up to us before we got to the house, so we were totally drenched by the time we slammed through the yard gate and ran up under the porch.

Grampy was still asleep.

By that time there was water pouring in a steady stream off the roof tiles and onto the outside of his hammock. He was practically floating in it, but he didn't wake up. I mean, we were making enough noise for an army, and he never even twitched. For a second Boone just stared at him with all the color draining out of his face. In one of his frozen spells, and I could almost see what he was thinking. Then in one big flying leap he bolted over and shook the hammock. Back and forth, back and forth, hollering like a wild man at the same time. "Grampy! Grampy!"

Grampy startled awake and grabbed for the sides before Boone dumped him out. "By cripes. There better be a fire! Junior. What's wrong with you?"

"You're laying in water!" he hollered back, "Dang, Grampy. I thought you were dead!"

"Well, quit thinking so much! Shoot, if I—" He tried to get up, jumped like he got a sudden pain, and then motioned for help. "When I'm fixing to die I'll let you know."

That long rest had stiffened Grampy up like a board. Even with the two of us, we could only shuffle him—half-bent over—to one of the benches and prop him up there. Then Boone and I got the shutters open, quick as we could, and the cross beam on the bear door slid away so we could get him inside.

I found out later the whole house had to be shuttered tight like that so the bears wouldn't raid the pantry and trash the place when nobody was around. Which made me feel way wobbly about running all over the hills and meadows around here before I knew there was a problem with that.

Inside the house was like a miniature mission and, come to find out, that's what it was. Seems the Apaches and the Fat Priest built it

after he helped them over the cholera that first year. Anyway, it wasn't much bigger than a good-size house, and decorated inside, now, with regular furniture and stuff on the walls. Except some of it looked like it went all the way back to Mad Maude's day, since this is where she came to when she ran off from town to hide out with great-aunt Mercy.

All the inside walls were painted white over the adobe, so it was bright and cheery in there, even though it was getting darker by the minute, outside. Lots of colorful Indian blankets and pillows all around, too. The only things different than a regular house was a big Mexican-style fireplace (the kind that have round openings instead of square ones) that sat up off the floor on a wall-to-wall hearth in the living room, and a huge (really huge) kitchen.

That kitchen took up the whole back half of the place. Boone said it was because there were always a lot of people living here during the Indian days, and they did a lot of cooking and preserving food here. Just like a regular mission. I guess that's how the Boones ended up getting so good at storing food away for years at a time. Because, man, it had been over a year since Gran died, and the pantry was still full of stuff. Like she'd be back any minute.

Boone pulled a clear jar of dried beans mixed with bright-colored peppers and spices off one of the shelves. "No use starting up the wood stove in here. We'll cook a pot of this bean soup over the fire in the living room. So Grampy won't have to move. He can just rest in his big chair and dry out. This is one of his favorites. All you have to do is add water. He used to like it with fresh tortillas, but I don't know how to make those. I can do cornbread, though."

"I don't care what it is." I watched him pull a tall-backed chair out from a long table and stand on it to reach one of the pots that hung down from iron hooks over the stove. "I'm so hungry I could eat stuff that came out of Egyptian tombs. We haven't ate anything all day."

While Boone got dinner going, I went back into the living room to start the fire. There was plenty of wood stacked up on the hearth, already, and even a big woven Indian basket full of kindling. I threw

a look over at Grampy, to see how he was doing, but his eyes were closed, and I figured he fell asleep, again.

He was all stretched out in his comfortable cow-hide covered chair (that thing looked way cool with the brown and white hair still on) and his feet up on a big footstool to match. As stretched out as he could get, anyway. If he tried to stand up, he would probably be in that same position, only facing the floor.

Boone came back before I hardly got a good start, and hung the covered pot on a big iron arm that swung out on a hinge from just inside the fireplace. Then he helped me chunk some more kindling and wood on, until the fire was pretty much roaring under that kettle.

He threw a look over at Grampy. “Dang, he’s asleep, again.”

“Well, don’t wake him up, this time. How’s he gonna get over the muscle cramp if you keep giving him heart attacks?”

“Okay. Might as well get some dry clothes on, then. This stuff’s gonna take a whole hour to cook, anyway.”

Now that the storm had rolled in between us and the sun, it actually felt cold away from the fire. But I don’t know what Boone was thinking, on account of the only thing I had to change into was my sister’s frilly shorts. I wasn’t about to run around in those, no matter how cold I was. I’d sit in my own puddles, first. But I got up to follow him, anyway.

Through an archway behind the fire place, and down a wide hallway with big red tiles on the floor. All the time noticing how his tennis shoes were making wet footprints that said, “*Nike, Nike, Nike,*” in a long trail out behind him. His Ashbury T-shirt was soaking wet, too, and clinging so much to his back and shoulders I could see all those muscles that were probably going to land him on the varsity wrestling team, next year.

“Here’s my room.” We stopped in front of a dark wooden door that had a black iron ring on it instead of a doorknob, and he pushed it open. “Wow. Everything’s just like I left it.” He went over to a desk in front of a huge window that looked out into the trees. “Here’s the last book my dad was reading to me.”

“*Secrets of the Woods Creatures*,” I read the title out loud.

“Hey, I was only six.” He went over to a dresser and pulled open one of the drawers. “You can borrow a pair of my—” The jeans he pulled out looked about the size of a doll. “Dang!”

I laughed out loud at that, and flopped backward onto a bed in the corner that had another Indian blanket for a cover. Then I remembered how wet I was and bounced up, again.

“Come on, we’ll have to use something of Dad’s.”

We were headed down the hallway, again, to the last room at the end, when he stopped so quick I plowed into him. “Sheesh, Boone. Do you mind giving me a heads-up when—”

“See that door?” He pointed to one across the hall from us. “It leads to an old hideout with an escape tunnel attached to it. Indian women and kids used to hide there whenever raiders came though.”

“Yeah? How’d they get up here, Boone? Through the water tunnel or the stronghold?”

“Those aren’t the only ways up here. This whole place is sitting on an old trail of Apache wells that crisscross the entire desert. Called the Devil’s Highway, because so many people got ambushed on it.”

“Then how come people didn’t start flocking here after the Indian wars? Wouldn’t take much sense to build a town high up in the cool country instead of down on the sweltering flats. It’s a regular paradise up here.”

“Too far off the road.”

“You just said the devil had one.”

“Not many people want to deal with the devil, Hud. Especially back in those times.” He started down the hall, again.

“That wouldn’t stop anybody these days.” I followed after. “The devil part would probably pull in the most tourists.”

“It is a tourist spot. Called *El Camino Del Diablo*. But I’m telling you, that road is so long it stretches across three states. Because the Indians—lots of tribes, not just Apaches—used to traipse from one end to the other of this country. It’s way the heck out in the middle of nowhere, though. So, you need off-road vehicles

to even get to it.”

“That’s what I’m saying. Off-roaders are enthusiasts, right? If they knew about a place like this—especially with hot springs in it—they’d come here all the time. Even if it took a week to get to it.”

“I’m telling you, nobody knows about this. There’s only a few well locations left anybody even knows about anymore, and there were hundreds of them. Besides, the ones they do know about are mostly down on the flat. The only people who know about this place here are Boones.” He pushed open the door.

It opened up into a bedroom that was so big it had a fireplace with a sitting area in it, and a glass door that led out onto an outside patio. “This was the fat priest’s private quarters. But it wasn’t fixed up this nice when he was here. Only thing left of his is that old cross hanging over the door.”

I turned around and looked up to where he was pointing. Man! Something that actually belonged to the fat priest. Maybe all Boone’s stories weren’t booger tales, after all. If it hadn’t been so high up, I would have reached up and touched it. Not that I thought it would still be holy, or anything, but, man, to think what that thing had been through. Way back in history, I mean.

“All the rest is my parent’s stuff. See this?” Boone snapped my attention back into the now by tromping on the keys of a piano. Only it wasn’t just tromping. It was a couple of full-out perfect chords of the kind of music you hear in old silent movies when the bad guy shows up.

He must have seen my mouth fall open (he never mentioned he could play piano), and explained, “Mom used to play backup music for a Vaudeville act when she worked for the circus. Along with other things.”

