



*The Young Heroics*

Book 2

# SPIES FOR LIFE

Cousin Summers

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The Young Heroics: Book 2

Cousin Summers



Summers Island Press

Thorne Bay, Alaska

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1<sup>st</sup> edition

*To all those who are strong enough to  
take care of others...and do it.*



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## Chapter One

### RATTLESNAKE HUNT

*“I had got into a regular nest of them...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Funny how most people are afraid to go out of the city into a wild place. Living out here in Arizona, practically on the border of Mexico (not far from Tombstone—how cool is that?), hardly anybody goes out into the desert. But Boone and I love it out there. It's been sort of like our second home. Ever since last summer, when Grampy taught us everything we needed to know about surviving in it. And I mean everything. But that's another story.

The one I have to tell, now, is what happened to us when we came back from there and the whole country started to bust up. We didn't know it was that serious, at first. We just thought it was the bad economy everybody was talking about, and wondered why more trucks weren't running to keep grocery stores better stocked with food. The thing that was on our mind most during those first days of the crisis, was food.

In fact, I might as well be totally honest and admit we didn't have a clue what was really happening the day we first discovered the hideout. But I think it was something that was meant to be. Almost like we had help from somewhere. Anyway, I remember all Boone and I

had on our minds that day was fried chicken. And there just wasn't any. So, we decided to go on a rattlesnake hunt. Course, it wouldn't taste exactly like fried chicken but it was close enough. Especially when the only real meat we had for weeks was a couple bites of "we-didn't-know-what-it-was" smothered in noodles and gravy. Or under a ton of dumplings.

People were eating a lot of dumplings in Ashbury.

I admit, I used to be scared spit-less of rattlesnakes. But Boone and I—we had a sure-shot secret for keeping them away. This was the first time we ever wanted to get close to one on purpose, though. I was so hungry after school that day the last thing on my mind was the hazards involved. Instead, I was remembering the time Grampy fried some up for us when we were half-starved in the mines, and I thought it was chicken. I might've puked when he finally told me, except it was gone by then and had tasted pretty good.

So good, my mouth started watering just thinking about it, again.

"You ever set a rattlesnake trap, Boone?" I asked him about ten minutes into our way out of town. "I mean, we don't have a gun like Grampy did."

"We'll probably have to make a snake-catcher, I guess." He was just climbing down the rocky slope off the back end of the parking lot behind Helm's Grocery Store (where the desert started), and turned his ball cap around backwards so he could see better. Every time he did that, a couple dark curls popped out above the adjustable strap over his forehead. "I'll grab him behind the head, and you pop him off."

"What? You gotta be kidding me!"

“OK, then you grab him, and I'll pop him off.”

About that time, I slipped on a couple of loose rocks and almost fell over. “Seriously, Boone. I read about a guy who tried that once, and you wouldn't believe what happened. That thing stretched its neck out—like it was made of rubber, or something—swiveled its head around totally backwards, and bit him on the hand! You can't catch a rattlesnake by the back of the head.”

“That's what the snake catcher's for. It's a long stick with a V at the end, and—that's—what you pin him down with.”

We headed out across the flat hard-packed ground, toward a scattering of mesas between us and a line of some blue, far-off mountain range that belonged to Mexico. We wound in and out of rock outcroppings for a while, and scattered clumps of sagebrush—I love the smell of that stuff. Strong, sweet and spicy all at the same time. It's like the smell of adventure whenever it hits me, and makes me feel good all over. No matter what's going on.

“Gonna have to be some long stick, if you ask me.” I picked a short dry leaf off one of the bushes as we passed by and popped it into my mouth to chew on. “I heard they can jump half their body length. Be easier just to whomp him with it.”

He started with his hyena laugh, and I knew what he was thinking. Me running around, trying to pop off a rattlesnake with a two-foot switch off a tumbleweed, probably. Which I did not think was funny. “Hey—why don't we do like those guys in India, and throw a bag over him?”

“Yeah, that's probably a better idea. If we ever even

find a snake. Could be they're as scarce as the rabbits, around here."

"Funny there aren't any rabbits this close to town. I bet it's the local dogs. Rabbits aren't stupid."

"Can't think of any animal that's stupid. Except maybe the babies. Wouldn't feel right eating one of them, though. Ol' Grampy—he'd turn over in his grave."

"I'd rather starve to death than be haunted by your Grampy when he's mad. It's hard enough just keeping out of the way of your mother."

"Hey—" He stopped picking up rocks to put in his pockets and shot me one of his Grampy scowls. His skin was way lighter but it was the same expression.

"She's nice though." I had to correct myself since he gets touchy if you say anything bad about his mom. Even if it's true. "Long as you stay on the right side of her." I picked up a handful of rocks to jam into my pockets, too. "She's the weirdest mother I ever knew, though."

"Yeah, well, she sure saved your bacon when you needed her to."

"Yours, mostly. Courts couldn't let one of us off and not the other. But..." I started walking, again, to catch up with him. "I'd stand by her if she wanted to go to the moon, after that. Which is only about one notch down from working for her for fifty cents an hour just because she bought out Hogworths's Go-Cart Track that went bust."

"Think about it, Hud, that was a brilliant idea. Besides, she's got something else she wants to do with it. And..." He made a wide circle around a chopped in half giant saguaro cactus that had been dead for so long it was caving in. Its wooden ribs, bleached gray from the sun,

were falling out and scattered all around the base of it. "She can't make it happen if you and me don't help her."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"Hey, look. Here's one with a worn-away split at the end, that would make a perfect snake catcher. Better look for another one, too. In case it busts at the crucial moment."

"Dang—that would be bad!" Picturing it in my mind was giving me second thoughts about this whole idea.

"Get a grip, Hudson. These things are really strong. Anyway, we won't even need them unless the bag idea doesn't work."

"What are we gonna use for a bag?"

"I still got my gym bag in my backpack. We can use that."

"OK. But I say we wait till the temperature cools down to about sixty. Snakes move a whole lot slower then."

I looked at my watch. Man, I wish I had talked my parents into letting me have a cell-phone before Mom lost her teaching contract. But being the last kid out of four I didn't have a chance. Three-thirty. And it was cooling off, already. Only about seventy degrees and dropping fast. Snakes stopped moving around when it got below sixty. If it stayed that way, too long, they'd wander off and hibernate somewhere. Except for the Mojave Greens. They could show up any time (with the deadliest poison because it went straight for your brain)—but we knew better than to mess with them.

To tell you the truth, we never messed with snakes, at all. But a lot of things change when times get past bad.



There's stuff we did then we never would have thought of before. Hard stuff. And I have to say I am way glad we had at least some time to practice our survival skills before the worst of it came down. In fact, we wouldn't have had a clue how to look for food out in the dessert if we hadn't spent all that time with Grampy, learning how.

Of course, when he told us the end of the world had already started, we thought maybe he was as crazy as everybody said he was. But that didn't seem so crazy to us any more. And I have to admit just knowing we had the strongholds of Padre Gordo waiting out there in the dessert for us, chocked full of enough food to take care of a whole lot more than just us (if times got really bad), was something that went a long way toward helping me sleep better at night.

Especially when we finally made it through all that court stuff Miz Boone saved us from and didn't have to get rehabilitated. They just released us into her custody. That lady (who anybody could tell was about as close to crazy as it gets without actually being there) got the whole town off our tail, back when we were in trouble for burying Grampy without permission. Even though we had permission from Grampy. Heck, it was his idea—but that didn't count. The county doesn't take things like that for excuses when they have something to prosecute.

We got off, though. I don't know exactly what she had to do to work that out, but she did. She even got my folks on her side—which was totally amazing—because they both work for the county. Well, they did back then. Mom's teaching contract runs out at the end of the year, and the library where my dad works is only open about three days a week, now.

The whole town's going bust, little by little. Which isn't the kind of thing a thirteen-year-old kid usually has to think about. Except it was about to blow all our plans to bits—Boone's and mine—just when things were starting to look up for us. I mean, what good is finally getting your freedom back if everybody's folks have to move halfway to the moon just to find work?

Boone's the best friend I ever had. The kind you only get from going through tough times together and come out on the other side. We have plans that can only (and I mean ONLY) be carried out right here. In Ashbury. Not with each of us getting planted down somewhere else just so our parents can get better jobs. I thought of asking if I could live with the Boones for the rest of my life but I don't think my folks would go for that.

Any way we looked, it didn't look good.

That is, until Miz Boone came up with her genius idea of buying out Hogworth's Go-Cart Track. It was going bust, anyway, and she made the owner an offer he couldn't refuse (I don't know why people always go for those things). He moved off to Texas, where a brother of his owned a gas station. "People will be driving cars for a long time, yet," he told Miz Boone, "But the first thing they cut back on when times get hard is fun stuff for kids."

Man, he sure had that right. But it was more than just fun stuff for kids that was getting cut back on. We didn't know it that day, but the end of our town of Ashbury (that had been around for a couple hundred years) was already in sight. In fact, I actually think if we hadn't gone out to hunt rattlesnakes after school we would have been caught in the same trap everyone else was.

Seriously.

But there we were dinking around in the dessert about an hour away from town, looking behind bushes and under rocks, hoping we could spot a snake (before it saw us, first). And at that very same moment...

The first wave of soldiers was rolling into Ashbury.

## Chapter Two

### THE HIDEOUT

*"It is always well to have a back door to your hiding place; that is one of the essentials in scouting."*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

By the time we got totally out of sight of town we had worked out a plan. One I thought could work, anyway, because even though it's Boone who comes up first with an idea, I have to admit it's me that usually figures out how to make it happen. Not that I'm bragging. It's just we have different talents. Boone's all for jumping into things without a second thought—and boy howdy—do we need that kind of guts sometimes. It's the kind that can turn somebody into a hero.

But I'll tell you, he'd probably be dead right now if I hadn't figured a way out of a lot of things he couldn't get out of after he already jumped in. Me, I have to think about things. It's just the way I was raised. With Mom being a teacher, and Dad a librarian, all us Hudson kids are academics. Not that I'm a genius or anything. I just know where to find important information. And I can't count how many times knowing how to find the right answer to something has saved our bacon. No kidding.

Which is why we were waiting till the temperature

dropped to sixty, so we could throw a sweatshirt over some sleeping snake, and then scoop the whole pile into Boone's gym bag with our saguaro sticks. We just had to figure out the best place where a snake would want to hang out. After a whole lot of looking without even seeing a sign of one, we decided to try Little Heely Mesa.

It was a long, flat-topped piece of red rock about thirty feet tall, and looked like some giant had stepped on the back end and crushed it into boulders. Perfect rattlesnake territory. That was the only reason we decided to explore the tall end of Little Heely, that day. We were waiting for the temperature to drop all the way down so we wouldn't have to take any unnecessary chances in snake territory. Being as ready as we could but still needing to kill some time, we climbed up to the very top.

"Hey, Hud—look at this—I think I can see the Apastoso River from up here. The end of the cement part, I mean. I wonder if there's any water in it, yet."

Boone's a better climber than me, so I'm always picking up the rear on these deals. About the time he said that, I was still part-way down, wondering if the best next hand-hold I was reaching for was wide enough for a snake. "How far away is it?"

"Half mile, maybe. I can see a little of Padre Gordo, too, but that's a way lot of miles from here. That's it, though. We could get there if we had to. Might take us a week, but we could get there."

I heaved myself up over the edge and sat for a minute. "Have to wait till Christmas vacation to get that much time off. I thought your mom said she was gonna take us back there one of these weekends."

“Yeah, but ever since she bought out Hogworth's she keeps putting it off. Trying to get ready to open next Friday.”

“But it was already open.”

“Nobody was coming, though. She's fixing it up for business not a ghost town.”

“Maybe if people can't afford it, they can't afford it. It's like Mr. Hogworth said, the first thing gets cut back is fun stuff for kids.”

He tossed a rock over the side and there was a clunk as it hit the ground. “Isn't just going to be for kids anymore.”

I had to laugh about that. Because I got a crazy picture in my head of my dad squeezed into one of those little kid go-carts, with a helmet on, racing around the track. “You gotta be kidding me! I can't think of one adult left in this town—with an extra five bucks—that would spend it on a go-cart ride.”

“Isn't gonna be just go-cart rides.” He pitched two more rocks over. Ker-thunk. Ker-thunk.

“What's it gonna be, then?”

“Heck if I know, she's keeping it secret. Whole back end of the track is under tarps, and she won't even let me in there. Only comes out when we're ready to go home for dinner.”

I picked up a handful of rocks to start tossing them over into rattlesnake territory, too. If we scared one up, then saw where it crawled off to, we'd know where to find it, again.

“Nothing moving around on this side.” He crossed over to the other end and started lobbing rocks over there. “What do you want to bet once the track opens again,

she'll be too busy to take us. ”

I went over to where he had been looking out into the dessert. “Hey, that is Padre Gordo out there. Doesn't seem so far away.”

“It's far if you're walking.”

“Hey, Boone...”

“What.”

“How long do you figure it would take on the Rhino?”

“Have to talk Mom into letting us get it, first. But we could definitely do Padre Gordo on a weekend if we had the Rhino to get there from here.” He tossed a few more rocks while he thought about it for a minute. “Could be she's afraid to take us and might just keep making up excuses.”

“But she promised Grampy she would.”

“She did, but she didn't say when.”

“See, that's what I'm talking about. She's crafty. It's great if she's on your side but it sure can work against us sometimes.”

“My Dad would let us, if he was here.”

“You heard anything else about how long it will be till he comes back?”

“He doesn't know anything. Days, weeks, or months even. Nobody knows. Just depends on how long it takes to close down the base where he's at.”

“We're stuck then.”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe we don't need the Padre Gordo Rhino.” I sat down, again, and picked a rock out of the treads of my tennis shoe that felt like I was walking on a marble. “Why couldn't we just use one of those from over at

Hogworth's. They aren't Rhinos but at least they have motors."

"Hey..." He got that far-off look in his eyes that happened whenever he was picturing something. I mean, if you ever wanted to catch Jefferson Boone Junior off-guard, you could do it easy when he was busy picturing something in his mind. He was practically blind and deaf when he was thinking that hard. "They do have motors!"

"Think she'd go for it?" I got up and went over to where he was looking for rattlesnakes.

Nothing down there, either.

"Probably not." Then he laughed his hyena laugh, again, and gave me a punch on the arm. "I'd have to make her an offer she couldn't refuse!"

All of a sudden, I felt all sorts of energy bubbling up inside me. So much I couldn't stand still, anymore. Neither could Boone. For the next few minutes we both bounced back and forth over that mesa, popping rocks off every side, like a couple jumping beans on a hot plate. I mean, the thought that we could be back in Padre Gordo, again—this weekend, maybe—seemed too good to be true.

We hadn't been back since we came down off the mountain after Grampy died. And to tell you the truth, all that "hero shine" over the stuff we went through out there felt more like a dream, these days. Like maybe it never really happened the way we thought. Especially after school started up again and life got shrunk back to normal size, with us right along with it.

"What kind of offer would she go for?" I asked.

"I don't know, I'll think of something. You're in, aren't you?"



“What do you mean? You're the only one has a chance of talking her into anything. And it's a little one, Boone. Whenever I try she out-talks me so fast I feel like an idiot for thinking.”

“Forget the brains, I'm talking muscle, here.” He flexed one of his biceps at me for emphasis. “I'm talking you and me working for free when she opens up the track.”

“Oh, no.”

“Night and day if we have to.”

“Are you kidding me? You know what hard work it's gonna be. Besides that I was looking forward to my fifty cents an hour. It's my first paying job. There isn't even any guarantee working free would do the trick.”

“It will. Might take a while, though. Hey, listen. If she doesn't go for it by Christmas break we'll switch to Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“Haven't thought that far ahead, yet.”

Boone never thought that far ahead. Not that I thought much past snacks and treats, lately—I must have been in a growing spurt, or something. But to think there was a time when my folks gave me an allowance that was enough to cover pizza night, a movie, and even an ice cream once in a while after school, I was dreaming how cool it would be to get half that stuff back on my own paycheck. Even if it took two weeks to save up for.

Wages had dropped way low for everyone in Ashbury. My mom even thought there was some kind of conspiracy going on because none of the teachers got their contracts renewed for next year. Not even one. She actually thought Ashbury was headed to turn into

another ghost town.