“Sheesh. Is there anything she can’t do?”

“Yeah. She can’t get along without my dad. She turns into a basket-case every time he has to do another tour. He’s getting out after this one, though.” He went around into a little alcove off in one corner and opened another dresser drawer. “His time is up.”

He tossed me a pair of jeans that were as big as the others were

little. I figured I'd have to tie them with a rope and roll up halfway to the knees to even keep them on me. But they were better than shivering for the next couple hours. There wasn't any rope handy, but we each took a belt-tie off some bathrobes that were hanging behind the closet door, and used them. By the time we left there, Boone and I both looked like a couple of bums that just raided the local laundromat. But at least we were warm. Which was a good thing.

Since we had no idea we were going to get stuck in that hideout for so long.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Telling Secrets

“His simple faith in God led him true and straight through every difficulty.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

I did not want to go in there. Okay, I wanted to see the place where all the Indians hid out when the raiders came. But I did not—and I mean, not—want to try out the escape place. Which is exactly what I would have told Boone, if I had known that’s what he was up to. Only I didn’t catch on fast enough. On account of when he said, “Hey, you want to see the hideout?” about three seconds after we already passed it up, I figured, how much could one little peek hurt?

I don’t know what I was expecting. Some closet with a false back to it, or even a hole behind a painting that was big enough to crawl through. Just some place I could look into the deeps of and say, “Wow! Man. Imagine that,” and try to picture what it would be like hiding in there, myself. Only it didn’t look like a hideout, at all. It was just somebody’s office.

It had a few more books in it, maybe (that place was floor to ceiling with books), but other than that, it had a desk and some wooden filing cabinets, same as any other regular office. Oh, and there were a couple of comfortable-looking chairs with cow-hair (like Grampy’s) in front of a big fireplace. Every room in this house seemed to have a fireplace, but, hey, it was built way before central

heating. Up until then, having one in every room must have been more essential than luxury.

Boone didn't swing open a painting to look behind, or even pull back the rug to show me a trap door that led down under the floor. Instead, he just said, "Follow me," and walked right into the fireplace. Not that there was any fire in it. But when he pushed on something in the corner and the whole end of the thing opened up just enough for us to crawl through, I could see how nobody would never even dream of looking in there. Especially with a fire in it.

"Where's the battery?" I was getting used to the way the Boone family rigged things up.

"There isn't one." He stood up after only a few feet, and I could hear him trying to strike a match. "This was built before they were even invented. It works off a perfectly balanced pivot. You could open it just by leaning against it. Except not many people would lounge around inside a fireplace."

An orange glow flooded down on top of me as I crawled through, and I realized he had lit some kind of old-fashioned kerosene lamp. I guess I was expecting just a hollowed-out place in the ground where people could huddle up and wait things out. Which is why I was totally surprised when I stood up and looked at what was in front of us. We were standing in a little church. With wooden benches, candles on the walls, and everything. Up front, there was a smooth wooden altar with the same kind of cross carved into it that was on the fat priest's grave. Only this one was painted gold inside.

The weird thing was, it smelled like flowers in there. Only I didn't see any around. Could have been the candles, maybe. But I didn't have time to peek into the holders to see if there were any left in there, on account of Boone walked away with the lamp. Not that it was scary, or anything. It just felt sort of like someone had been there and they just left. Either that or somebody was watching us. And I knew it couldn't be Grampy, since we left him twisted up like a pretzel back in the living room. I got a shiver, but I think it was mostly on account of the cold. It was so cold in there, I figured this

place had to at least be part-way underground.

“Look at this.” Boone held the lamp up over the altar when we got up to it. There was a white cloth spread out, with a couple of things sitting there. “This is a gen-u-wine Bible that belonged to the fat priest.”

I reached right out and touched it. Didn’t even hesitate. The leather of it was deep dark brown—probably from years of being handled—and it was cool to the touch, and smooth.

“Of course, being a priest, he had a few others. Like the one Grampy carries around in his pack. That was one of his, too.”

I snatched my hand back so fast you’d have thought it was a snake. “You mean, the one I made my swear on? Are you kidding me?”

“That was his, all right. Been in the family for years. And look here.” He picked up a small, blue, glass bottle that had three straight sides. Like one of those crystal prism-things that hang off dining-room lights. It had a fancy lid on it, too, in the shape of the top part of a cross. Only with short arms. “It’s holy water. Like for baptizing people and stuff. Hey. I wonder if...”

He drifted off into one of his silent, staring-ahead trances, and I had to jab him with my elbow. “Wonder if what?”

“I wonder if maybe a couple sprinkles of this holy water could put Grampy back in his right mind, again.”

“Boone.”

“I’ve heard of people getting healed from stuff like this. Saved even. Hud, we could save Grampy with this!”

“Jefferson Boone Junior, what do you want to save him from? He’s eighty-three years old, and—”

“Not eighty-three!”

“He is, too. He told me so. He’s eighty-three and still in better shape than anybody I know. Not a thing wrong with him. Except some major-ly wrenched out muscles. So, if he wants to go. He just plain wants to go!”

“But that’s the thing, Hud, he’s not right in his mind!” He held the little blue bottle up in front of my face like I maybe didn’t take a

good enough look at it. “Even a couple drops of this stuff could—” He set the lamp down and popped the top off long enough to tilt it toward the light and peek inside. “Ah, cripes! Not a drop left. It’s all evaporated out.” He stuck the cork-end of the little stubby cross back in. “You think there might be any power left in the vapors?”

“I think the only vapors it could hold would be if you had Grampy breath into it and capped it back on, again. With glue.”

He stared at it a few seconds longer, and then stuffed it into the pocket of his baggy jeans. “It’s an idea, anyway.”

“Boone, I was just making a point.”

“But it was a good point.” He picked up the lamp, again. “If I could have one deep breath of Grampy’s—after he was gone, I mean. Then if—”

“Boone.”

“If ever I came up against something really hard—like the end of the world, or something—I could just pop the cork, and breathe it right into me. I mean, well, even if it wasn’t true, it would at least make me feel better. Hold the lamp for a minute, will you?”

I didn’t say anything, on account of I didn’t know what to say to a wild idea like that. But Boone just plain hadn’t been himself all day long. So, I let it go. Instead, I stood there holding the lamp, and watched him shove the altar sideways. It rolled smooth and easy (like it didn’t weigh anything). But I almost dropped that thing when I saw what was under there. Underneath that altar was an open hole, with an old, practically ancient, stone stairway that led down into the pitch dark.

“Back in the old days?” He went about three steps down and then held his hand out for the lamp. “Even most of the bad guys wouldn’t touch an altar. No matter where they came from.”

“Holy crud, Boone!” I followed down after him.

“Anyway, as long as I’ve been hearing about it, nobody ever even found the chapel.”

It was damp and cold down there. I was way glad we had picked out a couple of sweatshirts instead of just T-shirts to put on. Except my feet were freezing because we had left our wet shoes back in the

hallway with the rest of the stuff we were going to dry in front of the fire. But the chill bumps I felt rise up on me weren't from the cold. It was because we were getting farther and farther away from those stairs.

"Man, doesn't it give you the creeps down here?" I was totally surprised, on account of Boone was usually about three degrees off ballistic whenever we were in some place scary.

"Naw. I've been down it a hundred times. It's a shortcut to the hot springs. Bottom of the trail that leads up to them is only about ten minutes from here. But halfway down, there's this little place I want to show you where—"

All of a sudden, there was a rumble and thump behind us that I did not need a translation for. "Holy crud. The trapdoor shut on us. Boone, the trap-door shut!"

He didn't even flinch. "Don't worry, it's just automatic. Some balance thing set up with sandbags inside the altar. Gets activated when you slide it open, but then the heavy bag sinks down slow and closes it. Takes about five minutes."

"Yeah, well, how do you get out from this side?"

"Just pull the sandbag up by its rope. Whole thing starts all over, again."

"Let's get out of here."

"First, I want to show you something."

I didn't know if I was up for any more of Boone's curiosities, but he took off, again, so fast, I had to follow him. I mean, with him having the lamp, and all. A few minutes later, he stopped in front of a place that had been dug right out of the side of the tunnel. It was about waist-high, maybe six feet long, and looked like an Indian grave. Mostly because there were the same white rocks we had seen around the fat priest's grave up on the hill, all circled around a dirt mound with Indian things on top.