“There's plenty of food in Padre Gordo, Hud.” It was almost like Boone was reading my mind. He's a lot like his mom, that way. “We could bring some of it home. Long as nobody noticed.”

“OK, I'm in.”

Which, looking back on it, I am not proud of. Because I wasn't thinking of taking care of anybody but myself that day. Even after that solemn oath to Grampy to take care of the “whole bunch.” Which he counted as whoever you happened to be with at the time of a crisis. Funny how easy it is to forget your promises if enough time goes by. Not that I changed my mind. If somebody asked me for help, I'd have done it in two seconds flat. But nobody asked me.

“Hey, look at this—” Boone stepped over the farthest edge of the mesa like he was walking off the curb of a sidewalk. Which almost gave me a heart attack, on account of it was at least thirty feet to the bottom from there. The guy has absolutely no fear of heights. But instead of falling off, only his feet disappeared, so there must have been a wide ledge sticking out just below the top on that side. “It's like a natural stairway down here. Or maybe somebody made it a long time ago.” A little more of him disappeared with each step he took. “Only goes part way down, though.”

After that, I couldn't see him, at all.

“Sheesh, Boone, give me a warning before you do something like that, will you? Liked to scared the daylights out of me.” I looked over the side. OK, it did look like steps. But I would not call it a stairway—they have rails—and these little things were sticking right out

into the mid-air. Had to have been there a way long time because they were all weathered and rounded smooth by the wind and sun.

“Come on down here, Hud—you gotta see this!”

“I’ve seen Indian paintings before.”

“It’s not that, it’s...man, you’re not going to believe it!”

I think climbing down from high places is a lot harder than climbing up. In fact, I don’t even attempt it unless there’s enough holes, bumps, and ledges to give you lots of hand-holds to choose from if one doesn’t work out. This side of the mesa looked a lot steeper than the one I climbed up on. Maybe even farther down, too. So, I pretty much decided to go back the way I came. But when I looked over to where Boone was standing, at the bottom of the little stairway, he wasn’t there anymore. I hadn’t heard any thuds, or hollers, and he wasn’t laying on the ground down below. So, I wasn’t too worried. I figured he must have found some deep indent to squeeze into.

I examined the stairway, again.

It didn’t go all the way to the bottom, but it was only about a twelve foot drop from the last step. Heck, a person could jump down from there. So, I thought I might as well give it a try. I didn’t walk it face first, like Boone did, though. Instead, I turned around and scooted down against the wall, so I could hang on as I went. It really wasn’t half bad. Especially without looking down. Anyway, that’s how we discovered the entrance to an old stronghold inside that mesa, set up exactly—and I mean, exactly—like the one in Padre Gordo. Right down to a solar panel at the top of the entrance to catch the sunlight

and charge the batteries. Only everything was on a way smaller scale.

When I saw the narrow entrance a couple feet off to the side of the last step, and how it was only visible to someone standing on that step, but not from the sides or down on the ground, I knew right off we had stumbled onto somebody else's stronghold. And even though the battery lights were turned on inside the little cavern by the time I got in—almost like Boone knew beforehand where they were—it didn't prove anything. He was as surprised as me to find it.

The Apache Indians had been making secret strongholds and escape places all over this desert for thousands of years. The only reason the Boone family had the one over in Padre Gordo, was because the Apaches gave it to the Fat Priest for helping them out with the cholera all those years ago, and it got handed down through their family ever since. Now the whole mountain was named after him. Padre Gordo means fat priest.

It smelled like a sidewalk in the rain inside there and made me feel like it was last summer all over, again. I have to say we forgot about trying to catch snakes, after that. Because that little stronghold was about the coolest place you could imagine. A regular hole-in-the-wall hideout that nobody else knew about but us. That's what we thought, anyway. Someplace for us to get away to and hang out in when we got tired of everything going on in town. We didn't think twice about claiming it. By the looks of things, no one else had been there in years. Everything was old except for the solar panel.

“It looks like Grampy did that,” Boone said.

“Then how come he never told you about it? He told us everything else he could think of.”

“Maybe he forgot about it. He forgot a lot of things after my grandma died. He wouldn't have put any of this other stuff in it, though. Not way out here he wouldn't. And he only rigged up batteries if he was working a mine. No signs of that around here, so it had to be someone else. Not for a long time, though.”

Everywhere there were signs someone had lived in it once. Stuff like rope ladders hanging in places to make it easier to climb down the steep walls, to where the inside opened up into a space about as big as a living room. There was a fireplace off in one corner, too. But we could tell just by looking it had been a long time since anybody used it.

We had a hunch it was newer than the rest of the place because there was a chimney that went about ten feet up to where it must have let out through a hole. It was made out of rocks that probably came from the snake territory outside, and chinked in with adobe. And since we knew for a fact that Indians never went to that kind of trouble for a stronghold (they just used fire pits that practically smoked out the whole place), we knew it had to be a more modern-day person that put it there. Someone who had stayed for a longer time than just camping out overnight, too.

Someone hiding out from the law, maybe.

Had to be a way long time ago, though. Because there were a couple old cans of food still sitting on a shelf that we didn't recognize the brands on. Something we didn't figure out till way later, on account of we ate two cans of beef stew and one of peaches in about fifteen

minutes flat. Cold right out of the can, and it tasted great. Not that we carried a can-opener around with us. We just used the Boy Scout method with our pocket knives to get them open.

About the time we were sharing out the last of the peach juice, and thinking about exploring more of the place, I got the sudden urge to puke. Not because that food didn't taste as fresh as the day it was canned, but because—all at once—we heard an engine. It was a big one, too.

You'd have thought we got froze to statues, waiting for it to pass and wondering who would be driving way out here in the desert (where there weren't any roads). The price of gas was too high for just playing around. So, it had to be somebody up to no good.

Which is why we both had the very same thought when they came to a stop, right outside the hideout. Then we heard feet on the ground like people getting out. That's when we realized we could be sitting in a coyote hideout.

And all that food we just ate came from Mexico.

### Chapter Three

## SCENE OF A CRIME

*“Spying, in reality, is reconnaissance in disguise. Its effects are so far-reaching that most nations, in order to deter enemies' spies, threaten them with death if caught.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

“We gotta hide!” Boone whispered at the same time he jumped to his feet and took off for one of the rope ladders.

I wasn't far behind. I pulled it up after us even though we didn't have a clue where that ledge went but we didn't care. Coyotes (not the animal kind) are criminals who make big money leading illegal immigrants across the desert between Mexico and the U.S. Sometimes the people make it across but a lot of times they don't. That's because the coyotes might decide to kidnap them for other crimes, instead. Which is about as bad as it gets, and why Boone and I didn't care a flip about snakes, right then.

That's how we found out about the escape tunnel.

The ledge was about twenty feet up, and ran along the top part of the ceiling toward the back end of Little Heely. There was a tunnel at that end (so small we had to

stoop over to get inside) where we figured to hide. Except it kept going, so we followed it. A few minutes later it came out on top of a huge flat boulder at the broken end of the mesa. Like a piece of the side had busted off, and tipped right out into snake territory.

The first thing we saw was a humungus sage bush at the lowest part, that had the corner of a wooden trapdoor sticking out from underneath. Which could have been the entrance to an old mine (those things were all over the place), or the cover on a well. Neither of which we were in a hurry to look into. Since there was always some source of water nearby to any Indian stronghold, we figured it was probably a well. But we could hear voices by then—just around the nearest corner of the mesa off to our left—so we just kept flat against the top of that rock and didn't move.

Sir Robert said if you stayed above or below a person's line of sight—kept down and didn't move a muscle—most people wouldn't see you. Which sort of gave me the willies laying there in case whoever it was wasn't like most people. But we didn't have much choice since if we moved or made a noise, any idiot would notice.

We only heard a couple of men's voices.

They couldn't have known about the hideout, though. Because—all of a sudden—we smelled coffee. Like maybe they were going to camp there for the night. Sheesh, I hoped not. It was already getting on to five o'clock, and I'd be in big trouble if I didn't show up for dinner at six. No matter what we were having.

All Boone had to do was meet up with his mom down at the go-cart track, where she was always too busy



to notice what time it was. Since it was just the two of them, right now, they ate whenever they felt like it. But with our big family dinner was a regular production, and—boy howdy—everybody better be there. Our house got so crowded sometimes, with my sisters bringing friends to hang out or stay for supper, it's one of the reasons Boone and I spent our time somewhere else.

“How much farther, Robinson?” said a growly voice.

“About twenty-three miles according to this map, sir. The bivouac area should be out there past that next group of mesas.”

“Well, let's keep going, then.” There was a splat and a splash like he just dumped his coffee out, then the crinkly sound of a map being folded up. “I want to see it before dark. See how much work the engineers have to do before the town shuts down. I like to know what I'm talking about before I make a speech.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Still think this is the shortest route?”

“If that guy at the gas station was right and there's no water in the river out there.”

“Let's hope he didn't send us the longest way round, instead. Rule number one. You can't trust the locals when you're there to shut down their town. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

There was the slam of a car door, and then another one before the engine roared, again. Boone popped his head up as soon as they drove off and about two seconds later he was climbing down. It was a big Hummer, painted Army green, with a card in the window that had a star on it. I looked back toward town, but no other

vehicles were coming. Whatever they were doing, they were doing all by themselves.

“Did you see that?” Boone was still talking quiet even though they were gone. “That was a brigadier general!”

“How do you know?”

“One star. That's for brigadier.” Boone knew everything about the military, on account of his family had been in it for generations. “Must be they're gonna put that border fence up everybody's been arguing about. Has to be something big if the engineers are coming.”

“It's something big, all right.” I climbed down the end of the boulder and let myself drop the last couple of feet. “You can't just shut down a town in this country. Not if the people don't want it to be.”

“Maybe they voted on it in the last town meeting and that's what everybody decided.”

“My folks go to all those town meetings. The only thing they decided was they need to elect a special committee to look into it more. On account of not everybody wants to sell out to the government at rock bottom prices.”

“They would if they were on their way out, anyway.”

“Maybe. But I don't think that general would have said shut it down if he meant buy everybody out next year. He said don't trust the locals, right? And that could only mean one thing. They're fixing to do something the locals won't like.”

“It's still a free country, Hud. Nobody can make you move if you don't want to. Not off your own land. I'll tell you right now, no Boones are gonna move off. We've

been here since the Indian wars and we're not about to budge."

"I wish my folks felt like that. They were ready to move since last month. Been sending resumes out, all over. So, it's just a matter of time till another job shows up. If you and me don't come up with something before school is out, that's it."

"I'll see what my mom thinks after I tell her what we heard."

"Yeah, and I'll tell my parents, too. They might not be so attached to Ashbury, on account of we've only been here a year, but they sure enough care about America. And if it looks like someone's trying to do something against the Constitution, they'll stick around long enough to vote that down, all right. I remember this one time, when we were in—"

All of a sudden, there was a sound that everybody knows what it is even if they never personally heard it before. Only Boone and I had heard it plenty. It was a rattlesnake shaking its tail from under that sage bush I just bumped with my foot.

I froze.

And right about the time I realized I didn't have any rocks left in my pockets because I had pitched them all off the mesa, I heard a couple of soft thuds as Boone lobbed some of his over. Which is all it took to make the snake stop and move off. Most of them aren't aggressive and they'd rather run than fight, anyway.

"Holy crud!" I whispered after it was gone. "It's a good thing they give you a warning!"

"He's too scared to catch, now. Probably be in a bad mood if we tried."

"I'm not hungry after all that beef stew, anyway, and it's getting late."

"We better head back. Good thing that wasn't coyotes just now. Has to be one of their hideouts, though. Indians don't put in fireplaces or electric lights. But since they don't usually come this close to a border station I guess it's an old one." He shifted the weight of his black backpack and put his hat on straight, again.

"Maybe that's why nobody's been here for a long time. I heard our border patrol got started after they cut back on the National Guards coming out here. Way before we came. Sure gave me a scare when I thought somebody was gonna catch us in there, though."

"Me, too."

"Think we should just forget about it?" I pulled my cap off and scratched the top of my head. Man, between coyotes and rattlesnakes, my hair was damp with sweat. Probably looked like a wet walnut.

"No way. If the Army's moving in to put up the border wall, the coyotes will high-tail it outta here and start using some place farther down to cross over. Besides..." He looked back at the mesa one last time as we walked away from it. "It's a great place to spy on the engineers."

"What? You gotta be kidding me!"

"Think about it, Hud. If the Army's up to no good, you and me are probably the only ones who could get away with it."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this from somebody who wants to go to the military academy."

"I don't mean they're up to treason, or anything."

"Well, I hope not because people hang for that."

They get hung sometimes for being spies, too, in case you haven't thought about that part, either. Just saying."

"They don't hang kids."

"No, they just rehabilitate them or put them away for life. Besides, what's to spy on? We're all on the same side, here." I stuffed my hat into a side pocket of my gray backpack, so the breeze could dry out my hair.

"But they could be up to no good. What if somebody from the county already made a deal about the town without everybody voting on it first? It could all be over before the rest of us even get a say."

All of a sudden, a light went on in my head. That was just the kind of stuff my mom had been talking about, lately. How all our freedoms were slipping away, little by little, without anybody knowing about it. Because they never brought it up for a vote. And how it was ten times harder to get a decision reversed than voting it down in the first place. "Could be you have something there, Boone. Especially if you count saving the whole bunch from something bad that might happen. Could be almost as important as saving them from something that already did."

"Could be a lot easier, too." He picked up a few more rocks to stuff into his pockets while I was resupplying mine. "I tell you, Hud, if this isn't time to take care of the whole bunch, I don't know what is. So, what do you say... are you in?"

## Chapter Four

### THE ANSWER MACHINE

*“As an essential part of scouting, I gave a chapter of hints on how to spy, and how to catch other people spying.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Jefferson Boone Jr. had a way of talking me into things that pulled my brain in two directions at once. Which is not easy. First of all there was that solemn promise we made to Grampy, last summer, that he always reminded me about if I had any hesitations. As if I could forget it. That promise—and living with it, afterward—had changed my whole life.

Not that I regret it. Because when I look back at my life before I made it, I was just a kid walking around blind. That's about all I knew about taking care of myself back then (what kid ever thinks of taking care of himself?), and I had no idea how important it was going to be, later on. Then there was this thing about taking care of the whole bunch.

That was another solemn promise. OK, so maybe it was more than that, on account of that one was an out-and-out swear. With a Bible and everything. Something I wouldn't go back on if you killed me. It's just how I was

raised. And even though I still think it was the right thing to do, I'll tell you right now, I never thought it would be this hard.

Back then, I pictured "taking care of the whole bunch," more like passing out food and water to hurricane victims, or something. We don't have hurricanes in Arizona. But you see a lot of that kind of stuff on the world news and that's how I pictured it. Sort of noble and all. I sure didn't see it as becoming a spy. Sheesh, I wasn't even sure if that was right.

Spies are sneaky. Nobody likes a sneak (me, included). Proof of that is the fact they still get shot, hung, or put away for life if they get caught. Which is why—considering the fact I have a lot of plans for my life I haven't tried out, yet—the whole thing was making me sort of sick just thinking about it. It was either that or eating canned food left over from the Cavalry days, back at the hideout. By the time I got home for supper, I wasn't hungry.

Since Boone and I agreed to tell what we overheard to our folks, I was in a pretty big hurry to do that. Except when I got home that night, mine weren't there. Something about another town meeting (there were a lot of those, lately), and my sisters weren't good for anything past bugging me to take a shower and get on my homework.

I really don't see the point of homework when the whole world is going bust but it was a lot easier to head up to my room like they told me than try to explain anything to them. They're worse than Mom when it comes to asking me personal questions like did I wash behind my ears and stuff. In this house I'm just the little

brother. Which I do not think will change. Even if I'm eighty.

That's the whole reason I was up in my room, that night, reading *My Adventures As A Spy*, by Sir Robert Baden-Powell (the guy who started the original Boy Scouts), instead of working on my science questions. I could do those things in about fifteen minutes flat, so I decided to leave them till lab class, which came first thing in the morning. Kids don't do much but play around in that class, anyway.

Besides that, finding out what Sir Robert thought about something was the next best thing to talking to a real adult. On account of he was one of the bravest and noblest guys that ever lived. No kidding. A bajillion kids don't just up and follow somebody—without being talked into it—for no reason. Which they did. Of course, the Boy Scouts were way different back in those days. Like I've said before, kids aren't even allowed to do most of the stuff in those old handbooks, anymore.