"This is an Apache shrine to Padre Gordo. See?" He held the lamp closer inside, so it could shine on a bunch of little stick-figure paintings all over the back wall. "That tells the story of the things he did for them. And this stuff, here." He held the lamp down low,

again, and moved it slow over the mound so I could see everything laid out on it. “These are gifts they made for him. Strings of silver and turquoise, pretty chunks of gold. Look, there’s even a smoking pipe made out of bone. There used to be leather pouches and stuff, too, but they disintegrated. All that’s left of those are the little piles of glass beads you see all over.”

“I thought all the Indians deserted this place after he died.”

“They did. This is stuff they put here when he lived here. It showed up a little at a time. Mostly from people he did things for. Indians honor people more before they’re dead than after. We better get back, now. Before our feet go numb.”

I didn’t argue. We left everything the way we found it (almost) and headed back for the living room. I could smell that soup as soon as we left the office. By the time we gathered up all our wet stuff and got back, there were little puffs of steam sneaking out from under the lid and it smelled delicious. I strung our wet stuff out over the hearth while Boone went for some bowls. But he was gone so long, I had to wander back into the kitchen to see what was up.

He was putting things on a wooden tray for Grampy, so he wouldn’t have to hold anything heavy. So, far, it had an empty bowl, a mug of chocolate, and a glass of what I figured for apple cider. “Did you see Grampy’s face? He’s really hurting, Hud. Didn’t even open his eyes when we came in.”

“Maybe he’s having one of those nightmares where you make a dream around something you hear and can’t wake up.”

“I’m telling you, he’s hurting. So, I’m putting a pain pill in each one of these things, here. See? That way even if he only takes a little bit of each one he’ll still get a whole one down.”

“Yeah, and if he eats everything, he’ll sleep for a week. Why don’t you just ask him to swallow one normal? Like with water. I say, he’s hurting enough to try anything.”

“He won’t.” He picked up the tray and started for the living room. “Doesn’t like the way that kind of stuff addles his brain. Says it does something to his will-power. Bring the rest of those things, will you?”

I picked up another tray he had piled with our bowls and chocolate, along with a couple of plates for the cornbread. I didn't see any cornbread around though, so I figured—what with everything that had been happening—he must have forgotten to make any. Which was a bummer, on account of I love that stuff, and I was half-starved.

Grampy hadn't moved any since we first left him there. His hands were folded across his stomach, his head was leaned back against the cow-hide, and his mouth was shut tight in a hard line. I got a little twinge of worry, just looking at him. So, while Boone took the lid off the pot and then lifted another sunken lid out with golden-brown cornbread inside, so he could get to the bean soup underneath, I moved in for a closer look at Grampy. Just to make sure he was still breathing, and everything.

First thing I noticed, was his clothes were pretty much dried. On the front, anyway. But I sure couldn't tell if he was breathing, or not. I hardly noticed when Boone came over with the tray. He must have been thinking the same thing I was, because he leaned over the top of all that stuff, and stared at Grampy's throat. Like he was maybe looking for a pulse.

"I can feel you looking at me, boys," Grampy said it even before he opened his eyes.

Boone let his breath out, like he had been holding it all that time. "We weren't sure if you wanted woke up."

"For some of your Gran's bean soup? I'm halfway dead, and I still want woke up."

"Are you really halfway dead, Grampy?"

"Well, I won't lie to you." He motioned for Boone to set the tray down. "I feel like something's tore loose inside me. Doesn't matter, though. Because it's way past time to let go."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Halfway Dead

“If those under you get into trouble through carrying out your ideas, be loyal to them; own up that it was through your fault that they did wrong.”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

“Grampy, don’t go!” It would have been easier to take if Boone yelled that, but he breathed it out so quiet, it punched me in the gut for about the hundredth time, that day.

Grampy didn’t answer it, though. Instead, he just said. “There’s things we have to talk about, first. Important things. So, get your bowls, sit down close, and listen up.”

I didn’t know what to expect, but I knew it was serious. Halfway dead! Which was probably why that punched-in-the-gut feeling was still there, even after we had both brought our supper over and sat down on the floor next to his chair. I took a few bites, mostly to have something to do, but I really wasn’t so hungry, anymore. Not if Grampy was halfway dead, I wasn’t.

Boone couldn’t do any of his, at all. He just sat there, never taking his eyes off while Grampy worked his way through a couple bites off his tray. Probably just to be polite, on account of Boone fixed it all special for him. But he really wasn’t hungry, either. After a while, he eased himself back against the chair, again, with just his glass of cider. Like he was gearing up for a story, and giving us one good, long pause for anticipation (like he always did) before starting off.

But instead of a “Once there was... ” or “Did I ever tell you about the time... ” he went with, “Here’s how you boys are gonna get out of here.” Which made that dinner the best one I ever left on the floor. Because after those words nobody ate another bite of anything. “Junior, do you remember the Little Punching Creek, where your dad used to take you fishing?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Think you can find it, again?”

“I can find it.”

“Good. Well, behind the Punching Falls is a tunnel that leads to the outside cliff. Covered over by where the other part of the falls trickle down on the other side. Slippery there. Steep, too. But the mules go up and down it all the time when we call them off the mountain. So, give them their lead as soon as you get through. They’ll take you right down onto the trail. Then you’ll be on the Devil’s Highway.”

Holy crud. We were gonna take that devil road! I might have been quick to sneak into a few horror flicks in my time (they’re not allowed at my house, so only with friends), but this was real life, not the movies. And I don’t mind saying I wasn’t any more anxious to deal with the devil than those early settlers were. If you want the truth about it.

“*Padre Gordo’s* about two long days ride from there, and most of it is straight down. But it’s the safest way out of here. Might should be a little older before you try coming through the caverns by yourselves. Just take the road slow, and you’ll be all right. All you have to do is—”

“I know,” Boone finished the sentence for him, “trust the mules.”

“There’s reasons why old-time miners preferred mules.” Grampy took a drink of his cider, then peeked into his glass like he maybe suspected something. “Stuff doesn’t taste as good as it used to.”

“They can live in harsh conditions!” I knew Boone said the first thing that popped into his head, just to get Grampy’s mind off the cider.

“They’re sure-footed!” I felt like I had to add something, too.

Grampy set the glass back down on his tray and ticked off the reasons on his fingers. “They’re stronger, more loyal, and they got better instincts. Besides that, they can smell a way out of places you can’t even imagine one. So, always trust the mules.”

“I knew that,” said Boone.

“Do it even if it scares you.” Grampy reached for his mug of chocolate, took a long drink, and then made a face at that, too. “Stuff’s no good, either. Must be me.” He pushed the tray a little farther away along the chair arms, and folded his arms across his stomach.

For a minute, I thought he was going to drift off asleep, again. But instead, he just took a long look around the living room, sighed (sort of contented), and said, “Don’t stop for the night until you get to Apache Springs. That’s an old deserted Indian village built into the mountain, about halfway down. Plenty of water there for the mules, and a corral you can lock them into. Take you a whole week to hike down on your own if you let those mules get away from you. They’re used to running that trail when they’re after the grain, so, be careful about that. Don’t need any more accidents, when your mom’s gonna be worried enough as it is. And boys?”

We didn’t answer, just waited for him to go on.

“Don’t let go of any secrets, no matter how those county people press you. You gotta do what’s best for the whole bunch, now. Just act like a couple of silly-ass kids on a lark, and let your mom do all the talking.”

“But we’re not silly-ass kids, anymore.” Boone sounded like he wanted to argue over that point, but I didn’t think this was exactly the right time. Especially considering all the stuff we had done out here that could maybe be lumped into that category. But he insisted, “Are we, Grampy.”

“No, you sure aren’t.” He looked from one to the other of us for a second, and then nodded his head, just a little, like it was more to himself than us. “What you boys did up there on the mountain today proves to me you can handle whatever gets thrown at you. You had

each other's backs, boys. And you had mine, too—even after I gave myself up for dead. That tells me you're going to be all right. No matter what comes down."

The good feeling that flooded over me when he said that would have lasted me forever (coming from somebody like him). If only he hadn't dropped a bomb with the next words he said, three seconds later.

"That's why I can let go, now. It's what I've been waiting for."

"Grampy!" It was just a whisper, but Boone almost choked getting it out.

"I'm tired, boys. More than tired. Ready, too. Been trying to earn my place on the hill for a long, long time." Then—almost like he only just thought of it—he asked, "How did it look up there?"

I don't know how he knew we even went. But leave it to Boone to tumble out with the whole darn story. First thing he blurted was, "Somebody already buried the bones!" like he still couldn't believe it. Like he totally forgot we were trying to keep that part secret.

"You think you're the first one to come up with that idea, Junior? Henry Ashbury took care of those bones the first trip he made up here. Trying to put a stop to what he was hearing."

"Well, it didn't work! What's up with that? How come people keep hearing the bones when they been laid to rest so good? Doesn't make sense you could hear something from all the way up here. Not all the way to the boxcar tunnel, it doesn't."

"You don't hear it with your ears. You hear it... " He tapped on his chest a couple times. "... in here."

"Then it's probably just something rolling around in your own brain, anyway." Boone sighed a big, disappointed sigh. "You just didn't know it was there."

"It wasn't me."

"Can't prove it."

"I got all the proof I need."

"What is it, then? What exactly did you hear? What could be so important it made you drop everything and run up here? Fast as you could, too. I mean, Dad couldn't budge you for this place even if he

put a stick of dynamite under you, last year! What changed your mind?”

A twinkle of remembering came into Grampy’s eyes, and he said, “Only one thing could ever get me to change my mind, like that. And that’s the sound of your Gran’s voice. Soft, gentle, and sweet as a cool breeze drifting over the mountain.”

“It wasn’t really her, Grampy!” Boone was set to argue. Like he could maybe change Grampy’s mind about letting go, if only he could make him see some sense. “Gran would never tell you to give up and die. She never would!”

“No, she never would. It was more like she was telling me to wake up and live.”

“What—did—she—say!” Boone looked ready to jump up and holler. “I gotta know!”

“She said, ‘Jackson, honey?’” The twinkle came back into his eyes, again. “You should see the big, bumper crop of apples we’ve got up here, this year.”

For a minute, we all just sat there. So quiet you could hear the rain pelting down steady against the roof tiles, and the fire giving a pop, or a crackle, now and then. I don’t know what Boone was thinking. But the first thing that came to my mind was that apple orchard we hiked through, this afternoon and how I never saw so many apples in one place before in my whole life. If that wasn’t a bumper crop, I don’t know what was.

“That’s it?” Boone looked astonished. “Hearing Gran talk about apples is all it took to set you off like that?”

“Don’t be so quick to judge.” Now, Grampy was looking over at Boone, with the same twinkle in his eye. “Might be hard for you to understand, right now, but the same thing’s gonna happen to you one of these days. Some pretty girl is gonna come along who can twist you every way but Sunday. Wait and see.”

“Not about important stuff.”

“About all the important stuff. That’s why you have to know who you are before you get there. Happens just like it did on the mountain, today. You don’t get time to think. Just happens.”

“You mean, if I hadn’t made you wrench your guts out trying to save me, you were only coming up here to work that big crop of apples? The way you and Gran used to do?”

“Maybe.”

Man, I figured if Boone had to take one more hit of truth-telling, it was liable to kill him. Just from the guilt of it all. Next thing I knew he was almost bawling. “I didn’t mean to fall off, Grampy! I was down before I knew it! What’s Dad gonna say when he hears what you had to do? Now, you’re halfway dead because of me! Honest—I didn’t mean it! What’s Dad gonna say?”

“It wasn’t your fault, son. Hear me? I told you, things like that just happen. Nobody ever sees it coming, Junior. Nobody. It’s what you do after they happen—that’s what tells who you are. Doesn’t matter how old you are, either. I’ve known grown men wouldn’t have the guts to do what you two did up there, today. And it for sure doesn’t matter who your dad is.”

Boone didn’t believe that—I knew he didn’t—because he didn’t give it an answer. Instead, he just drew his knees up, folded his arms across them, and laid his head down. Like he didn’t want to talk about it, anymore.

“Way I see it, you did me a favor.” Grampy went on talking to him, anyway. “Been letting myself go, down there on the flat for so long. Sunk way too low. Turning into some grouchy old cuss, and letting things fall to ruin around me. Just sitting there waiting to die. Got pretty tired of people bugging me about it, too. Then you boys came along.”

One thing I got to say about Grampy. He sure knew how to push Boon’s buttons if he wanted to. No kidding. You wouldn’t believe how fast Boone’s head popped up, ready to pick a fight over that last line. “Don’t go saying anything sappy—like we saved you—just to make me feel better! I know dang well you didn’t want us here. Wasn’t even your idea to pay us, it was Mom’s!”

Sheesh. I’d have been in some big-time trouble if I ever used that tone at my house. Especially to an adult. But Grampy must have been used to this kind of conversation between him and Boone,

because he didn't let any of those words get to him. Not even close. He just went on with what he was saying, like he hadn't heard most of them, at all. "Did I say you saved me? You boys came whether I wanted your help, or not. Didn't you. Right along with your silly-ass idea about dropping a raft into the Apestoso. Had your mother worried sick about that. Been out here three different times, trying to get me to do something about it."

"Like what? Scare the poop out of Mr. Cooper down at the pawn shop for selling it to us? Probably won't give it to us, anyway. He's a cheat! Made a deal with us and took our money. Then went and blabbed to Mom about it, after he said he wouldn't."

"There's cheats all over, Junior. Put here—for the most part—so the honest people in the world don't get over-run by too many silly asses."

"Did you talk to Mr. Cooper about us, or didn't you?"

"Me? Shoot, no. I told your mom she ought to just let you go ahead and drop it in. That way, if it happened she did have one of those silly asses for a son, it would be better to get it over with, quick."

I guess this thing about telling the whole truth whenever somebody asked for it went both ways. Because the shocked look on Boone's face after Grampy admitted that—on top of all the other rotten things he found out today—made him look like he just got the wind punched out of him.

Which was probably why Grampy added, "But all that was before she blackmailed me."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Whole Truth

“When a lad becomes a Scout; he is no longer a fool-boy, who goes about yelling aimlessly and making himself a nuisance to everybody. Instead of that he smartens into a manly fellow, ready at any moment to give a helping hand to anybody... without taking any reward for it, and without thinking how poor or rich, how old or young the person may be”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

“Mom wouldn’t do something like that. She’s worried ragged, right now, just trying to keep you out of the county home! It would kill her if you ended up in one of those. So, you... you shouldn’t talk about her like that!”

“I already ended up there, Junior. What do you think she had to come and get me for? And I’ll tell you how worried ragged she was. Wouldn’t even sign my release papers until I agreed to bring you home with me. You and the boy, too.”

“She just jumps and hollers a lot. You know that. She got you out, didn’t she?”

“She blackmailed me.”

“Tricked you, maybe. But it’s not the same thing. Mom’s got a trick up her sleeve for every situation. Just got the better of you, for once. That’s all. She had to, because we promised Dad we’d take care of you. We promised, Grampy! We can’t break a promise to Dad when he’s off in the war! That’s why you gotta hang on, at least till he gets back. You got to! You can do it. I know you can!”

Holy crud. Did Boone think Grampy could change his mind when he was already halfway dead? Asking him to hang on, when he was sitting there with his insides squashed, and wanting just to give up and let go? Making him feel bad about it wouldn’t help anything. Seems to me, you’re supposed to make people feel the best you can at a time like that. Not to mention people who got that way from saving your life that day. He saved our lives! We owed Grampy whatever we could give him that he asked for.

We owed him.

Then the real truth came tumbling out. “Dang, Grampy. I can’t take care of this whole mountain by myself. I’m just a kid! Even if Hud helps me—we’re still just a couple of kids!” Boone dropped his head down on his knees, again. “I wish Dad was here!”

“Come here, Junior.”