Which is why Boone and I read them on the sly.

Sir Robert wrote a lot of books and I've read over half of them, already. So many, I feel like I know him personally. He always tells you straight out how things are, even if it's hard stuff. Even when it comes to dying. Something I don't think we could have got through on our own when Grampy died unexpectedly, up on the mountain last summer. Which is probably why I was so into reading the spy book instead of doing science that night. I wanted to see how Sir Robert got around this sneaky, nobody-likes-a-spy thing, and still came out a hero. Because the way I was looking at it those two things do not—repeat, do not—go together. Seriously.



Mostly, I wanted to see what he had to say about them getting shot and hung.

OK, and how to keep from getting shot and hung.

The truth is, even if I didn't agree to go along with Boone, I'd have to know all this stuff, anyway. Because I'd probably have to save his bacon sooner or later. On account of when he jumps into something it's always with both feet, hundred percent. Do, or die. That's just the way he is. Something Grampy already knew about or he wouldn't have squeezed another swear out of me to look out for Boone after he was gone.

That's the only reason I was caught off-guard the next morning, when I found out those science questions weren't the usual. They were directions for teaming up on science projects. And since I didn't choose anything, yet—and we didn't get a minute to play around in the lab that morning—I had to take what was left. Sheesh. Which is the only (and I mean, only) reason I got paired up with Isabella Jones on her answer machine project instead of building something cool. Like a rocket that would really blast off.

It was either that or get stuck with Looney Martin, who was about the dumbest kid in the whole school. His project was how many constellations he could track by sitting on his roof for an hour every night for thirty days. I'm pretty sure he had help from Miz Brawley, thinking that up. Anyway, if I had to choose forty minutes of science class with Isabella, or an hour sitting on a roof with Looney for a whole month, you can see why I picked Isabella.

Her being a genius was another factor. Anything she thought up was A-grade and I didn't want to drop my

average (when you come from a family of academics, that stuff's important) just because I got carried away reading when I should have been doing homework. On the other hand, the highest Looney Martin was ever allowed to get was a C. On account of it was common knowledge anything he did was usually somebody else's idea.

The only thing I knew about Isabella was how she acted in class. Which wasn't much outside of answering questions right. I have to admit I hoped I might be able to talk her into modifying her project into something more interesting, though. I mean, who needs another answer machine when we have a bajillion other ways to do that, already. Like the Internet. Not to brag, but I could answer a question on almost anything in about ten minutes flat.

Which is why I was trying to think of a nice way to suggest that. Living in a houseful of girls, I knew better than most how hurting someone's feelings can cause a major blow-up. Miz Brawley already had her eye on me for not getting my homework done. So, I thought I'd say something like, "How about we turn that answer machine thing into a program for a rocket?" That way, I could work on the rocket part, and she could stick with the answers.

That could work.

"Hey, Isabella." I walked up to the table we were assigned to, where she was already shuffling through a big pile of papers (a collection of answers, probably). "What would you think about—"

"Too early for answers, William." She shoved half the stack at me like it was a hand-off during a basketball

game. "First we have to pass these out all over town."

I do not like to be called William, or Will, and definitely not Bill. I go by Hud. Short for Hudson, which is my last name. I also do not like to be bossed around. Especially by girls, on account of I already have too many of those at home. Something I was going to straighten out, first thing. Except, just at that moment she turned around and smiled at me. Then she cleared her throat, pushed her glasses higher up on her nose (she wears really big glasses with black frames), and walked past me.

OK, so, I guess she had an agenda, already. I followed her out into the hall, then waited while she handed me her pile of papers so she could put her jacket on. Then while she pulled her brown ponytail (that was so high up on her head it fell all around her face like a waterfall) out from under the collar. She always wore her hair that way.

"Hey, Isabella?"

"Yes, William?"

"Will you quit with the William thing? Just call me Hud. Or Hudson. Everybody else does."

"OK. Hudson and Jones." She held out her hand (like we made some kind of deal), so I shook it. Then she giggled and I realized she just wanted her papers back.

Which might have made me feel stupid if she hadn't cleared her throat and shoved her glasses up, again. Like maybe she was just as uncomfortable working with me as I was with her. Then it dawned on me she might not have done her homework, either. But I changed my mind about that since she had all this work organized on the project, already.

“What is all this stuff, anyway?” I had a long-sleeve t-shirt on, so I didn't need a jacket.

“I'm calling it a survey but it's really a personality test.” She grabbed a red briefcase with a long shoulder strap, took out two clipboards, and handed me one. “These are the stat charts we'll be filling out. Ready?”

“I guess so. But we're gonna need some passes.”

“Mrs. Brawley already gave them to me.” She reached into the briefcase, again. “Here's yours.”

I looked at it for a minute, wondering how all that took place when we had only been in class about fifteen minutes. I mean, I knew we were going to have to do science projects before the holidays rolled around. That's why I was thinking about rockets (I always did some kind of rocket for science projects) but did I miss an assignment, or something? Seemed like everybody was ready for this but me. Even Looney Martin.

“I was supposed to work with Savanna Anders but she's got the mumps.” It was like she had read my mind. “What happened to your partner?”

“Didn't know I needed one till this morning.”

“Oh. Sorry.” We started walking down the hall. “Maybe Mrs. Brawley will let you change your mind tomorrow. I think the only reason she stuck you with me is because she didn't want me walking around town by myself, today.”

“No problem. I'd rather walk around town than sit in lab class, any day. Where to first?”

“City Hall.”

Which sort of took the wind out of me.

On account of I swore I'd never set foot in that place, again, in my life.

## Chapter Five

### CENTERED

*“Quite another class of spy is the traitor who gives away the secrets of his own country. For him, of course, there is no excuse.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

When Boone and I had to go through that whole court thing about burying Grampy, all that went on in City Hall. It dragged out for a long time and there were a bunch of arguments, like gunfire shooting at us from every side. Some of them were so crazy I thought life (as I knew it) was seriously over. Like getting sent to some boy's camp for rehabilitation because we were carrying guns and explosives when they finally found us.

I guess they'd been looking for us a long time—but, heck—how were we supposed to know?

We didn't know about the explosives part, either, or we'd have ditched that stuff before we came down off the mountain. Wasn't ours anyway, it was Grampy's. Few sticks of dynamite in one of the mule packs is all it was, and everybody knows (at least, everybody in Ashbury) you gotta have dynamite if you're working a mine. But the judge said all that was irrelevant (don't bother looking that word up, they only use it right when it suits them) and things just got crazier, after that.

Then, like I say, Miz Boone made one of her offers nobody could refuse (I still have no clue what it was) and they released us into her custody, instead. Just one more reason I agreed to work for that lady—for free—all the way till Christmas if that's what she needed. No matter how crazy she gets sometimes. Because she is crazy smart. I owe her my life, the way I look at it. But I have to admit even though she saved me from being rehabilitated, I still get the cold shakes going anywhere near City Hall.

Thing is, there was something totally weird going on down there, that morning. It was about the biggest crowd of people I saw anywhere, except maybe at a ball game or a town meeting. There were so many they were standing in lines that spilled out the doorways and flooded halfway down the north end of First Street. I took it as a piece of good luck and was thinking I could maybe talk Isabella into starting her survey somewhere else.

“Hey, Jones? How 'bout we try the post office. There's always plenty of people coming and going from there and we wouldn't have to fight all these crowds, or—”

“But this is the perfect place, Hudson.” She cleared her throat and pushed her glasses up, again. “People waiting in line are stuck in line. You know? They won't mind answering a couple questions half as much as if they were already going somewhere.”

“Yeah, I guess. But you don't have any objections to starting at the back of the line, do you? I'm not too comfortable in crowds.”

“You're claustrophobic?”

“Sort of.” It was easier to say that when I wasn't

about to go into the real reason. Not that it was a lie. I actually am claustrophobic if you squeeze me into anywhere tight enough. Who isn't?

"All right. We'll start at the back of the line." She unzipped her brief case and pulled out a couple of pens. "Here's one for you. Getting started is the hardest part. You'll see. Once we get a couple filled out, it will be as easy as—hey, there's Mrs. Parker, the county nurse. I know she'll fill one out."

I looked up from my clipboard in time to see a big, round, black lady headed for the line at full speed. She was wearing a green uniform dress, just like last time I saw her, but with regular shoes on this time instead of Army boots. Her hair was done up in a bun (no safari hat, either), only part of it was falling down already, on account of anywhere she marched it was like a train coming on. Her and I had a serious disagreement once, and I did not win.

"You can have her, Jones, and...uh...I'll start up by the door." I turned and lit out but it wasn't fast enough.

"William Hudson—you get back here this minute! I want to talk to you—right now!" That booming voice gave me the same chill as the first time I heard it and I stopped in my tracks.

"Miz Lucinda—" I shouldn't have called her that but it's what Grampy called her and it just popped out. "I'm supposed to be working on a science project here!"

"This will only take a minute."

I didn't budge.

"Don't make me get out of this line, either." The look on her face told me she meant it, too.

Well, sheesh. If this day wasn't getting worse by the

minute I don't know what was. I only hoped I could take a hit without looking like a wimp in front of Jones. Miz Lucinda wasn't holding anything but a purse though, and I figured that couldn't hurt too bad. Especially if she didn't want to make a scene in front of City Hall. So, I headed over.

By the time I got there (you can bet I was taking my time) Jones was already explaining the survey thing.

Miz Lucinda said, "Mm-hmm...uh-huh...sure, I'll fill one out," and took the clipboard and started to write.

Which looked like a good opportunity for me to get on the higher side of things, myself. "I'm collecting surveys, too, ma'am. So, I better get on it."

"You better stop interrupting is what you better. Stand right there till I'm done with this. Who made up these questions?"

"I did," said Jones. "After quite a bit of research on the subject, too."

"Mm-hm... it shows. You're going to get a wham-bang of an answer from everybody who reads this last one. It's what we're all doing down here, today. Wouldn't be surprised if work like this doesn't land you a seat in Congress one of these days."

"Um..." Jones cleared her throat and pushed back her glasses. "Thank you, Mrs. Parker."

"Leave a couple with me, and I'll pass them around the hospital when I get back this afternoon."

Jones' eyes lit up. "That would be great—really great! I'll stop by after school and get them."

"I'll be in my office."

"Oh, man. I've got another appointment this afternoon," I tried to sound sorry about it.



“That’s why I’m going to talk to you, right now, William.” She handed the survey back to Jones then looked me straight in the eye. “You ever had the mumps?”

“Once,” I admitted. “A long time, ago.”

“That’s all it takes.” She pulled her purse off her shoulder and I flinched. But then she just popped it open and started to rummage around instead of swinging it. “Looks to me like I could be stuck in this line for a good two hours and I’m supposed to be at the county home, checking on three kids over there came down with the mumps.”

She pulled a little white bag out and handed it to me. “This here’s a prescription, and I want you to take it on over and give it to Mrs. Murphy. She’s the secretary there. Tell her I’ll be late, but I’ll be along.”

“But we only have about twenty minutes left of science class and I’m supposed to be helping Jones with —”

“Didn’t I just say I’d help with that? Here, I’ll write you a note in case you’re late getting back.” She pulled out a yellow sticky-note pad and began scribbling. “There. Now, get going.”

“She’s not supposed to be out here by herself.” I had to bring that up because I didn’t want to catch it from Miz Brawley when I got back to school without Jones.

“I’ll keep an eye on her.” She snatched my pile of surveys and the clipboard. “I’ll even work this end of the line for you. Long as I don’t lose my place. So, get going.”

“It’s OK, Hudson. We’ll get a lot more with Mrs. Parker’s help, anyway. There’s plenty enough people here.”

Which is how I ended up working on a survey I didn't even know what it was, and forgot it was the measles I had when I was little instead of the mumps. Not that it would have mattered much. I figured all I had to do was go into the office down at the county home (about five blocks away) and hand over the medicine. I was pretty sure those mumps victims wouldn't be sitting around the administration office, anyway. So, there was practically zero chance of getting infected even if I had been wrong. It was a perfectly logical plan except for one thing. There was chaos in front of every county building in town, that day.

Including the Ashbury Home for Orphans.

By the time I squeezed my way to the counter in the front office, Mrs. Murphy was explaining instructions to about fifty kids (most were high-schoolers). I had to wait until she got finished telling the ones with last names beginning from A to M, go to the blue table, N through S to the green, and T through Z line up at the yellow one before she would even look at me. When I told her what I came for she just said how busy she was and to take it to Miss Anders over at the infirmary.

Still no problem, on account of I didn't think any mumps victims would be feeling good enough to answer the door. I'd just hand the bag in to whatever adult was in charge and high-tail it out of there. Seems I remembered something about mumps being worse on you the older you got, too, but I already decided I wasn't going in. If that Miss Anders lady was too busy to come get it, I'd just pitch it in right from the porch.

Miss Anders was not a lady.

I knew the minute I looked at her it was Savanna

Anders, from my science class. The one who was supposed to be out doing surveys, today, instead of me. To tell you the truth she was one of the prettiest girls in our school except she hardly had a brain in her head. I don't know what it was about most of the orphans not having the IQ of a rabbit, but I wasn't thinking about that right then. I wasn't even thinking about how pretty she was with all that curly red hair, green eyes (with the longest eyelashes you ever saw), and skin the color of milk.

All I was thinking about was the huge gray bathrobe she was wrapped in (that looked like someone else's instead of hers), and the dishtowel tied under her chin and over the top of her head to hold one of those blue-ice things against her throat. And how I was definitely face-to-face with one of the mumps victims. She gasped when she saw me and I didn't blame her, on account of she probably was expecting the county nurse. I figured she was about as embarrassed as it gets, so I just handed her the bag with the box of pills in it and mumbled how the nurse would be by later. Any of my sisters that got caught that way would have run and hid, by now.

Instead, she said, "William Hudson—it's a miracle!" Then she grabbed me by the arm, pulled me inside and shut the door. "We're in terrible trouble, here!"

"I heard it only lasts a couple weeks. Probably doesn't even leave a scar." I tried to sound reassuring even though I was seriously starting to sweat, on account of I was smack in the middle of the sick room. Forget the infirmary. This was nothing but a room with about eight beds in it. Two that had kids. One was sleeping under a

huge orange comforter, so covered up I couldn't tell if it was a boy, or a girl, and the other was a pint-sized kid with a head of thick yellow curls, who didn't look old enough to go to school, yet.

"They're going to close down the home and ship all of us off to somewhere else! All over! We don't even get to go to the same place!" She grabbed the blue thing at her throat, and moaned. "I have to talk to Jonesie..." She moaned, again. "She's the only one who might be able to find an outside adult to help us. All the adults around here think..." She sniffed, like she maybe was going to cry any minute. But she didn't. Instead, she took a deep breath and calmed herself. "They think it's the best thing for everybody."

That's all it took for the little kid to bust out bawling and she hurried over to put an arm around him. "It's all right, Jimmy. Want another drink of cold water?" Then she looked across at me, again. "And it isn't just us. The whole city is going to be centered. That's what they call it. Anyway, that's what Uncle Ding—he's the old janitor—said this morning. Mandatory retirement for him, they said. In one of those homes for old people. Because there aren't enough jobs to go around for the younger ones."

"Holy crud."

"Will you tell Jonesie to come over, after school? They won't let her in but just tell her to come around the side way, throw some pebbles out of the planter on that window and I'll open it."

"Sure, I can do that. I'll talk to my folks, too, and see if they can help. I wonder how this all happened so fast? Whole town's lined up down at the city hall."

"Uncle Ding said they're giving government jobs to

anyone who's willing to help all this get organized. The rest have to transfer to bigger city centers as soon as they find work. That's what all the lines are about. They have lists of job openings in all the big cities, but it's first come, first serve. Especially if they want out before Ashbury gets centered."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"Turned into a temporary holding facility for people waiting to be shipped out of state. They're going to use the Orphan's Home as part of it. And Juvenile Hall, too. Because they're set up for a lot of people, already. I heard the Mayor talking about it to Mrs. Murphy, this morning." She took a breath. "And the hotel, too, of course."

"He said that right in front of you?"

"No, he called her on the phone when she was giving us our medications. But she's sort of hard of hearing and had the volume turned way up."

"Sheesh. Centered? Sounds like something out of a science fiction movie."

"Hud, you've got to believe me!"