He didn’t move a muscle. For all the times Boone hopped to whatever Grampy said—even if it scared the pants off him—he was out-and-out defying him, right then. But Grampy must have understood Boone had about all he could take, because he didn’t get mad about it. He just handed his tray off to me, pulled his feet off the footstool and leaned forward (it had to hurt—I saw him wince). He reached out for Boone’s ankle, and slid him across the floor, anyway. ‘Til he was right up against his knee. Then Grampy just put a hand on top of his head and sighed.

After a minute, he said, “I know it’s a hard thing, not having your dad around. A hard thing. You wait and wait, just hanging on, like I’m hanging on, here. All the time getting madder at any and everybody else. Then, if it happens he doesn’t come home...”

That did it for Boone. He let loose like a bucket with a hole in it when he heard those words. Which didn’t surprise me, since I’d seen

it building up in him, all day long. Even so, it gave me such a lump in my throat, I had to quit looking at him, and focus on some desert painting that was hanging on the wall.

“Maybe I should tell you what it’s like out there, Junior. On the battlefield. Might make things a little easier than I had it, when I was your age.”

“My dad’s coming home!” He said that with everything he had, right through all the bawling.

“I hope he does. Pray for it every day, just like you and your mom do. But there’s something you should know if he doesn’t. About what it’s like out there.”

He stopped talking, and was quiet for so long, I thought maybe he was trying to get a grip, first. Like those old war veterans on TV that still get choked up when they talk about their buddies. I thought he was getting ready for one of those speeches about how we all have to keep our chins up and carry on for the ones that never make it back, even if it puts a wrench in your gut to do it.

But he wasn’t.

Instead, he said, “Life’s a twist, boys. And for every one you figure out, there’s one waiting down the line you never saw before. Life’s one twist after another, all the way through. That’s why you got to have the code. But especially the brotherhood. Those things give you something to hold onto. Like a mule pulling you through the tunnels. But with all the twists and turns to figure out, war’s the worst thing that can happen to you. Always has been.”

Boone didn’t say anything. Didn’t make any sound but a sniff, now and then. He didn’t even lift his head up. So, Grampy just sighed another big sigh and went on. “People argue about it all the time. Some for, some against, and the rest don’t understand any of it. They just get caught up in the thing, and end up having to do what they’re told. Nothing wrong with that. You’ve got to make hard choices for yourself once you’re out there, though. And that’s a fact. But I saw something when I was there...”

Now, his eyes got sort of distant, and he looked off toward the fire. Like he wasn’t just remembering, but actually watching things

play out in front of him, all over, again. “From high up. Away from all the noise and arguing. Away from the fighting and dying, even. You know I used to fly Hueys in the Vietnam War? Flew into all kinds of tight places, so we could get out the wounded—and the dead. Get them off the battlefield. That was my job.”

He looked back at us, again. “But what I saw out there! I’m not talking blood and guts, now. There was plenty of that. Sure. And you can see that stuff any night of the week, right on your own TV. No, I’m talking about something else. Something I call The Save, boys. And it was happening all over the place out there. All the time.”

He patted the top of Boone’s head, again. “You tasted a little bit of it for yourself, on the mountain, today. Happens in a flash. Somebody’s in trouble, and they look at you. Wrings your insides out like a sponge. No time to think. It doesn’t matter. You just do what you have to do. They’re the most important person in the world, all of a sudden. Then you see The Save. Pops up, plain as day, right in front of you. And you know you can do it, too. You feel it in your gut.”

He smiled a little, just thinking. “Live through something like that—just once—and you’ll do it, again. Because, here’s the deal, boys, saving people grows on you. After a while, you’re just about living for it. Want to know why?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, just answered himself. “Because it feels good, that’s why. Feeling good gets real important when you’re in a mess as big as war. Survive long enough, and you get even better at it. Pretty soon, you’re just looking for The Saves. Anywhere you can find them. That’s when they start popping up everywhere you look. Next thing you know, you’ve got others moving out alongside you. And they’re just like you. That’s how I first met the heroes. Heroes collect heroes. They multiply.”

“Heroes multiply?” I couldn’t help asking, on account of I am way interested in that stuff.

“Like magic, boy. Especially in places like that. Out there on the battlefield there’s too many even to count.”

“You mean doing saves is what makes a hero?” Even Boone

couldn't keep quiet, after that.

Because if there was one thing we had spent the most time wondering about, this summer—the whole reason we were studying Sir Robert's book, and planning our expedition, even—it was how in the heck a person got to be a hero. Without getting himself seriously killed, I mean. Now, here was Grampy, telling us straight out.

"It starts that way, Junior. But somewhere along the line it turns into something else. Something way more powerful than ordinary men. When men like that start moving out together they get backup. That's how I see it. They get backup straight out of heaven. Shoot, there's more angels on a battlefield than all the churches in town. Seen it with my own eyes, boys, and that's the truth."

"You've seen angels?" That was me, again.

"Now, boy, it's not like I saw shining, warrior-type creatures flying around with swords and lightning-bolts. But that's the only way to explain what I did see, looking down so many times from those helicopters. Moves were so obvious, it was like watching a football game with the sound turned off."

Boone and I must have looked stumped, because he tried for another way to explain. "Close calls happening all over the place. One man doing things a whole committee couldn't figure out even if they had half a day to vote on it. And some being caught up—instantly—right out of those bloody fields, and taken off somewhere. Their bodies were still there, all right, but by the time we picked them up, they were gone. Gone, boys. Already taken off somewhere, else. Isn't any wonder men get hooked on that stuff?"

He shook his head, slow, and looked back toward the fire. "Hits deep every time you see it. Till your heart runs so deep with that stuff, all you want to do is more Saves. Never blame somebody for wanting to go back to the battlefield, Junior. Especially your dad."

"But he's a treasure keeper! What about the whole bunch while he's out there?" Boone sounded sort of demanding all of a sudden. "All my life I been hearing from both of you about having to take care of the whole bunch. What are we supposed to do? Save the whole dang world? What good is it to leave one bunch high and dry,

just to run off and save another one? It's not fair! It's impossible, too, Grampy. And it's not fair!"

"Depends on the bunch."

"Our bunch."

"Was that our bunch up on the mountain, today?"

"You can't count Hud. He was adopted in."

"Anybody can be adopted in, Junior."

"We can't take care of the whole world! It's impossible!"

"Junior."

"How can one person take care of the whole world?"

"It isn't just one person. It's a lot of people working together." Then he rapped him on the head. Not hard. Even kind of gentle. "What do you think the brotherhood is."

"But, dang, Grampy! Where's that leave the whole bunch we been taking care of off this mountain, all this time?"

"The whole bunch." Grampy leaned back in his chair like he was getting too tired to argue, and he closed his eyes for a minute. "The whole bunch, Junior, is whatever bunch you're with when the trouble starts."

"What?"

He opened his eyes, again, and looked straight at Boone. "Your dad is taking care of the whole bunch. He's over there taking care of them, right now. That's the truth, the best I can give it to you. Now, the only way to get alongside him—the way you want to—is to start doing the same thing, back here. Where you're at, right now. In fact, he's depending on you to do that. It's like a... a flank maneuver. You work your end, and he works his, 'til one day we all meet in the middle. By cripes, that'll be a great day!"

"The end of the world, you mean?"

"Maybe. But how should I know which of us will last that long? I'm just telling you everything the way I've seen it going up till now. Personally. Took the sauce out of me, too. So, quit trying to wear me out before I finish."

"Dang, Grampy, you said enough. I can't take anymore!"

"One thing more..." He closed his eyes, again, his mouth went

sort of slack, and I thought sure he was going to fall off into one of his instant sleeps this time. But then he roused himself and said, “Haven’t told you how I want to be buried, yet.”

Chapter Thirty

All the Way Home

“Try and leave this world a little better than you found it and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate you have not wasted your time but have done your best. ”

Sir Robert Baden-Powell

Grampy had the whole thing planned out. You’d have thought he was going to bury himself, the way he said, “Let’s go,” and “Might as well get to it.” Like he intended to be one of the guests, as well as the person getting buried. I got to admit it felt sort of strange, everybody getting ready, like we were only heading off to church and didn’t want to get there late. But it took some of the sting out of it, too. Especially for Boone.