"I believe you." I had a sinking feeling in my gut I believed her so much. "Explains why the whole town's going bonkers out there."

"Thank heavens you came when you did! Now..." She turned away to pour a glass of water from a pitcher on a nightstand and hand it to the little boy. "Jonesie's got U.S. History this hour. Will you promise to find her even if you're late?"

"Yeah, I have that class, too." Jones and I had four classes together, on account of we both have high grade point averages.

“Tell her it's a matter of life and death!”

It's a good thing Miz Lucinda gave me a note to get back in school. Because by the time I'd waited in the office down at the Orphan's Home, found the right building the infirmary was in, then talked all that time to Savanna (I even had to help clean up when the kid threw up after he drank all that water. But—hey—she wasn't feeling so good, either) the lines outside City Hall were almost gone from outside the building.

I should have went inside and looked around but I figured I'd go back if Jones didn't show up for history class. Not that I was ditching her. I knew for a fact Miz Lucinda would drive her back before she left, on account of she said she'd watch out for her.

Like Grampy told us, that lady might be mean as a hornet if you crossed her but when it came down to it, she was a cousin to the Boone family and a direct descendent of Mad Maude, herself. She'd do the right thing when the chips were down. She just couldn't always figure out what the right thing was. Which is why I was not surprised that the note she scribbled out for me was not an office excuse, after all.

I just wish I hadn't handed it over to the Vice-Principal before reading it.

## Chapter Six

### MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

*“To be a really effective spy, a man has to be endowed with a strong spirit of self-sacrifice, courage, and self-control, with the power of acting a part, quick at observation and deduction, and blessed with good health and nerve of exceptional quality.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

The Starlight Hotel was surrounded by soldiers. At least, that's what it looked like when Boone and I were headed for the hospital after school to meet with Miz Lucinda. Anyway, that's what the note said. “Bring Jefferson Boone to my office IMMEDIATELY after school. And DON'T make me come looking for you!” The only excuse I could come up with when the Vice-Principal wanted an explanation was we thought we both might be coming down with mumps and the county nurse wanted to have a look at us.

Something Boone did not appreciate one bit. On account of he didn't want anything to do with the county, either. Especially not Miz Lucinda. Didn't matter that they were distant cousins (both being related to Mad Maude) because as far as he was concerned she was some shape-shifted version of the Wicked Witch of the West. So, I couldn't much blame him for buzzing ahead of me

through town every chance he got.

Personally, I was getting pretty tired of running from one end of town to the other all day and didn't even try to keep up. I knew he'd end up at the hospital no matter which way he went. Because if there's one thing about Boone, he always does the right thing. He might jump and holler and be mad about it but he never chickens out. Even if he's scared. And I can't blame him for being scared of Miz Lucinda, on account of she can pack a wallop. So you can bet I wasn't in any hurry to get there, either.

Matter of fact, I figured if he was going to act that way he might as well be the first one through her door. Except, by the time I got to the hotel (right across from the hospital) Boone was standing on the corner of Main Street, waiting for me. Practically the whole parking lot at that hotel was filled up with Army vehicles. I guess that's where they were setting up headquarters. At least till the engineers came.

"So, what did your folks say about all this?" he asked before I even stopped walking. "Mom thinks somebody's lying. Especially after I told her what General Philby said."

"General Philby?"

"That's his name. He gave a big talk at the town meeting, last night. Said we'll be getting more groceries in the store, now. When the Army comes in the supply lines open up better. Supposed to be new jobs for civilians, too—what with the border fence going up and the engineers coming in—so, maybe they decided not to shut down Ashbury, after all."

"Well, my folks weren't there when I got home.



They were already gone before I got up this morning, too. But if you ask me, they're starting to shut things down already. Shipping out the orphans and old people first, so they can take over those places for holding facilities. We been centered."

"What?"

"That's what Savanna Anders called it."

"What would she know about anything? She wasn't even in school today."

"She overheard Mayor Bennet talking on the phone to the secretary over there. This morning, when they were passing out medications to the mumps victims. Savanna's got the mumps."

"Is that where you got this idea? What'd you have to say mumps for? Now you and me will probably have to get vaccinated."

"I think I already had them. It was either that or measles."

"Well, I didn't." He gave a heavy sigh and turned his hat around backwards. Like when we were getting ready to do something really hard. "Come on, we better get going or that old nurse will be in a bad mood."

Miz Lucinda made us wait outside her office door a long time even though nobody else was in there with her. Seems like when you're a kid people don't think twice about wasting your time, on account of they can't imagine you'd have anything important going on. Boone and I had so much going on (trying to figure out if this was when we had to start taking care of the whole bunch) we didn't know what to do first. That's why it came as a real shock to us what happened next.

Miz Lucinda motioned for us to sit down in the two

chairs in front of her desk, picked up her phone and said “Sheryl? Hold all my calls for the next half hour,” and plunked it down, again. “Now...” She nailed Boone with one of her no-nonsense glares. “Junior? Who’s handling things out at your place since Uncle Jack’s gone?”

“Well, uh... my dad.”

“Your dad hasn’t been here for over a year, and who knows when he’ll get back with all this mess going on. Any of the Corpus Christie brothers coming to stand in till—or if—he ever does get back?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Isn’t your mother, I know that. Hasn’t been a woman since you-know-who. That only leaves one person. Right?”

“Not exactly.” He took a deep breath, pulled his ball cap off, and wrung it like a dishrag.

“When’s the last time you had a haircut?”

He ran a hand over his head for an answer, trying to smooth down all those springy curls, and I could tell by looking he just stuck his hat on instead of combing his hair this morning. Probably stayed up reading late, same as me. Only reason I never go to school that way is I got three sisters that won’t let me out of the house till I pass inspection.

“Mm-hm. That’s what I thought. Be just like Uncle Jack to leave a responsibility like that to a couple of—” WOP! She banged her fist down on a pile of papers so hard we both jumped. “Scrawny kids!”

Boone didn’t say anything, just sat there.

“Well...” She smacked the papers again, like she made a decision. “Desperate times call for desperate measures. So, listen here. I need to get my boy back from

college before he gets shipped off to who-knows-where in all this confusion. Whole country's in an uproar, same as us. Now, the fastest way to turn a dollar around here is to have something everybody wants. Right now, that's food. Good food. Understand? I need some of the stuff out of that storehouse, and I need it quick."

"Grampy said that stuff was to take care of the whole bunch, after the crisis hits. Not—"

"Boy, what do you think we are in the middle of here? Can you get it, or can't you?"

"I can't sell it, that's what I can't."

"Don't you sass me, Junior. That grandfather of yours was old-fashioned and we're living in the twenty-first century, here. Whole system works on money. Not hams and pancakes. We got family scattered all over this country, not just in the neighborhood, anymore. People are worth more than money. Always have been."

Boone still didn't say anything.

"You think if you could get your dad back tomorrow by selling a little of that food, today, you wouldn't do it?"

"Miz—Lucinda!" I jumped to my feet before he could answer. "That—is—not—right!"

"Sit down, and don't interrupt!" she spit the words out at me and went back to hammering her point. "You know you would, Junior. There's no difference between my boy and your dad. The family's the family! Now, what's it going to take to get this thing done? All weekend, I'm thinking, since it's a six hour hike up that mountain just to get there. I got it all figured out."

She pointed a finger, then wagged it at both of us. "You boys just signed up for the Boy Scouts. And I'm

taking the whole troop up there—on Saturday—to work on getting your Wilderness First Aid Badges.”

Boone sat there with his head hanging down, twisting that ball cap till I thought he was going to rip it in half. I knew he had all he could take and was about to go ballistic any minute. Talking about his dad—when Boone was worried every day if he was going to get shot down in his plane before he ever got home—was about the only thing he couldn't stand even a little of. Something told me if I didn't do something—anything—to draw the fire off him, he was gonna spill the beans about every promise we ever made to Grampy. Then, next thing you know, she'd be after the gold.

So, I jumped up, again, and hollered, “Why don't you just punch him in the gut and get it over with, you old tub of—”

Who would have thought somebody that huge could move so fast? She grabbed the first thing handy (it was a stapler) and was off her feet in an instant. Which was about as long as my nerves held out, on account of I did not want to get clouted with that thing. And even though Boone was closest to the door, I practically mowed him down getting out of there.

“Six o'clock Saturday morning!” She called after us down the hall. “Right here! And don't make me come get you!”

The fact it was crowded with people out in that hall was the only thing that saved us. I guess as county nurse, she had a reputation to think about and it wouldn't do for anyone to see her chasing a couple of kids with intentions to do bodily harm. All I know is we didn't stop running, or even slow down, until we were halfway up Main Street

again, right in front of Cooper's Pawn Shop.

Old Mr. Cooper was the only one in town who was still doing a booming business, on account of everybody who needed extra cash was trading off something for it down at his place. Boone and I hadn't been there since he cheated on the deal we made with him for our raft last summer, and we didn't plan on ever doing business with him, again. Except we were totally winded by then. I stopped and leaned my hands on my knees to catch breath.

"Thanks, Hud." Boone was gasping when he came up behind me, too. "All I could see was—that old bag—dreaming up some reason why Mom's not keeping a good enough eye on us. Then we'd end up getting rehabilitated, after all. Because we sure can't go back on what we promised Grampy!"

"Well..." I stood up straight, again. "We have three days to come up with something."

"It better be good, after what we just did." Then he started laughing his hyena laugh and, thinking of the way Miz Lucinda looked coming around the corner of that desk like some runaway train.

I couldn't help laughing, too. But then the reality of it set in. "Seriously, Boone. All I can think of is we have to talk your mom into taking us there, first. She's the only adult we can trust, right now."

"We can't sell all that food off to the highest bidder, Hud. Grampy would roll over in his grave. Remember what he said about that? First thing the city cousins want to do, is sell everything off all at once. Make a whole lot of money for a few instead of taking care of the whole bunch. We can not—and I mean not—let Lucinda Parker

find out where the stash is. Because, Hud...”

He moved closer and whispered, like somebody passing by on the street might hear. “She is way stronger than both of us put together. You know it. And I know it.”

“Boone, if we don't come up with something better than an out-and-out—No—we're gonna get rehabilitated.”

He stood there and thought for a moment. “I'll see if Mom can maybe swing a loan to get Denny Parker back from college. Might be hard though because she already spent so much money getting ready for the grand opening at the track on Friday.”

“Tell her I'll work for free till next summer if she can do that. On account of I do not—repeat, NOT—want to get rehabilitated. Being centered is bad enough.”

“What's up with that word, anyway? I never even heard of it before.”

“Savanna said—”

“You can't believe everything she says.” He moved over to look at the stuff in Cooper's window. “She's a drama queen. Hey look. He's got a couple of headlamps. We're gonna need those for the hideout.”

“Got any money?”

“A little. Do you?”

“Heck, no. I'm lucky I get lunch.”

“We'll have to make him an offer he can't refuse, then.”

“You go make one. I'm going over to the elementary school to see if I can catch up with my mom. Before she gets involved in another meeting like last night. I gotta find out what her and Dad are thinking about all this. Then I'll head over to the library and tell Dad about

General Philby. Wednesday is late night, so he just takes a sandwich and doesn't come home till 9:30."

"Ok, I'll meet you at the library then. We still gotta talk about the spies. Did you find anything out last night?"

"Yeah, and it wasn't good."

"But he survived. Right? We're looking for how to survive. You know, the secrets."

All of a sudden I had an overload of every bad thing that could happen and I pretty much had enough for one day. Not to mention I was starving. I'm always hungry after school, no matter what's going on. I even had a flash of the graham crackers my mom kept in her classroom for snack time with the primaries. My sisters used to make brownies, or cookies all the time but nowadays they only did that on somebody's birthday.

"I looked up how to make a snake trap. We can practice that after the library." Boone woke me up out of my food thoughts and we started off in opposite directions. Then he turned back and hollered. "Hey—tell me what Sir Robert used for a last resort. So I can be thinking about it."

"He didn't have a last resort—" I called back. "He got caught!"

## Chapter Seven

### DRUDGE

*“My mountain climbing came into use on  
another occasion...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

There were so many adults missing from where they should have been, that day, I was starting to think they got abducted by aliens. Because even when I went over to the library to see Dad, the whole place was closed. New hours, the sign said. On late nights it wouldn't be open in the daytime, anymore. Only at night.

Something that made me worry about him saying how he'd have to start looking for work out of town if they cut back any more of his hours. When even my house was empty (not a sister in the place), I dialed up Boone's cell from the kitchen phone while I was making myself a peanut butter sandwich.

He didn't even say hello, just, “Hey, where are you? The library's closed.”

“Making a sandwich. You want one? If we're going to the hideout, we better get on it. It's after four, already. I couldn't find my family, they all disappeared. Even my sisters.”

“Mom needs help putting the new sign up, so they're down here at the track. She wants you and me to clean out the go-cart garage, after that, too. It's a real mess. Gotta



forget the hideout for today. It'll take all of us to do the sign, so come as soon as you can. They're almost ready to haul it up."

By the time I got there, my sister Emily (she's seventeen and has a driver's license) had her head stuck out of a little blue Toyota truck and was easing it forward real slow while Dad gave her hand signals. There was a rope attached to the back, that was slung over a bar between the old sign posts, and the new sign was moving into the spot where Hogworth's had been.

The new one said, Boone's Family Fun Park, and had a bunch of colored lightbulbs around each letter. A little crowd of people were watching and the first thing I noticed was Looney Martin was there. That kid was always running around town by himself. Getting in the way or getting into things.

He lived over at the Orphan's Home, same as Savanna Anders. He was a chunky, football type who never got to play ball, just sit on the bench most of the time. Right now he had his ball cap on backwards, just like Boone, who was perched on top of one of the posts, getting ready to guide the sign in. My mom was holding onto a rope attached to a corner end to keep it steady, and Miz Boone had one at the other corner.

Miz Boone hollered, "Get ready, Jeffie—here she comes!"

That's what she called Boone, no matter who was there to hear it.

I'll tell you right now, those two ladies are about as opposite as it gets. Mom's always color-co-ordinated and dressed business-like, with her brown hair cut neat and short for better management. On the other hand, Miz

Boone liked to dress like some Gypsy fortune-teller. Reading people's minds and bossing everybody around, usually before they even got a word out. It was hard to believe somebody that little could be that loud.

Next, she was hollering something up to Boone about holding it steady as soon as he could reach it, so it wouldn't crash into the pole. Like he wouldn't have thought of that himself. Her red hair was pulled up in a clip most of the time, and she had the kind of emerald eyes that remind me of a cat. She was about as unpredictable as one of those, too. Except nobody—even Miz Boone—was dressed like they usually were, just then.

They all looked like a bunch of bums. Every one of them was wearing old clothes splashed with paint. Even my dad, who usually wore a suit and should have been at the library, right now. They were really quiet, too. But probably because they couldn't get a word in with Miz Boone yelling so much. Didn't matter if she was mad or happy, she yelled both ways. I set the sack with Boone's sandwich next to the ticket booth, and headed over.

“Hey, Hud!” Looney hollered when he saw me coming. “Are you gonna climb up the other pole?”

“If I have to, I guess.” Like I say, heights is not one of my favorite things. But it looked like there was a ladder with a walkway running along the back part of it. Probably so you could change the lightbulbs when you needed to.

“We'll wait for you, son,” Dad said without looking back at me. He even had an old fishing hat on with hooks and flies stuck all over it, and he never wore hats. “Should slip in easy if we all work together and take our

time. Ladies? Pull a little more tension on those lines and watch out for that breeze that's picking up."

"Be careful on the ladder, Will," Mom called out like I was seven instead of thirteen. It's a good thing she didn't know the kind of work Grampy had us doing, last summer.

Climbing up didn't bother me too much. On account of I was busy thinking how all this was starting to feel like getting stuck inside a horror movie. There were my parents (who I just spent half an hour looking for), down here at Hogworth's—I mean, Boone's Family Fun Park—in those grubby painting clothes instead of doing their regular jobs. Everything felt so weird I wouldn't have been surprised if my dad jumped into one of those go-carts all of a sudden and started speeding around the track. It would just prove the whole world was going berserk.

The beginning of the end.

He was supposed to be opening up the library, right now. Not down here at the Fun Park. Then I started worrying he maybe got fired. Except he looked sort of relaxed and enjoying himself, so I knew it couldn't be that. Not yet, anyway. Then I had another awful thought. I wondered if he believed what General Philby said at the town meeting, and went and quit the library. Maybe even took one of those out of town government jobs everybody was scrambling for. All before I got a chance to warn him about the whole big lie.

I got such a horrible feeling in my gut about that, I just had to know. "Hey, Dad!" I called down before I even finished climbing up the ladder. "Aren't you supposed to be over at the—"

“Heads up, Hudson!” Boone hollered at me.

But it was about two seconds too late. The corner of the sign bumped into me on its way up, and knocked my feet off the ladder. Everybody screamed but me. But by that time I already had hold of the edge of the walkway, and swung my feet back onto the ladder two rungs down. Climbing up and down mesas, and in and out of mine tunnels last summer must have improved my coordination. Ten minutes later the sign slipped into the groove the way it was supposed to, and Boone and I were putting the screws back in to hold it there.

It wasn't until we were about to come down—when I was looking over the track and noticing all the changes from up there—I actually figured out what Miz Boone had been up to all this time. There were a bunch of booths along one side (painted bright colors, like the spatters over everybody's paint clothes), sort of like the fairway at a carnival. From what I could see they had the names of about six businesses in town that were shut down, already.

One was Three P's Pizza (where she used to work), and I could almost imagine I smelled pizza coming from in there. Later, I found out there was. The others were Mad Maude's Ice Cream (with a painting next to the words that looked like a blown up snapshot of Miz Lucinda), and Cactus Jack's Coffee Shack (with a cartoon picture of Grampy—it had to be him).

At the other end there were a few attractions. The biggest was a House of Mirrors, then one of those little kid's Air Castle things (with a load of colored balls in it), and finally a small blue and white striped circus tent without any sign, yet. So I didn't know what was in there.

I found out later she got all that stuff from an old carnival that went bust. Except for the bleachers (they came from the school district) that were set up for people to watch all kinds of midget races from. Decorated with checkered flags and everything. The track had a white line at one end that said START on one side, and FINISH on the other. There were still going to be go-cart rides—real cheap, in fact. That's how she was going to draw in the kids. But only for a couple hours every day. Everything else would be shows and attractions. That's where the real money would come from.

I bet plenty of people would come to it, too. On account of it was the only entertainment left in town. For kids, anyway. Something I could have got real excited about, myself, if times had been different. As it was, Boone and I were stuck on the drudge end of the business. We started working that night, and then every day after. Almost wearing ourselves out trying to turn Miz Boone's ideas into some new kind of reality.

I'll tell you right now, she had about two new ideas every day. Like turning the back half of the lot into a miniature golf course (with a ghost town theme). And while the adults involved stayed busy with their booth-businesses, Boone and I got stuck with painting, digging, and generally cleaning up around the whole place. Nothing but drudge work, really. Except for the go-carts. We got in on a little of that fun because she let us be in total charge of the vehicles. Even the races.

So, even though we did not see one red cent of pay for all that drudging, his mom wrote it down in the books every week how much our part of the business was earning. Or costing. Like for gas, oil, and any spare parts

the vehicles needed. Along with wages (really low wages) for extra kids we had to hire. To tell you the truth, I didn't mind too much. I already had a taste working with Grampy last summer of how good hard work can make you feel. I'd rather be working than hanging around, anyway.

The whole Boone family always worked like slaves but they treated you with respect and paid good wages for whatever you were working for. OK, so most of the time you didn't get a choice about what you were working for. But you'd get a fair share just the same. Maybe not until college. But it still belonged to you. That is, unless you did like Boone and me, and trade it off for something else you wanted (like bringing the Rhino back from Padre Gordo, so we could go there anytime we wanted). Might as well figure it was gonna cost a high dollar to get it, though.

That's how things were the first week soldiers started rolling into Ashbury. You could still pretty much tell who was us, and who was them. Everybody was excited about good food and more money coming in, and—after times being hard for so long—everybody was still friendly and talking to each other. Because it took a while for things to get totally out of control.

The adults never even saw what was coming.

That's because most of them flat out refused to believe what they saw.

I would even go so far as to say parents as smart as mine were the worst of all. Because any time we told them straight out what was happening, they could always think up some logical explanation for it. Not to mention they had a little money left in the bank. Along with the

idea they could still do anything they wanted with it.

Now that I think back on it, that night the sign went up at Boone's Family Fun Park, wasn't only the best time we had in months, it was the last we had, too. It was sort of a celebration for the staff before the big Grand Opening on Friday night. Everybody there (except for Looney) either ran a booth, or was helping Miz Boone fix things up. We even had pizza. I didn't hang around for all of it, though.

As soon as Boone and I finished cleaning out the go-cart garage (and checking out which vehicles might have enough power to make it all the way to Padre Gordo), I decided to walk over to the library with Dad. On account of he had to close up after the volunteers left. The other library workers were volunteers, now. Old people, mostly. Anyway, I figured between there and home, was the only chance I might get for us to talk alone.

It was dark by the time we headed over. He was in a great mood and it was one of those amazing nights in the fall, when it isn't too cold, yet, and you can still catch the smell of sage coming off the desert from here. I love the desert. It's the most amazing place I have ever been and I just plain don't want to leave it. Maybe even never.

But especially not now. So, when he started asking me about my day, I didn't want to waste time with small stuff. I had to get a grip, though. Because I sure couldn't pop off with, "Dad—General Philby is a big fat liar!" right off the bat. Sheesh.

So, instead, I said, "Dad, would it be breaking your parole not to show up at an appointment some crooked county person made for you?"

Way wrong choice.

## Chapter Eight

### READY OR NOT

*“Spies are like ghosts—people seem to have had a general feeling that there might be such things, but they did not at the same time believe in them—because they never saw them, and seldom met anyone who had.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

While I was busy spilling the beans to my dad about everything I'd been doing for the last two days, and what all I was worried about (hey, when it's the end of the world almost everything you believe takes a nose-dive), Boone was doing the exact same thing over at his house. I wish I would have known that. Then I could have just stuck with telling Dad about General Philby instead of the Miz Lucinda thing.

If anyone could figure out what to do about her it was Boone's mom.

Now, Dad and I couldn't get past that subject.

I totally forgot he had no idea what was going on between her and me (starting all the way back to last summer), and he was shocked. I knew because he said, “William!” in a sort of amazed whisper—like he can't believe I would be involved with something like that.

I gotta admit that always makes me feel like I'd give



anything if only I wasn't. He never gets angry the way most people do. Just disappointed. But I'll tell you, I'd rather get clouted than have my dad that disappointed in me. Anyway, there we were, sitting in a couple of chairs in the reading room of the empty library.

Libraries are kind of spooky when nobody's in them. Especially the dark quiet places where the comfortable chairs are. But neither of us wanted to go home till we got this thing settled. I guess we were both trying to make sense out of what the other one was saying. And even though I love Dad with everything I've got (people say I'm a laser copy of him, except I don't have any gray wings in my brown hair), I sure can't figure him out most of the time. It's not like Mom, when I already know what she's going to say to almost everything.

"They have a Boy Scout troop in this town?" He asked like Helm's was having a sale on donuts instead of telling me what I should do about the county nurse trying to kidnap me.

"They don't. She's just making it up."

"Son, I'm having a hard time not thinking the same thing about you at the moment."

"Dad, you've gotta believe me!"

"Why would someone who was trying to do a good turn for the young people of this town be lying about it? It's a volunteer position. Even if she changes her mind she just has to say so. It happens all the time. People don't realize how much work goes into being a troop leader. There's no reason to lie about it."

"Dad."

"There's no logical reason for her to lie."

“There was no reason for her to get me in trouble with the Vice-Principal today, either, but she did.”

“William!” It was the unbelievable whisper thing again, and this time he shook his head as if this wasn't working. “You have never had these kind of behavior problems before.”

Uh-oh. That's what he said before I got grounded for something. So, I figured I better change the subject. “I don't mean to, Dad. Seriously. It's just that everything's going totally crazy around here!”

“Things are just changing too fast. All of us feel uncomfortable about that, Hud.”

Dad's the only one in my family that calls me what I'd rather (at least sometimes), and I felt a little better just hearing it. So, I tried, again. “I looked all over town for you and Mom, today. How was I supposed to know you were over working for Miz Boone? I thought you quit your job, or something.”

“Haven't we been talking about helping out if she needs us? Today she needed us. And I'm sure one of these days, we'll be needing her, again, too. It's how people are in hard times. They help each other. You know that. So, you better tell me what's really bothering you.”

“OK, I will.” I took a deep breath. “It's about all these soldiers coming here—shipping the orphan kids and old people off—and turning Ashbury into some kind of—of—holding facility for World War Three!”

“What?”

“And I am totally—and I mean TOTALLY—worried what's gonna happen if I have to get rehabilitated. Like it might fry my brain! Maybe turn me into a zombie, or something.”

“For heaven sake, William—you must be watching entirely too much TV.”

“No, I’ve just been watching what’s going on around this town the last two days. You know what Boone and I overheard at Little Heely Mesa, yesterday, Dad? We heard General Philby and some other soldier-guy say the Army’s gonna shut down the whole TOWN! Gonna be a ghost town, just like Mom said! He says they can’t trust the locals, too. He’s a liar, Dad—a big fat liar!”

I was so upset, I couldn’t stay in my chair anymore. So, I popped up like a jack-in-the-box somebody wound past the release and started to pace back and forth. I couldn’t help it. I had to do something or I seriously think I might have busted out bawling. Like that pre-schooler named Jimmy, back at the orphan’s home, today.

“William!” By that time, the look on his face was about as shocked as it could get. “Son!” He leaned forward in the chair (it was one of those wide low ones, so his knees were practically up to his chin. “The only reason I’m not grounding you for talking that way—is I think you actually believe all that.”

“I do believe it! Did you see those lines down at City Hall, today? Everybody’s scrambling for government jobs while they can still pick where they want to go. On account of nobody wants to hang around here, anymore. We been centered! I’m telling you, Ashbury is toast!”

“All right. Try to calm down.”

“It’s the end of the world!”

“William Hudson!”

I flopped back into my chair, with my eyes closed, and tried to take some deep breaths. Holy crud. It was like the lid just popped off my fear factor and I was seriously

close to a melt-down, all of a sudden. But now Dad was out of his chair and I could hear him walking back and forth for a minute.

Thinking.

“Let me try and explain it to you,” he finally said. “You’re absolutely right about us being in serious times. We’re pulling back our troops in a lot of arenas, and securing all our borders. Because things are hard everywhere. We’ve got so many people out of work, right now, it’s like the Great Depression all over, again. Do you remember two weeks, ago, when the president had to declare a national emergency?”

It wasn’t the kind of question that needed an answer, so I didn’t.

“Well, that’s what’s going on here. In order for the government to get better organized to help everyone, we need to have a more central way of doing it. Smaller towns will be overseen by larger cities that are most equipped to handle specific needs. That’s all they mean by this centering talk. It’s simply the fastest way for our soldiers—who are the largest, most well organized force in the world—to get that massive job done. You see?”

I did not see.

“Of course, it will take time. And in the meantime, there will be more jobs for those of us who need to stay and fulfill contracts we already have with the government. As well as come alongside to help the military whenever we can. So, you see, it really is best for everyone, all the way around. Sort of a mass helping of each other, instead of each town standing on its own. That’s all it is, Hud.”

“Except for the orphans and old people.”

“Son, ever since the food crisis, the orphanage and senior center have been having the hardest time taking care of their people. Especially during these last few months. Without shipping them out, it would take too many weeks to get government subsidies in place for them in time. Then doing the same thing over and over—in the thousands of similar establishments throughout this entire country—could generate a problem of nightmare proportions. And it would take money we simply do not have. So, shipping them off to the largest, most organized facilities is only logical.”

“But General Philby said they were going to shut down the whole town.”

“The town as we know it. They still plan on keeping it as a patrol base, since it's so close to the border. It was probably just a phrase he used. But I'm sure what he meant was directly in line with the overall plan of centralizing all the cities and towns across the country. Let's try to remember all this can't be easy for him, either. He's in charge of thousands of people. Not just Ashbury.”

After that, I heard him sit down, again.

Which probably would have been a good time for me to say, “Oh, yeah. Now, I get it.” and slip out of there without losing any privileges I might need next week for taking care of the whole bunch. Only I couldn't. Because all I could think about was how Savanna Anders was counting on me to get some adult help for all of them before it was too late. And how that little Jimmy kid kept bawling every time she got upset. Like he was some mirror image of whatever she was feeling. They felt the same way about moving off from their friends as I would

moving away from Boone.

To tell you the truth, I really didn't care how logical my dad said it was. It wasn't fair. In fact, I was seriously thinking it wasn't even right. But I was way not going to get into that kind of discussion with him just then. On account of I have never in my life been able to out-talk my dad. Not to mention it was after ten o'clock and I felt like some of the times Grampy made Boone and me pull an all-nighter. Working our tails off trying to get away from the county people.

I guess you could say I felt like we were being chased all over, again. Only this time, even our own families weren't going to help us. I got a lump in my throat thinking about that. But I guess it was because I was tired from moving all that heavy stuff around in the go-cart garage. Which is probably the only reason I had one of those thoughts that goes right out your mouth without being approved first by your brain.

"Dad? If I could prove to you they're all lying...would you at least try and help the orphans?"

"Well, of course, I would." Then he smiled.

I gotta say when my dad smiles at me, there's nothing—and I mean nothing—I wouldn't do for him right then. No matter what. Which I do not understand and I'm not even going to try to explain. I only know—at that very moment—I made up my mind that getting him to believe me was the only hope for the orphans and old people in Ashbury.

The whole bunch.

OK. I admit it. For Savanna, Little Jimmy, and Uncle Ding. Because—man—I had already felt their feelings. I knew how sad and scared they were because

I felt that way myself, this morning. And even though I didn't know Uncle Ding (what kind of name was that?) personally, I didn't have to. I had known Grampy.

Which is why I knew, first hand, what it was like to love somebody you weren't related to. Just thinking about all that stuff, right then, is what made me so determined to do whatever it took to get Dad on our side. Because kids can't do this kind of stuff on their own. I had to get him on their side the same way he was already on mine. And I knew—all of a sudden—there was only one way to do that.

I had to become a spy.

## Chapter Nine

### PLAN A

*“I went armed with most effective weapons for the purpose, which have served me well in many a similar campaign. I took a sketch-book, in which were numerous pictures--some finished, others only partly done...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

We had one day left until the Grand Opening, and two days before Miz Lucinda expected us to show up for the fake scout trip. Boone and I didn't have a lot of time to talk before school, on account of most days it's all I can do to get there on time. We only have one class together, too (PE at the end of the day), so, we're lucky we even get a few words before the first bell rings.

Today, it was me asking, “Any progress on the Miz Lucinda thing?” while I was getting science and history stuff out of my locker.

“Yep.” Boone was in a great mood. Like half the weight of the world got knocked off his shoulder. “Next time my dad calls, Mom's gonna find out if she can make her an offer she can't refuse!”

Which made me feel a whole lot better all of a sudden, too. Except for one thing. “But what if he doesn't



call, today? Or, tomorrow, even. Saturday's still on its way whether we like it, or not. And that lady can make a way lot of trouble for us."

"We'll just have to come up with a diversion. Say we got the mumps or something."

"Boone, she's the county nurse. She's not gonna fall for that."

"Something else then. We still have two days."

We started walking to the end of the hall, where we had to split off to opposite classrooms, when another thought came to me. "Hey, how come you never ask your dad anything we need to know when he calls? That way, he could give you permission to go to Padre Gordo—like you said—so you wouldn't even have to ask your mom. You talk to him, don't you?"

"Well, sure. But it's only kid stuff. I can't talk anything serious on account of the line's not secure. Besides that, Mom's always there."

Which did not make sense to me. Because what's so dangerous about asking if it was time to start passing out the ham and pancakes, yet? Anyone who overheard would just think you were having someone over for breakfast. His dad would get the point and then only have to say yes—or, no—for us to know the right answer. Something about this didn't make sense.

Then I started to wonder if Boone even still had a dad.

Like maybe he got shot down in his plane a long time ago, and Boone just flat-out refused to believe it. I could totally picture that happening with him, on account of he's so emotional. Man, he even makes me that way, sometimes. Then there's the thing with his mom taking

care of everything, never wanting to bother his dad with domestic stuff while he's over fighting the wars. Always the same excuse.

Boone punched me in the arm (like he knew I was drifting) and said, "We'll come up with something." before taking off down the hall.