First thing we did was get Grampy into a hot shower. By that time, he was so wore out from the long talk, we practically had to drag him in there. But it did a lot for getting him limbered up enough for the short ride up the hill (he insisted on having his funeral that night—what else could we do?), and it straightened him out a little better, too.

He still had a bad stoop, though, but there wasn’t much we could do about that. Boone and I washed up, afterward. And right when I

was thinking there were some modern things I would really miss (like hot showers) if I lived back in the gold rush days, I found out the hot water came from a pipe that ran through the back of the fireplace. So, I guess they had been having hot water around here since the place was built.

After that, we grabbed Grampy's best dark suit from his and Gran's room (on the other end of the big hall), and he was only half-dressed when he caught a look at himself in the bathroom mirror. He rubbed a hand over the pointy beard on his chin and said, "Better get rid of this. Wouldn't want Mary to see how low I let myself go, first time she gets a good look at me." Only he started to slip into another droop, just trying to get it done.

So, Boone and I helped him back to his chair by the fire and finished up for him. Sort of like one of those old-time barber shops in the Western movies. We left his mustache. On account of he had always had one, and Gran was partial to it. With all the talk about visiting with Gran, and the rest of his folks, again, (especially his dad, who he hadn't seen for almost seventy years, now), I actually started to get caught up in some of his excitement, myself. I mean, it was sort of catching.

He took another long nap while we cleaned up all the messes we had made around the place, and then changed back into our own clothes that were finally dry. But it wasn't until we were putting the stuff we borrowed from Boone's dad back in the dresser drawers, that the little blue bottle for holy water rolled out. He picked it up and stuck it into the pocket of his shorts. I figured we were going to stop long enough to put it back where it belonged. Heck, it was so old, it was like taking something from a museum.

Which is why I had to mention that fact when he passed right by the office and went, instead, to rummaging around the desk in his own room. "Boone, you're not doing what I think you are."

"I know I used to have some glue in here."

"Even if you had some—how are you going to get his breath in there, in the first place?"

"Stick it up his nose when he's sleeping. I'm gonna get

Grampy's breath, Hud."

"Well, good luck with that."

"Maybe I'll just come right out and ask him to do it. I don't know, yet."

"Good luck with that, too."

By the time we were ready, Grampy was still sleeping hard. So, I sat down on the hearth and started looking through a picture album that was lying there. I thought I might see some of the people on the hill, but it turned out to be mostly a bunch of pictures Boone's mom had collected from all the different places they had been stationed with the Air Force over the years. I finally saw what his dad looked like, though. He looked like Boone, only grown up.

After a while, I came across a picture of a lady sitting on a stool in front of an easel. She had a straw hat on, so you couldn't see much of her face. But the painting had the same bright red flowers as the hill she was on. And the sky was the same blue. "Who's this?" I asked.

Boone came back from where he was looking out the window, and stared at the picture for a second. "That's Gran. When her and Grampy came to visit, one Christmas, when we were stationed in Guam. She liked to paint. That picture's probably hanging around here someplace. She did the desert one on the wall over there, too. Hey, look. The sun's coming back out."

"Maybe the rain stopped." I turned the page and saw another picture from the same vacation, and this time there was a close-up view of Gran, holding a little brown-eyed, curly-haired toddler that looked like Boone with fat cheeks. Their faces were pressed together and they were both smiling into the camera. She was pretty, and had a great smile. "She looks awful nice, Boone."

"She was the best. Always let me hide in her room when I got in trouble for something. At least, till things calmed down, anyway."

"You still hide when you're in trouble."

"Yeah, well, hiding gets me out of a lot of scrapes." He shot a look over at Grampy, then whispered, "Makes him madder than a hornet, though. You think we should wake him up, now?"

“Boone.”

“If we don’t, we’ll miss the sunset. It’s getting late.”

“I say we woke him up too many times today, already, and we better leave him alone. There’s another sunset scheduled for tomorrow.”

“Good time to catch his breath, anyway.”

Which is how it happened that Grampy woke up with a start, and half a blue bottle up his nose. “What—what are you boys—” He gave a big sneeze and the bottle went flying. Which almost gave me a heart attack, on account of I still thought it should be in a museum. “Can’t a man get any peace?” He sneezed, again. “What have you got in that bottle?” He sneezed, once more, and this time it must have hurt. Somewhere in his chest, because he put a fist against it, screwed up his face, and closed one eye, just trying not to do it, any more.

“Grampy, I—” Boone had caught the bottle in the mid-air, like a fly ball chucked into left field. “I was just trying to catch—”

Grampy moved his hand back and forth on his chest, slow, and then let it down easy while he was waiting for a good explanation.

“Some of your breath.”

He must not have believed what he heard, because he threw a look over at me, then. But, heck, I was standing there with the open bottle of glue in one hand, and the cap with the little brush on it in the other, ready to swab fast, once we got some in the bottle. So, it was pretty obvious I was in on it.

He must have thought I was saner than Boone, though, because he was still looking at me when he asked, “What’s he want it for?”

“For the end of the world,” I blurted out. “He wants one big breath of yours to... to breathe in so he can face it. On account of, well, on account of you’re a hero.” Sheesh. That’s the first time I ever spilled the whole truth all at once if somebody asked for it. I usually doled it out in little bits and pieces, hoping they’d get tired of fishing before I had to give it all up.

When he heard that, all the irritation drained out of Grampy like butter melting into toast. Then he looked back at Boone with so

much love in his eyes, you could have swam in it. That's what it was, too, pure love. After that, he did something I will never forget. He held his hand out for the bottle, took a deep breath, and breathed right into it. Long and slow. Boone shoved the cap at me before he was finished, I swabbed fast, and he corked it off. Almost before the breath finished leaving Grampy's lungs.

Then everything got real emotional, again. And I sure don't know why it hit me so hard, when only ten minutes before, I was threatening to punch it out with Boone if he got me in trouble for all this. Maybe it was the way Grampy realized how important it was to him. Enough to make a big deal out of it. Sort of like a ceremony. Almost like one general passing his sword over to the next one in line. That's how it felt, anyway. And I know Grampy treating it like that meant the whole world to Boone.

I knew by the way he bent down to hug Grampy's neck, afterward, and mumbled halfway through a "thank you," before he started bawling. I mean, flat out, really bawling. Man. After that, even staring at the desert painting didn't help me keep a lid on. Next thing I knew, I was bawling, too. Just like a baby. Grampy held his other arm out to me, too, then. And I am not ashamed to say that I got down there and hugged him, same as Boone, and we all had a good cry over everything.

He told us what good boys we were, and that we'd be all right. No matter what happened before the world gave out. Said he'd be looking down on us from time to time, too, just to make sure. I don't know if that's possible, but I don't care. Just thinking about Grampy excusing himself from visiting with all his folks for a minute—maybe even the fat priest, himself—to keep an eye on Boone and me when we hit the rough spots, made me feel a whole lot safer about the future. No matter what was waiting for us behind all those twists and turns.

It made me want to do something good before it was all over, too. Something to make him proud of us. Because, man, to tell you the truth, I was banking on the fact that we would get to see him, again. When we finished our flank maneuvers and all met up in

the middle. The thought of not seeing Grampy, anymore, was so hard to face, right then, I couldn't help hoping to God (begging God, actually) that there really would be a middle like that, somewhere, to meet up in.

There had to be!

After a while, we pulled ourselves together enough to help him out the door, so he could whistle up the mules. Then we set him down easy on one of the benches while we saddled up. It only took about fifteen minutes to get up to the graveyard that way (instead of walking, like before), and we made it there just in time. By sunset.

First thing Grampy did was have us help him over to Gran's headstone, so he could give it a pat, and lean against it while he looked out over the valley for a while. As pretty as it had been this afternoon, it was totally amazing, now. The big orange sun was setting behind the farthest hills, making a blazing path of light out of that little road to heaven I had seen earlier.

Grampy picked out his rest place—between Gran and Wild John Boone—and then sat down against the *El Padre* tree while Boone and I started to dig. Seven feet down, he said. So the bears wouldn't get any ideas when we weren't around. Which made me sort of nervous. On account of it was getting dark. Digging a seven foot hole could take all night, for all I knew. But then Boone said we didn't have to worry about that. The bears were as afraid of us as we were of them. So, as long as we made enough noise, they'd stay away.