A few minutes later, I was already through the door to science class before I realized I never picked up those survey questions I promised Jones I would get from Miz Lucinda's office, yesterday. On account of we left there in too much of a hurry. But I didn't want to tell her that. I made a big deal about how I would handle it, so she could go straight to the Orphan's Home, after school.

Sheesh.

I knew those things were important but I wasn't about to go looking for Miz Lucinda before Saturday—and especially not by myself. Which is why I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Jones wasn't at our table, yet. At least I'd have a little time to think of something to tell her. Meanwhile, I sure couldn't go ahead and work on the project alone when I didn't even know what it was.

I'd have to get busy on something, though, or I'd have Miz Brawley on my tail. During stuff like this, she just walks around and looks over everybody's shoulder. Sort of like a hawk. Which is why I flipped over to the sketches section of my notebook, and started working on a half-finished drawing of a rocket instrument panel when she passed by.

"William, do you know where Isabella is, today?"

"Not really. I hope she didn't catch the mumps from Savanna Anders, though. 'Cause I can't do this whole thing by myself."

“What exactly are you doing there?”

“I’m, um... well, it’s... a sketch of the answer machine. Its inner parts, that is. See this right here?” I pointed to a place with the tip of my blue pencil. “That’s where you put the questions in. And this part over here... is where—”

A door slammed.

“Oh, there she is,” said Miz Brawley.

Jones did not look good. In fact, she looked like she slept in her clothes, didn’t comb her hair this morning, and was about to bawl any minute. Something was seriously wrong. Which is why I figured I better run some interference before the next thing anyone said to her caused a meltdown.

“How did the survey go, yesterday?” Miz Brawley asked before she even sat down.

“Really great,” I answered for her and closed my notebook with a loud thump. “We just need to hit a few more places, then we’ll be ready to start imputing all the data. Right, Jones?”

She made an effort at clearing her throat and pushing up her glasses, but that was about as far as it got.

“I’ll get the passes, this time.” I stood up and started toward the teacher’s desk, but Miz Brawley wasn’t buying it.

“Child...” She put a hand under Jones’ chin and stared at her face. “It looks to me like you have a fever. I know you’d like to work on this but the best place for you is at home.”

“I... I’m really not feeling well, Mrs. Brawley,” Jones answered. “Nobody’s home to come get me, though. So can I just sit in the office for a while and let

Hudson finish up the surveys?"

Oh, holy crud.

Now, she cleared her throat and pushed up her glasses. "I'm sure I'll feel better after a while."

"Well..." Mrs. Brawley really was pretty decent as long as you didn't fool around when she was talking. "We'll give it a try. William? Get your things and I'll write you a pass."

By the time I waited for mine (Jones got hers, first), I had it figured out what I was going to do. I decided to forget about the ones over at Miz Lucinda's office and hit the post office, instead. Just collect a bunch of new ones, and nobody would even know the difference. Which made me feel a lot better about everything. Sheesh. I seriously had to get my stress quotient down a couple of notches or I could end up being a basket-case before Saturday even got here.

Two days until Saturday.

I was thinking about all that when Jones grabbed me by the arm, just outside the door. I guess she was waiting for me.

"I need your help, Hudson." She started toward the office in a total rush, pulling me along with her. "It's a matter of life and death!"

It was the same phrase Savanna used, yesterday, and I knew the two of them had come up with something. I hoped it included a trustworthy adult who could lend a hand, though, so we wouldn't be all on our own with this thing. Because if I was a cat with nine lives, I figured I only had about half a one left when it came to getting into some serious trouble with all this.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"I need you to knock over three water coolers right when I'm asking for schedules to collect homework for sick students."

"What? Holy crud, Jones— I'd get kicked out of school if I did something like that. They might even decide to rehabilitate me!"

"Puh-leeze—you have to! It's the only way I can get all these homework assignments without causing suspicion! The office ladies will be so focused on you, they'll just hand them over automatically."

"That's not all they'll hand over automatically. No kidding. You better tell me what you're trying to do, so we can maybe come up with a Plan B. Seriously."

Which I guess was the way wrong thing to say. Because she just grabbed her head, busted out crying, and went into a sort of meltdown all of a sudden. I mean, if I hadn't seen my sisters do the same kind of thing a bajillion times whenever they had more than they could take, I wouldn't have known what to do.

Instead, I said, "OK, OK." Then steered her over to the nearest bench (there was one next to the restrooms), sat her down there, and gave her a minute. Meanwhile I was trying to think of something more realistic than tearing the place up. I mean, there could be serious repercussions from that. Not to mention my dad would ground me till I was thirty, no matter what he thought I believed. That's just how it is in our family.

Jones pulled a crumpled up tissue out of her jacket pocket and blew her nose. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself. It's all just so awful! Savvy's my best friend since I can remember—I don't know what I'd do without her!"

"So, what's to be suspicious of? The office always

hands out schedules to take schoolwork home to sick kids. It's no big deal. But I really don't see how keeping everybody up on their homework is going to help this situation much." I could have added that it wasn't worth sacrificing myself for, either, but I didn't say that part out loud.

"Because I don't just need one, I need eight. Two from the high school, Three from here, and three from the elementary. The problem is, five of those kids don't really have the mumps." She hiccuped, then blew her nose, again. "But it's the only way I could think of to get them on the wait list instead of being transferred out right away. None of the mumps kids can go anywhere until they're over it. Anyway, after that, I figure I have less than a week to find a place to hide all of them."

"Are you kidding me? How are you going to hide eight orphans? The whole town will be out looking for them. Maybe even the Army."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"With a little more time I'm pretty sure I could come up with one. What's the big rush? I thought—except for families that transfer out early because of jobs somewhere else, they were going to let everyone hang around till school's out."

"Everyone but orphans and seniors. That's what Savvy heard. They finished out-processing their high school students, yesterday, and they'll be leaving in five days."

"Five days? Holy crud. I was going to recruit some adults to help, but there isn't enough time for that, now. Last night when I talked to my dad, he said he thought that was the best thing for everybody. It's gonna take

some real convincing to change his mind about that. In fact, I'd say we might even be totally on our own with this thing. Know what I mean?"

"Not really. I know I can't just sit here and watch my best friend and her family get split up and shipped off to—I don't even know where."

"Orphans don't have families, Jones. That's their whole problem."

"Their family is each other, Hudson. Some of them have been there all their lives. Now, are you going to help, or—"

"What are you two kids doing out here?"

Sheesh, it was one of the security guards. He came up behind me so quiet I never heard a thing. But before I could think up something logical to say, Jones pushed open the swinging lid on the trash can, next to the bench and vomited. At least, that's what it sounded like.

"Nevermind," said the guard, and walked on past us.

"Maybe you should just head for the nurse's office and I'll try to come up with something." I suggested.

She straightened up and looked at me. "You don't think I'm really sick, do you? I'm just pretending."

"Well, you can't pretend a fever."

She reached into her red briefcase, and pulled out a heating pad, with a cord. "Five minutes with this on your face, and you get a fever that lasts for ten minutes. Maybe even fifteen. There's a plug-in in the restroom. I'm not usually so deceptive—my parents would be terribly disappointed in me if they knew about this. I just didn't know what else to do."

Which, to tell you the truth, made me feel like

something of a wimp. Because while most everybody else was still in the talking-about-it-phase, this girl was already doing something. And not just to save herself, either. She was out there. Putting herself on the line.

“Well...” I took a deep breath and tried to steady my nerves. “Let's go knock over some water coolers, then, and get this thing over with.”



## Chapter Ten

### FIRST ASSIGNMENT

*“I flogged the water... with an impossible fly,  
just to keep the man's attention from  
my real work...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Once I made the decision to help Jones with her plan, I got an idea. I wouldn't knock over the water coolers unless I absolutely had to. I mean, why all the drama? There were a couple of other things I could try first. According to Sir Robert's spy book, one of the best decoys for any assignment was to have some specific (and innocent) reason why you are wandering around enemy territory in the first place.

I had a good reason right in my hand, already. A legitimate one. I could just hand out surveys to the office ladies, so they would be filling them out while Jones was getting the student schedules. I even had my pass from Miz Brawley to back me up on that. And with three school offices to visit, I might not even have to go to the post office to make up for the surveys I forgot to get from the hospital, yesterday.

OK, so I could do this.

I started by standing behind Jones a couple seconds (like I was waiting in line), then as soon as she asked for the schedules, I interrupted and said, "Hey, could you fill out this survey when you get done? It's for the science fair." Then shoved one across the counter at the lady who was helping her. But before she had time to answer, I headed over to the next lady who was doing something on a computer a few feet away.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I'm doing a survey for my science project. Would you mind filling one out, too? It will only take a minute."

"I suppose I could spare a minute." That one smiled and came over to the counter. She was a nice lady with frizzy blonde hair (somebody's mother, probably) who only worked there part time. "What kind of science project is it?"

The question caught me off-guard, because I still didn't know exactly what our project was. So, I had to make something up. "It's a... personalized answer machine, ma'am. Not one stuffed with those generic answers you get off the Internet. Even though those do come in handy most of the time."

"How does it work?"

"Well, it's this... booth you go into, see...sort of like a voting booth. Where you can write your question down in private. Then you drop it into a slot that feeds it into a...uh... cataleptic analyzer."

She slid the paper back to me (there were only four easy questions on it) then leaned her forearms on the counter. Her eyes twinkled like she didn't really believe me but was enjoying the break. "Sounds fascinating. Then what?"

“Then it, um... gets processed through a micro-sifter that's based on the projected findings of the general survey. Which is... uh...color-coded to the... uh... Bonhoffman Personality Formulas.”

Jones looked over and rolled her eyes at me, and in that very same second, her office lady said, “Five students at the Orphan's Home have mumps? That sounds like an epidemic. I wonder if I shouldn't report that to the Department of Health before it gets out of hand. I didn't know mumps were a problem, anymore.”

She started over toward a phone, and Jones looked about to faint.

So, I hollered, “Owww!” loud enough to make the lady in front of me jump, and everybody else in the room stop what they were doing and look over. I dropped my clipboard and grabbed my throat. “Oh—owww! I just got a shooting pain right in my—are mumps catching?”

“Only if you haven't been vaccinated and get exposed,” my lady answered, looking worried all of a sudden.

“I've been exposed! I sit right next to her in science class—” I pointed at Jones. “Her best friend has it! Oww—there it goes, again—I need some water!”

I bolted for the water cooler at the end of the room. About then, the Principal stuck his half-bald head out of an office door and wanted to know what was going on in there.

Holy crud. I hoped I wouldn't have to knock the bottle off the cooler with him standing around. I'd need a way good reason to do that or they'd call my parents. So I grabbed a cup out of the dispenser, gulped some water down, then pretended to shoo away a pesky fly. They all

stared at me for a few seconds, then the phone lady sat down at the desk instead of calling anybody and started tapping something into her computer.

"I'm OK, now." I rubbed my throat and looked over at the Principal. "Probably just a false alarm."

He didn't answer, just gave me a look like I better quit fooling around, then went back into his office. I filled my cup up, again. In a minute, I heard the whir of a machine, and knew the schedules were starting to print. I waved my imaginary fly off, squashed my cup, and popped it into the trash can. When Jones had the schedules and headed for the door, I picked up my clipboard and survey, rubbed my throat one last time and mumbled how maybe I shouldn't collect any more surveys until I found out if I had the mumps, or not. In case I was a carrier or something.

Outside, Jones was waiting for me.

"That was close!" She handed me one of the schedules. "Will you do Looney's? We can get these done faster if we split up. Then we can head over to elementary."

"OK. But on the way you better explain more of the project to me, so I don't have to sound like an idiot every time I tell somebody about it."

"Well, you don't go into a voting booth and I didn't use the Bonhoffman Personality Formulas. I don't even know what those are."

"There's no such thing. I just made that up."

We collected the schedules at the other offices with no problems. I guess because we only had a couple to do in each one, and partly because there really was an epidemic of mumps in our town. Well not exactly an

epidemic. Counting our three legitimate ones over at the Ashbury Home For Orphans, there were about six.

Walking back and forth between the classrooms to get all those assignments for the next two weeks gave me time to find out the plan Jones had come up with to save the orphans. She didn't have one past hiding out in one of the cottage basements during school hours for the next couple of days while she looked for somewhere more permanent for the kids to stay. Turns out there weren't a lot of places for that to happen.

Most of the adults (including her parents, who both taught in the high school) agreed it was best for them to get shipped off to places that were better equipped to take care of them. But the real reason was because they were the "unwantables." Don't bother looking that word up, either, since I made that up, too.

See, people don't usually mind lending a hand with little kids who can't take care of themselves, or even older ones who are practically adults, already. But nobody seems to want the half-grown kind that are caught in the middle. Especially during hard times like these. It's a situation I wouldn't wish on anybody, on account of I know first-hand how hard it is to figure things out when you're a kid even when you have a family that loves you a lot.

And even though I was trying to help out any way I could with this deal, I really didn't see how they could even begin to pull it off. Something I think even Jones was starting to realize by the time we were heading back to science class about five minutes before the bell rang. I could tell because she didn't look much better than when she first came to class and it had been a way long

time since she used that heating pad trick this morning.

“Hey, Jones. Do you think those kids would still want to stay if it turns out nobody in town wants them and they'd have to hide out like outlaws the whole time?”

“I know they would! They'd have each other wouldn't they? And they'd have us to help them. But I can't think of a place where they wouldn't be spotted right away, since almost everybody knows everybody around here.” She sighed and pushed her glasses up. “There's supposed to be hundreds more people coming in with the Army and transients, though. It actually might be easier then. If they can hold out that long.”

“OK, then I think I know of a place that might work but I'd have to talk to the people who own it, first.” By that time, we were at the door to our class and both stopped there.

“You do?” She looked up at me like I just pulled a rabbit out of my hat at a magic show, or something.

“Yeah, but don't get too excited because they might not go for it.” Which didn't change her expression a bit, so I opened the door just to have something to do. Sheesh. You'd have thought I said I'd handle the whole thing.

Miz Brawley was writing on the whiteboard and talking when we went in, so we just sat down at our worktable. “Which still leaves Looney Martin, who is absent, today, and...” She looked around the room for a few seconds. “Oh, yes. Isabella Jones and William Hudson.” She turned back to write our names in a box up there. “You two can set your answer machine project up in the south corner forward. Will you be needing a table, Isabella?”

“No, ma'am,” said Jones. “It's sort of like a... a

voting booth. So, a corner will work just fine.”

“All right, then. First class demonstrations will be a week from this Friday, and you two are number...” She ran a finger down a list she was holding in her other hand. “Number three. That would be at nine oh five. Make sure you have your introductory handouts ready to pass around for student comments by then, as well. Remember, class...” She looked at all of us just as the bell rang. “One quarter of your grade for this project will come from student evaluations. You're dismissed. See everyone tomorrow.”

The classroom erupted in a buzz of chairs scraping the floor and kids talking. But not loud enough to cover up Miz Brawley's voice over the top of them. “Isabella and William, would you see me at my desk, please?”

## Chapter Eleven

### THE SPY

*“Our erratic procedure naturally  
invited investigation...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

With only one day before the grand opening of Boone's Family Fun Park, it was pretty obvious Boone and I weren't going to have any more free time except maybe an hour or two on weekends. At least not till things were running smooth around there. Meanwhile, we had two time-bombs ticking away between the orphans being shipped off and Miz Lucinda wanting to get her hands on all Grampy's supplies.

I mean, when you've got stuff like that hanging over your head it's pretty hard to get excited about go-cart races and track meets. Which is why my mind wasn't exactly on the relay race, during PE, when Boone started talking about setting up a snake trap after school. What was he thinking? We were in the middle of two life-or-death situations and he still had his mind on snake traps.

“Are you kidding me? It would take at least two hours to hike all that way out there and back.” I glanced over my shoulder where he was standing behind me in the relay line. “Your mom would kill us if we didn't show up at the track right after—”



“Go, Hudson—you're next!” He told me the same instant the relay stick hit me in the gut because I wasn't watching for the handoff.

Which is why I was short on wind before I even started my run. I could have recovered—not to brag, but I'm a pretty good runner—except I saw something at the bottom of the fence at the turn around point that cost me another couple seconds. It was Looney Martin's face peeking out from behind a dumpster on the other side.

“Man—what are you doing here?” I gasped. “You're supposed to be hiding out today!”

“I am hiding.”

The rest of my team started yelling at me, so I had to run back without saying anything else. But by the time I got close enough to hand off to Boone, I had already passed the other team's runner on his way out. Which would have bothered me any other time, except—compared to what had gone on the last twenty-four hours—didn't even phase me.

“You just lost us the run, Hudson!” somebody yelled.

“So, put it on my bill. I'm having a bad day.” I leaned over and rubbed my side where the baton hit me.

I expected a bunch more flack from everybody but got a dead silence, instead. Like they could relate. Which made me figure they maybe were worried about what was happening around here, too. We all were. I knew one thing, though. Helping Looney Martin was going to be impossible if he didn't even know enough to do what he was told during an emergency. I guess that's what came of people ignoring you all your life.

Most people just let Looney do whatever he felt like

because they didn't know what to do with him until he got in the way. I can't say I was much better. On account of I wrote him off as a lost cause the minute I saw him sneaking around on the other side of that fence. That kid was just an accident waiting to happen, no matter how you looked at it.

We headed straight to the Fun Park, after school.

I had forgotten how Boone was something of an expert when it came to getting around work schedules, on account of he'd been dealing with it all his life. So while we were putting the finishing touches on our go-cart operation (due to begin at four o'clock the next afternoon with a price of fifty cents for ten minutes), we were also getting ready to make a trial run out to Little Heely Mesa, for other reasons. The most important being to check on the hideout and the other to lay out a mini off-road track for a future attraction.

By that time, we were really getting into the carnival mentality (Miz Boone's enthusiasm was catching) and the sky was the limit for thinking up new ideas. As long as it was mostly work involved to make it happen and not money. In fact, there were so many ideas flying around that place it was like walking through a giant brainstorm just to look around. Everybody was excited about the possibilities. I guess you could say it was the best-of-times and worst-of-times, all mixed up together.

First on the list when we got there was trying out the new menu over at the Three P's Pizza Wagon. It was a "Racetrack Special," loaded with everything but the kitchen sink, for only five dollars. But that day, Mr. Pickler was handing out free slices in exchange for

everyone's opinion. Same with Mad Maude's Ice Cream Cart. They invented a new flavor called "Sand Tracks" that was practically a soft-frozen candy bar. That was going to sell for a dollar, starting tomorrow. But today it was free for an opinion to anyone on staff.

We decided to save Cactus Jack's Coffee Shack until just before we went home (on account of we were stuffed after that) because they had a great version of Grampy's hot chocolate there. The kind Boone and I drank out in the desert, last summer. Anyway, walking around in the middle of all those people, I decided to wait until we got back to our go-cart garage to tell Boone about the orphans.

The place had a workbench, a sink in the corner to wash up in, and space big enough for two vehicles. The rest were parked outside under a long carport. There was half a loft in there, too. It was filled with car parts and spare tires. All taken out and put back in, again, so we could spray it for bugs and scorpions, yesterday. Now we had spent so much time around there, it was starting to feel sort of like a second home. We were working on the last two golf carts in our fleet and we went on tightening bolts and getting ready for tomorrow while I filled him in on what had been happening.

"Grampy always said we'd know when the time came." He had been checking the air in the tires as I was talking. "I guess this is it."

I picked up a wooden box filled with stuff we had been collecting for the hideout and put it in the back seat of the golf cart parked in the open doorway, under a tarp. "How are we going to keep your mom from reading our minds when we're doing all this stuff we have to do?"

She's gonna know something's up the minute she comes outside to go somewhere and her golf cart's missing."

"She's working with the bookkeeper up at the office, right now. So, I figure we have at least two hours before she even thinks about doing anything else. Hey..."

He tossed the tire gauge back into the tool box and brought it outside to take with us. "Maybe we can hire the orphans to work around here. Long as we keep the wages low—I mean, really low—she won't care. They'd have to be locked up every night after we close up but we could fix a place to sleep no one else will notice. Scatter them out all over. Put a couple here in the garage, some in the house of mirrors, and some over at the castle. Places to hide till after closing time."

"That is a genius idea, Boone! Totally. Especially if everyone hides in whatever attraction they're hired on at. That way if somebody catches them at it they can just say they fell asleep, or something, and got locked in. I'll tell Jones tomorrow and she can spread the word."

"Just make sure nobody gets over ten cents an hour though, 'cause it has to come out of our own wages."

"Dang." I put the tool box on top of the tarp in case we broke down somewhere. "Just when I was feeling good about not having to work for free."

"I'll try to talk Mom into hiring two more to help us with the races. And I think there might be a couple openings at the food wagons. But the rest you and I will have to cover."

"That'll do until we think of something better. I thought of putting them over at the hideout but it's awful dangerous out there if you don't know what you're doing. Too close to rattlesnake territory."

“Yeah, not to mention the engineers will be coming back and forth in front of there. Perfect place for spying but the first time anyone catches a look at kids, they'll get hauled off somewhere. Especially orphans. It's a good outpost for raft expeditions to Padre Gordo, though.”

“Sheesh, Boone,” I stopped shuffling the gear and looked over at him. “That would be breaking our swear to stay out of the Apostoso we made to Grampy. Going back on a Bible swear's way worse than getting haunted by somebody dead that's mad at you.”

“Not if it's a life or death situation. I say we line everything up before the Engineers get here, just in case. It's the fastest way to Padre Gordo if you can't drive. But we'll only use it if we have to go to Plan B.”

“Yesterday, you said it was all just a bunch of drama.”

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind, today. It's like being in the wars. You have to do what you have to do if you want to save people's lives. Besides...” He picked up a red three-gallon gas container and shoved it behind the seat on the other side. “Anytime they start talking about getting rid of kids and old people, something really bad is coming down.”

“I guess so.” I hopped into the front seat on the passenger side. “I sure thought our folks would handle things from here, though. Didn't expect them not to believe any of this.”

“Mom believes it. That's why she bought out this place and let all the family businesses that went bust work out of here. She's handing out way more money than she's making. That's a fact.”

“So, how come she doesn't just take everybody up

to Padre Gordo, instead? That's what they did in the Great Depression, right?"

"Yeah but that place gives her the creeps. So, she's waiting for Dad to come home, first. Right now, she sounds like your folks. Doesn't think things have gone bad enough, yet."

"I'm telling you, Boone, being a spy is the only way to solve this whole mess! Because we're going to need some hard evidence to convince any of the adults. Except for Uncle Ding and Mrs. Dumfries, maybe."

"Who the heck are they?"

"The old people still working at the Orphan's Home. Houseparents and janitor for the unwantables. But they can't help for long, on account of they're getting shipped out to some old folks place next week."

"Well, that stinks. You better find out if they want to work here, too. Mom would definitely make a spot for them if they'd rather stay. Just something easy. Like taking tickets or whatever."

"I'll have Jones find out."

"You sure are spending a lot of time with her, lately."

"It's because I was reading how to be a spy instead of doing my homework the other night. Trying to keep you and me from getting hung. Now, I'm stuck working on some answer machine thing when I could have been working on my rocket launch altitude record. It was either that or recording star data with Looney Martin for a whole month."

He laughed, got into the driver's seat, and started the engine.

"Did you know science projects were starting

already?" I asked.

"We've been working on ours for the last two weeks in Mr. Simon's class. I'm doing an alternative fuel system for one of our broken down golf carts. Me and Harvey Baker. His brains and my mechanics."

"You lead a charmed life, Boone. Really."

"Only 'cause you keep saving my bacon. Did you learn any spy secrets we can use?"

"Learned them? I used some down at the school office, already."

"How'd they work?"

"Fine, as long as you don't mind people thinking you're an idiot. Or getting study hall because someone ratted on you for wandering around town during school hours—even though it was her idea."

"Whatever kid did that, maybe you and me better have a talk with them." He backed out of the driveway like an expert, then headed the golf cart toward the main office.

"It wasn't a kid."

"Who was it, then?"

"The only person who could have told Miz Brawley I never picked up the surveys from over at the hospital, yesterday. Now, I got three days of study hall at lunch hour and an essay to write about the importance of integrity in science."

"Oh, man." He pulled up at a gray wooden building that looked more like a store-front in an old western town than an office. "I told you that woman was stronger than us. She's even got the school putting the pressure on, now. I gotta check in with Mom before we leave."

"Pick me up at the back gate, then. I'm supposed to

tell Emily to bring home three pizzas for dinner, on account of there's another town meeting, tonight.”

Ten minutes later, we were heading out the back gate across where the miniature golf course was going to be and then straight out into the desert. It was the first time we had wheels since all our Rhino driving, last summer, and neither of us was prepared for the feeling of freedom it gave us. Even though the golf cart wasn't as fast or rugged as the Rhino, it was enough to feel a sense of wind in your face and smell sagebrush in the air as it rushed by. We wound in and out of clumps of bushes, around rocks, and giant saguaros that looked like huge stick men standing with one arm up and the other down.

We made it to Little Heely in about twenty minutes instead of forty-five. Boone drove around to the far side this time and parked under the lowest step of the staircase. For a minute, we just sat there without saying anything, on account of everything felt real heavy all of a sudden.

“This is serious stuff, Hud. Dangerous, too. Especially if we get caught hiding orphans. If Grampy was here, he'd make us swear.” He turned his hat around backwards and looked over at me.

“I guess we better swear then, because we gotta do it. I'd rather overdo than not do enough if we're talking about the end of the world, here.”

We both raised our right hands, and I took a deep breath before saying the first thing that popped into my mind. “I hereby commend myself to God...” (had to stick that in, on account of that's how I was raised) “...and swear to do my almighty best, with strength and honor, for as long... as long as I can hold out.”



“Me, too. I swear. And if we get separated for some reason...” He thought for a second, then smiled. “Let’s promise to meet up in the middle, the way Grampy said.”

“OK, I promise.”

I don’t know why but I felt a whole lot better.

After that, Boone climbed up onto the roof of the cart with his usual energy, then grabbed hold of the last step of the staircase to pull himself up. “Come on, let’s go look for a rope to haul all this stuff up with. If we take too long, Mom will know we’re fooling around.”

I started up after him. “I would not call what we’re doing fooling around. Hey, how we gonna get the raft out here without attracting attention?”

“Gonna have to make a night run, I guess. Better do that before the engineers come.”

We tied the stuff into one of the rope ladders to haul it up, then stacked everything on the upper level except some cans of food we brought to put on the shelf over the fireplace. We figured if every time we came out we brought a few things, we’d have a pretty good stash in case of emergency. Like if we ever did have to hide all the orphans in here. Sort of a Plan C.

“So, how many kids did you say it was, again?”

“Nine, counting the one that isn’t old enough to go to school, yet.” I kicked at a piece of charred wood in the old fireplace and it left a big black streak on the side of my shoe.

“Not old enough to go to school? How we gonna give him a job? Mom wouldn’t go for that. And she’d know right off we weren’t starting a babysitting service.”

“We won’t have to babysit him. He sticks like glue to Savannah. I’ll tell you who we do have to babysit,

though. Looney Martin.”

“Uh-oh. I forgot about him being one of the orphans.”

“Yeah, and after what he pulled today, I don't think we should take him. On account of he could seriously get the rest of us in trouble.”

All of a sudden there was the sound of somebody moving around on the top level, and Boone and I stopped talking and froze. I was starting to break into a cold sweat thinking a gang of coyotes snuck in without us knowing. I couldn't quit thinking about those guys ever since that first scare.

“Hey!” Looney's face stuck out over the edge with a frown like he just lost his birthday. “You guys have to take me!”

“We don't have to nothing!” Boone answered back and I could tell just by the look on his face he was worried how much Looney heard. “What do you think you're doing here?”

“I'm a better spy than you are, that's what. So, you have to take me.” He spun his ball cap around backwards, the way Boone's was. “I'll tell everything you guys said if you don't.”

## Chapter Twelve

### INVADED

*“Suddenly...looking up, I found the face peering in at me; he had caught me in the act.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Boone went ballistic faster than I ever saw him move before. No kidding. He was headed to the rope ladder so fast Looney took the only defense open to him and hauled it up before he got there. Which only slowed Boone down a little, on account of he can climb a rock-face better than anyone I know, and started up from one of the corners just like Spiderman.

“Whoa—Looney—you better drop that ladder back down—NOW!” I hollered. Not that I was on his side or anything. I just didn't want those two tumbling around on that ledge and maybe killing each other falling off it.

But Looney took it for help and kicked it back down just as Boone was climbing up over the side to come after him. He scuttled down it in a hurry—dropping onto his butt the last few feet—and I grabbed him by the ear before he could get up. Sheesh, he hollered like I was torturing him.

“You are not—repeat, NOT—going to tell on

anybody! Hear me?" He knocked my arm away and I got ready to fend off a swing as he staggered to his feet but he busted out bawling, instead. Which made me sorry for twisting his ear half-off. But, man!

"I'm in a bad spot!" He sniffed. "I'm in a bad spot!"

"If you're in a bad spot..." Boone jumped the last six feet off the ladder and came over to us. "Don't be making threats to the only people who can help you! You're on the right side or the wrong one! So, make up your mind—you sneaking weasel—'cause I'm about to knock you flat!" He drew back his fist to do it, too.

Except at the exact same time, Looney raised up his right hand the same way Boone and I had done out in the golf cart a while ago, and started rattling off, "Hope to God, I—I swear to be strong enough to—to meet in the middle—even if I can't hold out!"

Which stopped Boone so fast, you'd have thought he just got punched instead of Looney.

"Is—is that right, guys?" He sniffed, again, and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his shirt. "Is it?"

"You swear to do whatever you're told, even if it kills you?" I had to add that part on account of him showing up in school today when he was supposed to be absent. "Even if you don't feel like it?"

"I swear!" He looked over at Boone. "Will you take me, now?"

For a long time Boone just stared hard at him and didn't answer. Finally, he said, "First time you get somebody else in trouble, you're out."

That's how it happened that the first person we took into the bunch was about the last person in the world we would have wanted. But like Grampy said, "The whole

bunch is whoever happens to be with you in a time of crisis.” After that, we high-tailed it back to the Fun Park, with Looney riding on the back seat, on top of the tarp instead of under it, this time. Boone drove a little too fast around corners to give him a bumpier ride but I figured it was just to cool off some since he was still mad about him knowing everything that was anything about our whole operation.

Since the grand opening was tomorrow, we stopped in at the office to pick him up a T-shirt and hire him on at the racetrack. The whole staff had black T-shirts with a checkered flag on the back that said Boone's Family Fun Park underneath it. That way we could at least keep a good eye on him. He was so excited about his ten cents an hour, you'd have thought it was ten dollars. But—hey—it was the first job for all of us and we pretty much felt the same way.

Even my sister, Emily—who never earned money except for babysitting—had a new job there. Something in the big tent I didn't know what it was, and she wasn't telling. I guess they had been working on it in secret for weeks, though. Some old guy who used to run the local radio station, a high school kid, Emily, and Miz Boone were the only ones allowed in there.

That night, when I was headed over to catch a ride home with her and not thinking much about anything but the three boxes of pizza I was carrying, I saw there was a new sign up over the entrance. See the Amazing Gorilla Woman! You Won't Believe Your Eyes! Underneath, was a painting of jungle plants, with creepy eyes looking out, and long black hair all tangled up in the vines around them. Sheesh. Emily never liked horror movies and now

she was working for a creep show.

“Ready, Will?” She came up so quiet I hadn't heard her. “Pretty scary looking, huh.”

“What is she—half woman and half gorilla?”

“Something like that.” Then she took two tickets out of the pocket of her jean-jacket and handed them to me. “Here. First show is at six o'clock, tomorrow. You and Boone can see for yourself.”

“Hey, that'll be right after we close down the track to get ready for the races at seven. Can I have one more? We have another kid working with us over there, now.”

“Sure.” She gave me another one. “I've got a bunch to hand out in school to sort of advertise the park. I have a couple of posters to put up at the grocery store, too, before we go home.”

“Miz Boone is sure going all out for this place.”

“Isn't she fabulous? I just love her.” She headed out the back gate, toward the parking lot, and I followed with the pizzas.

“She yells a lot.”

“It's her enthusiasm showing through. Did you know she used to work for a circus?”

“Yeah, I heard something about that.” I felt like saying, you wouldn't believe what else she can do but I waited for her to unlock the little blue Toyota truck, instead. I guess Miz Boone was letting her use it all the time, now, on account of Emily was always running some kind of errand for her. She had her SUV to drive most of the time, anyway.