After the sun set all the way, it got really cold up there. We spread one of the Indian Blankets out for Grampy to sit on, and then another one for over the top. The third one, we bunched up behind him to ease his sore back. After that, we took turns with the digging, so one of us could sit with him and keep an eye on things.

Starting a fire in that little yard, even if it was to keep warm by, would have been as disrespectful as starting one in a church. So, we didn't. Instead, we shared one end of Grampy's blanket when we were sitting with him, and the digging was enough to keep the other person warm while they worked.

Grampy talked some (mostly little things about the people there). That's how I found out his Grampy George—the one who raised him after his dad died, and taught him everything there was to know about this mountain—was ol' Washington Boone, himself. George Washington Boone, to be exact. No wonder he wasn't afraid of the ghost. How could he be, if ol' Washington was even half what Grampy was? The way I saw it, he had to be, in order for Grampy to turn out the way he did. Because, by then, I was positive sure you had to learn from somebody who already had those kind of things in them, in order to get that way, too. Which made me feel sort of emotional all over, again. Just for the fact that he had decided to adopt me in. Before I even knew how important it was. Or even how valuable all the stuff he was showing us was going to be.

But by that time, anything else you could get from him had to come in bits and pieces, because he kept falling asleep more and more. Once, when he stopped talking in the middle of a story, I thought I'd only get the half of it. But he woke up a little while later and finished it off. Almost like there was still stuff he wanted to say, only he had to drag it out of himself. Not long after that, he tensed up, and got quiet for so long, I knew he had to be hurting something fierce inside. He didn't talk much after that.

I think it was somewhere around midnight when we finally finished the hole.

Boone tossed the shovel up onto the big pile of dirt we had made, and climbed out. He looked thrashed (and way too dirty for a funeral—we both were) when he came over and got under the blanket, on the other side of Grampy. Nobody said anything. Just about the time I was estimating the possibility we might have to live up here for a week—on account of Grampy had a heart as strong as a bull, and it might take as long as the world to finally give up and quit—he started talking, again.

“Boys, do you know how important a man's last, dying request is?”

“Yes, sir.” We both answered together.

“Well, this is it. So, raise your right hands.”

Uh-oh. Another swear. But by that time, I didn't care if he made us promise to blast him to the moon. I'd have done anything. No matter what anybody said. No matter what people thought about it, either. Which is why Boone and I, both, repeated every sentence back to him, not caring what it was—almost without realizing what we were saying until after it was said. And it was an real swear, too. Because by that time, we knew that if we were going to get any respect at all from people, we better make sure everything we put our word to, from now on, was just as important.

So, we swore.

"I do solemnly swear..." We spoke it right out together. "That I will not take that raft down the Apestoso..." We slowed up, but we said it. "Or set one foot inside Mexico..." Really slow with that part. "Until voting age."

"Awww, Grampy!" Boone felt tricked. I could hear it in his voice.

"Had to do that one for your mother," he answered. "Thing's nothing but a mud creek anyway. First time you had to haul over dry rock, you'd have punched a hole in the bottom."

"But that is way not fair!" I got to admit, I felt cheated, too.

"Well, you'll have to live with it. Might help to know I dragged a swear out of her, too. She's going to give you free-reign to stay as long as you want up here. Anytime you like. Without tagging along all the time, or telling you what to do."

"Mom agreed to that?"

"Well, my parents won't. I'll tell you that, right now." I still felt a little miffed, because it looked like I got nothing but the crooked end out of that deal.

"You just let Amelia talk to them."

"Case you don't know it, Grampy, they both work for the county!" I must have been turning into more of a Boone every day. I could tell just by the way I felt about the county making enough rules to smother a person before they even got to voting age!

"Don't worry about it, Hud. Mom used to work for the circus, Remember?" The way Boone said that—like there was no doubt in

his mind the right hoodoo trick could fool anybody in town—made me flat-out laugh.

I couldn't help it. I think I was as whacked out as he was, by then, and a good belly-laugh was about the only thing I hadn't done that day. What surprised me, was finding out Boone and Grampy must have been in the same spot. Because it started a chain-reaction. I busted out first, which knocked Boone into his hyena thing. Then I started to feel Grampy doing one of his silent laughs, right next to me. He had to hold his sides, though. On account of even the quiet laughs gave him shooting pains.

"Let's start the service." I think he finally said that just to stop the torture. Which it did. It popped us all like a bunch of balloons.

"Grampy, we're not gonna start a funeral when you're not even dead." Boone was serious, now. "Dang. That wouldn't be right."

"I won't enjoy the music as much, then, as I will, now. Did you bring your dad's violin, like I asked you?"

"Just because you asked, I did. But I told you already, I can't play it."

"You can play it."

"I only dinked around on it a couple times, with Dad. What do you want to hear? *Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star*?"

"I want to hear *America the Beautiful*. The way he used to play it. So, I can close my eyes and imagine my boy right here with us. Instead of so far away." He gave a big sigh.

That was it. That was his real last request, and we all knew it. Boone didn't even argue about it any more. He just got up, went over to where the mules were tied (just outside the gate), and came back a few minutes later with the case. He set it on the ground and took it out—careful—and I knew just by the way he handled it, how special it was. He plunked it a few times, turned the knobs some, then plunked a few times more. He bent down and picked up the bow, stood straight and tall, right in front of Grampy, and started to play.

I never heard anything so beautiful in my life, as the sound Boone pulled out of that thing, while he stood there in front of the

stars. Nothing complicated. Just the simple tune we all knew so well. And even though nobody was singing, I still heard the words inside my head as he played.

“*America, America.*” I couldn’t help it. Between school and church, I had been singing it all my life. “*God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.*”

Only it had a whole new meaning for me, now.

None of us could say anything, after that. Boone came back and got under the blanket, again, after he was finished, and Grampy put an arm around both of us before he said, “Goodnight, boys. See you in the middle.”

That was the last thing he said.

We didn’t know he had actually let go until we woke up early the next morning and realized all the warmth had gone out of him sometime during the night, and he was stone cold. It wasn’t scary, though. Because he looked so peaceful lying there. Like he was off somewhere, visiting with his folks, already. Just like he said. No Kidding. I think he really was.

We did just like he told us with the burying part. The way Sir Robert described it in the book. We said a few things we liked best about him—Boone and me—and did another swear (on our own) about how we were going to try and live up to the things he taught us. All the way up to the end of the world. We prayed a prayer for him, too. That he would get to see his dad, first, on account of he’d been waiting so long. Then Boone played *America the Beautiful* for him, again, because it was his favorite song. We just hung around for a while, after that. I don’t know why. I guess it was just too hard to leave him there.

Boone cut a big piece of bark off the tree (not the *El Padre* tree, the other one), and we spent most all morning carving the words, “Jackson Boone,” into it. Then the dates. Under that, we just put one word. “Hero.” Then we stood it up at the head of Grampy’s grave.

“That will have to do until we can get back with a proper one,” He said when it was finished. “We’ll bring it next time we come.”

We didn't bawl anymore. Probably on account of we had bawled enough yesterday to last for years. Or, maybe we just didn't want to shame Grampy in front of his folks. If he happened to say, "Just look at my boys, down there!" before we even left the place. I don't know how to explain it, but we weren't feeling so sad, anymore. And when we finally went back to the house and polished off last night's dinner (down to the last crumb), we started feeling even better.

We took our time packing up for the long ride back to *Padre Gordo*, though, and even longer closing up the house. By that time, we had tried out all the rifles in Grampy's gun rack, and had finally settled on the smallest one there (Gran's, maybe), because it was the lightest and easiest to handle. If we actually had to shoot at something, I mean. Like a rattlesnake on the trail, or something. After that, we went back to the graveyard, again.

Not inside, this time.

We just tied our two mules to the fence and sat down to look out across the valley for awhile before we headed out. Boone had old Miss Jenny, and I had mine. We had packed plenty of food, camping gear, and anything else we might need along the way. To tell you the truth, I think maybe we were stalling. On account of we were both a little worried about that devil's road we had to take.

It was a lot better than going back through the mountain, though. We both agreed on that. I don't think either one of us was ready to try our shooting luck on whoever was guarding the Gates of Hell, without a little more target practice under our belts. Still, when you have to choose between hell, or the devil, it's no wonder you can't get too excited about it. Only natural. Which was why we were just sitting there, practically on the edge of the hill, talking about our options, again.

"Three ways in and five ways out," Boone said, for almost the hundredth time. "How come I only count four?"

"How come anything, Boone? Nothing surprises me anymore." I was scratching on a bug bite on my foot before I put my shoe back on.

"Better put some aloe vera on that centipede bite. Scratching will

just make it worse.”

“Centipede bite! That’s a centipede bite? I don’t even know when it happened!”

“Down in the secret passageway, probably, when we were running around barefoot. I told you they don’t hurt that much.”

“My feet were so numb down there, I wouldn’t have felt a snakebite. But I guess I’m not going to be afraid of a measly little centipede, again. Do you mind if we get going, now? Because I do not—and I mean, soooo not—want to be stumbling around some deserted, probably haunted, Indian village, trying to find a place to sleep after dark. Come on, Boone. Seriously.”

“I haven’t got a grip, yet.”

I popped a blade of sweet grass in my mouth, crossed my legs, like an Indian, and just sat there. Done talking. I wasn’t going to say one more word until he got his grip. Which is probably the only reason it was quiet enough at that second for us to hear an air-raided siren. Which made all the hair on the back of my neck stand up at once.

“Holy crud! That could be a terrorist attack. What if it really is the end of the world? What if somebody bombed the capitol, already, and they’re calling out the National—”

Boone side-punched me. “Put a lid on it, Hudson! Cripes. That’s just the old siren we got hooked up at the airport. Remember? That’s how we call in the mules. But Mom must know something’s up, if she’s calling in the mules.”

“Whew! That’s better than the end of the world, anyway. Except she really does have some kind of ESP. Way too much of a coincidence. Especially on account of she should be at work, right now.”

“I told you she just knows about those things. You wait. Next, she’ll be high-tailing it up here—hollering all the way, and—”

All of a sudden one of the mules from the meadow came running past us, almost close enough to touch, and took a flying leap over the side. I couldn’t believe it. Right out into the thin air. Our mouths were still hanging open, when we heard the rest of them come

thundering up behind. Then we watched, totally shocked, as one-after-the-other (almost like they were all harnessed together, again), they took off over the side.

“Hey!” Boone got to his feet like he had to see, for himself. “Hey! Hud! That’s it! That’s the fifth way out!”

“That’s the last way out, if you ask me. Holy crud!”

“It’s the shortest, too! Dang! It only takes about six hours before they start showing up after the—”

Old Miss Jenny let out a bawl and started pulling at her reins and dancing back and forth. Until the other one started in, too. In fact, it looked like, any minute, they were going to pull that iron fence out by the posts and take off with the rest of the herd. Packs and all.

Boone darted over to grab her harness, and I grabbed hold of mine, too. Only, it was almost impossible to get them calmed down. Not with that siren still going off and the rest of the herd in a flat out run down the mountain. Making a bee-line for *Padre Gordo*. The exact same way they did inside the cavern.

Boone looked at me, and I looked at him, and I knew we both had the same idea.

“Ready?” He untied old Miss Jenny.

“As I’ll ever be.” I untied mine, too. My heart was pounding practically up into my throat, but I just kept saying, “Trust the mules, trust the mules.” over and over, as I heaved myself up in the saddle.

I looked over at Boone.

He was already up, holding old Miss Jenny back, with the reins, even though she was prancing and dancing, and just itching to take off. My Jenny started doing it, too. But the lead was the lead, and she wasn’t about to pass her up for anything. They were both bawling their heads off though. Then Boone made her circle around the graveyard a couple times and mine followed right behind. Round and around, again.

“What are you waiting for?” I hollered over the noise. “Let’s go!”

Boone looked back and smiled. “Gotta show her who her new

boss is!” Then he stood up in his stirrups and yelled, “Goodbye, Grampy!” before he let out an eagle whistle that sounded exactly like the old man’s and let her go.

It was like the starting gun at a race. I hardly had time to let loose of the reins, grab two fists full of mane, and hunker down, before we went plunging over the side after the rest of the herd. The amazing thing is—I wasn’t even scared. Not one ounce. I knew as long as I held on tight, it was safe as a cradle. They were just bouncing their way onto a narrower, steeper trail and loving every minute of it. They had done it a hundred times. They also knew there would be a whole lot of fresh grain waiting for them when they got there. Which probably had a lot to do with all the excitement.

But it was flat-out wild.

That’s how we came out of the desert. Whooping, hollering, and all on our own. We had no idea what was waiting for us around the next turn. But after what we had just come through we knew we could handle it. Even if it was the end of the world, we could handle it. Because we were brothers. Boone and I. We knew all the secrets of *Padre Gordo*, now, and we could live out there forever if we had to. Heck, if we had to, we could take care of the whole darn town.

We could be heroes.

“Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.”

I Peter 2:17

A real-life hero and a real life code...

Sir Robert Baden-Powell is a real life hero, who really did write a book that boys all over the world learned the secrets of survival from. As the youngest colonel in the British Army, he was given an impossible job. To go into enemy territory and pretend he had a force of frontiersmen big enough to win the war. The odds were four to one... counting a cadet corps of boys from the ages of ten to sixteen.

He trained these boys to stand guard duty, run messages between patrols, and pick up the dead and wounded from off the battlefield. Some of them even acted as spies. This freed up the "real men" for actual fighting. When he saw how brave and loyal the boys were, he gave them special instructions on how to survive. The boys loved him. And he credited them for their unwavering dedication and strength. In a siege that lasted 217 days, his little group finally won an amazing victory.

But he had a surprise waiting for him at home. The little manual he had written for "his boys" on how to survive, was being read by other boys everywhere. Boys who wanted to follow Sir Robert Baden-Powell. So many boys that the King of England finally said he could do more for his country by training all these boys rather than fighting in wars. Which he did. It was a movement that spread around the world within his own lifetime. That was the beginning of the Boy Scouts.

Sir Robert wrote many books on survival and woodcraft. And even though the scouting organizations that took over after he died have changed a lot, you can still read his original advice to boys in his old books. The book featured in this novel is based on one titled **YOUNG KNIGHTS OF THE EMPIRE**. In it, he describes in detail how to:

1. Set up a wilderness camp

- 2. Build a fire**
- 3. Catch and cook your own food**
- 4. Become an expert tracker Learn knot-tying**
- 5. Games to practice all these skills**
- 6. As well as many true stories of survival and heroism that he personally knew about**

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"There is no better fun on earth than living in the open and catching and cooking your own grub, in doing mutual good turns with a good comrade in camp, and in recognizing God's handiwork in the mountains and forests around you."

~ Sir Robert Baden-Powell

ABOUT COUSIN SUMMERS

Cousin Summers (the Mysterious) has lived up in a lighthouse on Summers Island for longer than anyone can remember. But it doesn't matter that no one remembers when the stories started. The important thing is the lighthouse is where they all come from.

You might be wondering where the mysterious part comes in. It is because Cousin Summers is a shy person (and busy, too), who spends so much time writing stories up in the lighthouse that a lot of rumors have started. Which is all we need to say about that, because we know where rumors come from. Sometimes there's a little truth to them, too. Either way, you will have to decide for yourself.

What is known for certain is that Cousin Summers (the Mysterious) does not mind sharing the island with readers who find their way there. Oh, yes, and you will occasionally see Miss Lilly there (the light housekeeper who only does light housework). She can answer questions you might have about Cousin Summers, but you have to be polite to her. Then there's the Captain, who has lived long enough to know something about everything. He talks to anyone who will listen, regardless of whether they are polite or not.

There are others on the island, too. But that's enough for now.

ALSO BY COUSIN SUMMERS

The Young Heroics

Book Two

SPIES FOR LIFE

(middle grade)

The Young Scientifics

Book One

RETURN TO THE DINOSAUR PLANET

(middle grade)

Kids On Assignment

Book One

THE KIDNAPPING OF MARY

(young adult)