“While I'm putting the posters up, will you run in and get a couple gallons of milk? I heard a shipment finally came in today.” She started the motor and backed

out. "There's a twenty dollar bill Mom gave me, in my wallet. Go ahead and get a candy bar if you want, too."

"Thanks, Em."

Like I say, Emily's the nicest of all my sisters. She's always doing something for somebody and she sticks by me if I'm having troubles. When I was little, she was the one who watched out for me when Mom was at work. I could tell her just about anything and—for a minute—I was tempted to tell her about the orphans. But I didn't. At seventeen she was practically an adult and probably already thinking like one. I figured she'd be the first to be on our side when we got enough evidence, though.

I was thinking about all that while we drove to the store and busy getting the twenty out of her wallet when she slowed down to a crawl at the intersection of Main Street and First—right outside the hospital—and mumbled, "What in the world!" Which made me look up just in time to see about five buses parked at the entrance, and lines of people spilling out the doors.

"Holy crud, Em—maybe our hospital's been centered, too, and they're transferring in a bunch of patients from other places."

"They don't look like sick people." She pushed the visor up and leaned over the steering wheel like it would get her a closer look. "And there's so many of them." She glanced in the rearview mirror to see if she could back up but there was already traffic behind us.

"Hey, look—there's two buses over at the hotel, too." I rolled my window down and stuck my head out. "All kinds of people with suitcases. Maybe the mayor and everybody will explain it at the town meeting, tonight."

"They'll explain, all right." She sighed and shook her head. "Don't know if it'll be the truth, though. Rand Hamilton thinks they're lying to us."

"Randall Hamilton?"

She laughed, and while we were waiting for the light, redid the clip holding her long brown hair all twisted on top of her head. "Nobody calls him that. Except teachers, maybe."

"He works at the Fun Park, too?"

"Yeah, in the Gorilla Lady exhibit."

"Exhibit—I thought you said it was a show."

"Show, exhibit, whatever. You'll see, tomorrow. Where did you hear about him?"

"I heard he has the mumps."

"What?"

"Might be just a rumor, though. Light's green."

We went on past and I thought I should maybe change the subject before she started asking me questions. Randall Hamilton was one of the high school kids Jones and I got homework assignments for, today. I guess he wasn't exactly hanging around the basement over at the orphanage, either. Which made me wonder how in the world you were supposed to help people who didn't cooperate with what you were doing to help them.

I guess I never realized there would be so many people against us for doing the right thing. Taking care of the whole bunch was turning out to be a lot harder than I thought it would. And where did all these other people come from? If they really had plans of shutting down the town, why were so many new ones moving in?

"Did you notice anything weird about those people, Em?"



“Yeah.” She pulled into the Helms parking lot half a block away. “They were all men. But maybe they’re transporting workers ahead of their families so they can find places for them to stay first. Where’d you hear Rand had the mumps?”

Even though I’d been trying half my life to get my family to stop thinking I was still a little kid, I gotta admit there are times when making a scene is the only thing that will work for me. And this was one of those times. Because if I didn’t do something quick, it wasn’t going to take more than another couple questions and I’d be spilling the beans to Emily about everything. Not to mention facing the end of the world is hard enough without having at least someone in your family to lean on.

“Forget the mumps, Emmy—what difference does it make? Can’t you see we got an invasion going on here? They’re just calling it something different, that’s all. This is way serious—I’m telling you—those were not ordinary men back there!”

“William, what in the world are you saying? Of course they were ordinary men. And don’t tell me they’re aliens. Or zombies, either, because I don’t believe in any of that stuff.”

“They’re enemy aliens, if you ask me.”

“They’re probably just men from other towns, like General Philby said. We’ve been declared a temporary transit center and this must be what it means. They’re ordinary family people like all of us. Probably just on their way to settle into new jobs somewhere else.” She opened the center console and took out two posters about the Fun Park. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Ok. But if I happen to suddenly disappear sometime in the near future, don't come looking for me, Em. Better to save yourself and the rest of the family.”

“Oh, for goodness sake—now, that's enough, Will—you're giving me the creeps!”

“Well, I'm feeling pretty creepy myself, right now. On account of I don't want to be brainwashed and rehabilitated by enemy aliens! What if they turn me against my own family?”

“Not one more word!”

That was her I've-had-just-about-enough tone, so I quit. But I could tell just by looking she was upset about all this, too. She just wasn't saying so. Trying not to scare me back, probably.

But at least she wasn't asking any more questions about Randall Hamilton.

## Chapter Thirteen

### MIZ BOONE WAKES UP

*“It would be difficult to go and stay there  
without being noticed at once.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

When we got to the Fun Park, after school the next day, the first thing I noticed was that Miz Boone was not her usual loud self. Most of the time you could tell exactly where she was just by all the yelling. So, while Looney and I got the ticket box ready (all the food and attractions were bought with tickets once you got inside the park), and brought the first four go-carts up to the starting line to get ready for drivers, Boone went to see what was up.

He was gone a long time.

In fact, it wasn't until four o'clock—when we were officially supposed to open—that the two of them finally walked out of the office to open up the gates. By that time, practically the whole town was lined up out there. We had a pack of kids wanting to drive go-carts right off, on account of the place already had a lot of fans from when it used to be open. The only reason they hadn't been coming was because the prices were too high after

money got so tight in Ashbury.

So, between four o'clock and five-thirty (when we shut down open-to-the-public driving), all three of us were hopping just trying to keep everything operational. Each ticket was good for a ten-minute spin, and most of the kids headed to the back of the line, afterward, and started over. We had two breakdowns, and had to push the carts and drivers off to the garage, while Looney stood in front of the rest of the line with two checkered flags—held up high—to keep everyone stopped until we cleared the track.

I never realized it took so much work just to give kids a fun time. Up till then, I was always thinking about myself. Five-thirty to six was our scheduled dinner break. When that came around we gave Looney a pile of tickets and sent him off to bring back pizza and sodas so Boone and I could talk in private. We had set up a break area in the back corner of the garage, with a table made out of a big wooden spool that used to hold heavy-gauge telephone wire, and a few black plastic crates around it for chairs.

Boone sank down onto one, took his hat off, and dropped it on the table.

“So, what's up?” I asked, on account of he was dead quiet all of a sudden.

“Mom really does believe us, now.” He sighed. “But she thinks it's too late to do anything about it.”

“Are you kidding me?” I couldn't see how he could just sit there staring off into space when I felt like I just heard the chink before somebody threw a grenade. “How can it be too late when the engineers haven't even showed up, yet? We've gotta get everybody up to Padre Gordo,

then—before they get here! You hear me, Boone? We gotta get out of here!”

He didn't answer.

“What's your dad say about it?”

“She hasn't heard anything from him in three weeks. Doesn't even know where he is.” He put his head in his hands for a minute and I knew he was trying to get a grip.

“Holy crud, Boone! A couple days, ago you said he was calling every few days. What was all that stuff about you couldn't talk anything serious to him because the line wasn't secure?”

“That's how it was. Mom let me think he was calling after I was in bed because of the time change over there. She didn't want me to worry.”

For a minute, I couldn't say anything, either. Not one single thought popped into my mind except —we have HAD it—going around in my brain over and over, again. In the background, I could hear a bunch of little kids hollering and laughing while they dove in and swam through all the colored balls over at the castle.

Then it got drowned out by a loud bell that sounded like a ride starting up, and a man's voice booming, “One more prisoner for the House of Mirrors!” along with a crazy sounding laugh at the end. That thing went off every time somebody fell into the trap door and slid out through a long tunnel. If it hadn't been so noisy from all the motors here on the track, it would have got annoying.

“Man, I'm sorry, Boone. That really stinks. But look how crazy it is around here—it's probably like this everywhere. Right? Could be just a glitch in the communication system why you haven't heard

anything.”

“Yeah, that's what Mom says. But she only gets like this if she's really worried.”

“What does she mean by too late, though? Padre Gordo would be a lot safer than here. There's plenty of food up there, too. How could it be too late for surviving?”

“Something she heard at the post office, today. How the Army's gonna take over the food shipments from now on, so they can ration everything out. Won't be able to get food without a number, because too many people are hoarding it.”

“Maybe that's just a rumor. You know, one of those conspiracy things.” I picked a wrench up off the tool bench and then put it down, again.

“It wasn't a rumor. She saw one of the workers stacking cards and she told her right out what they were. Said they were getting ready for food registration on Monday.”

“Sheesh. No wonder I couldn't buy milk at the store, yesterday. But isn't that just one more reason to get outta here? Who cares whether we come, or go? They're going to shut down the town.”

“It isn't just our town, that's being centered. It's all of them. They want to keep track of everybody. With the numbers. Gonna start a curfew, too. We all have to be off the streets by ten. Adults, kids...”

He got quiet, again for a minute, and I could tell he was picturing it all. “Everybody. That shocked her awake, all right. Before, she was just waiting for Dad to come home and take care of everything. But she'll think of something, now. She always does. We're gonna talk

more about it after we close, tonight, since we ran out of time. Oh, yeah, and we gotta go on the fake scout trip.”

“What? You gotta be kidding me!”

“On account of she has something she needs us to do up there before the new curfew rules start Sunday night. She's gotta stay and run things around here, like nothing's changed, but she says kids are still invisible because they won't be getting numbers. Not yet, anyway. So, she's counting on us.”

“What do we have to do?” I was starting to feel like last summer when Grampy wanted to do something crazy and we couldn't see any way out of it.

“I don't know, yet. But you better stay over tonight, 'cause she wants to talk to both of us. Besides, we gotta be down at the hospital at six in the morning.”

“Who's gonna run the race track while we're gone?” It was a lame question but I was so numb it was all I could think of. I mean, you hope and pray for an adult to wake up—and when one finally does—they turn you over to the enemy.

“Your sister and Rand Hamilton will run it while we're gone. In the meantime, we gotta take Looney up to Padre Gordo, too, so it'll look more like a real scout trip.”

“I thought your mom was gonna make Miz Lucinda an offer she couldn't refuse. This looks like you and me are it!”

“It's not like that, Hud. She is going to make an offer. It's just you and me are the ones that have to make it.”

“Oh, holy crud, Boone! That old freight train isn't gonna listen to us! She's gonna make us tell everything we know—that's what she's gonna!”

“Not if we do what Mom tells us! You gotta trust her, Hud, she's got a sixth sense about this stuff. Now, listen. This is how she said it has to go down. See, as soon as we—”

“Are we gonna lead that woman straight up to Padre Gordo, or aren't we?”

“She's been there before, Hudson. She's one of the family. Remember? She's a city cousin, all right, but she's still one of us.”

“You mean, she's been to the stronghold?” I started to pace because I couldn't stand still anymore just thinking about that.

“Listen.” His voice got totally calm and controlled all of a sudden. Like the time he made the decision to run away from the county people with Grampy, whether I went with them, or not. “Nobody's been to the stronghold but you and me. Nobody. Even Mom doesn't know where it is. So, you better tell me, right now, if you're—”

“Don't you ask me if I'm in, or out, Boone! Hear me? Or—honest to crud—I will knock you on your—”

A shadow passed in front of the open garage door and I almost choked trying to shut up. Which made me wonder if I hadn't been letting myself go too much (just pretending), and was running dangerous low on self-control, again. Now, I was so upset I had to turn toward the wall for a few seconds to get a grip on myself. Good thing it was just Looney back, already, busting through the work area with his arms loaded down with a couple sacks and a cardboard drink tray. So fast, he tripped before he even got to the table. The drinks had lids on and didn't spill, but a bag of popcorn skittered all over the place.



“Man, Looney—what's the big hurry?” Boone got up and picked the pizza bag off the cement floor before it got stepped on.

“There's a line a mile long over at the gorilla-lady ride, guys!” He reached under the table for one of the drinks that rolled away before he stood up. “If we don't eat in line we won't get in on the first one. It'll be too late.”

I took my hat off and ran a hand through my hair, still trying to cool down to normal.

“Come on! Or we won't get to go before the races!”

“Well, let's go then.” Boone put his hat back on. “Everybody grab something and we'll get outta here. Gotta see if whatever Mom paid for a gorilla-lady was worth it.”

I picked up a soda and followed them.

“Probably just a lady with too much hair on her face,” Looney guessed. “Or a bald lady gorilla.”

Boone didn't answer for a minute (picturing it, probably), then busted out with his hyena laugh. After that, he waited till I caught up with him and punched me in the arm. “Don't worry. We already know we can outrun her.”

I knew he was talking about Miz Lucinda but Looney stopped in his tracks when he heard that and turned around with a worried expression. “She's not real, right? There's no such thing as a gorilla-lady...right, guys?”

It was only about five minutes after we got in line, Mr. Pendergast, who used to be a radio announcer, started taking tickets and letting people into the tent. Saying stuff like, “Step right up, ladies and gents, for a look at one of the rarest sites on earth! The gorilla woman

was captured in one of the wildest jungles in Africa. Brought here for scientific study. In a few short weeks she'll be headed home, again. So, hurry! Hurry! Hurry! Bring your friends! Bring your family! You'll never see anything like this, again!"

All at the same time he was taking people's tickets as they passed by to crowd into the tent. Just before we got up there, he stopped a kid smaller than us, who looked about ten years old, and said, "Not you, sonny..." and waved him out of the line. "You'll have to be a few inches taller before you get to come in. Maybe next year." Then he motioned to us, "Hurry it up, now—show's about to start."

By the time we got in, the tent was so crowded we could barely fit inside. But right then the guy came in behind us and herded us toward the front, till we were pressed up against a stage about three feet high, with a heavy red curtain in front of it. "Everybody squeeze in tight, now. All you shorter ones come up front so you can see."

It was dark in there, except for a single light at the top of the tent. People were crowded so close together by that time, everyone's shoulders were touching and we could feel all the people behind us. Not to mention we were gonna have to crane our necks to look up at the stage. Looney sounded sort of panicked when he said, "We're in a bad spot! I don't like it, guys—we're in a bad spot!"

"Shh! Go on out if you're scared," Boone told him. "It's a fun park—how bad could it be?"

"I can't! There's too many people in the way!"

All of a sudden the light went out and it was totally

black. Which I don't mind saying made me feel too hemmed in, myself, and I couldn't help looking toward the bottom of the tent at the end of the stage to see if I could maybe see any light creeping in. But about that time, there was the sound of the curtain opening up, and the next thing I knew, we were looking into a huge cage with iron bars, that had a woman standing inside it.

There were a couple of bright lights pointing at her, and she was dressed in a bathing suit that looked like it was made out of leopard skin. She was just standing there with her head hanging down. You couldn't see her face, on account of she had curly black hair that went down about to her waist, making a sort of curtain in front of it. For a few seconds she just stood there without moving. It was hot and stuffy in there with so many people but they were all dead quiet. Watching.

Then she started breathing heavy. And while I was watching her shoulders start to move up and down with every breath—I don't know, but—I actually thought I could see hair start showing up all over her body. Sort of slow at first, and—man, I couldn't believe my eyes. I mean, it looked like she was actually turning into a gorilla. Pretty soon, you couldn't even see her swimsuit and the hair was getting so thick you could hardly tell it was a woman any more.

All of a sudden she gave out with a loud moan (like she was startled awake), and it made me jump. I couldn't help it. About that time, Looney started edging toward the entrance, pushing and squeezing, and stepping on people's feet to get to the door. But Boone and I were rooted to the spot. We couldn't take our eyes off her. Then, she raised her head, real slow, and—I'm telling

you—it was a gorilla. Looking right at us. No kidding. Like it just woke up.

For a few seconds it looked around, like it was trying to figure out where it was. Then it shuffled up to the bars—kind of groggy-like—grabbed hold, and growled deep in its throat when it couldn't get out. About that time, I tried backing up (because—man—that thing was only about two feet away from me and it was way too close for comfort) but I stepped on the foot of whoever was behind me and couldn't go any further. That's when the gorilla roared really loud, like some enraged monster. It started shaking those bars as hard as it could, until—all of a sudden—the front of the cage popped off.

After that, the whole place came unglued.

People hollered and started booking for the door. I'm ashamed to say Boone and I weren't far behind, except the pile up at the entrance was impossible to get around. The gorilla threw the piece of broken cage aside, and looked about to jump off the stage any minute. That's when the bottom of the tent raised up next to us and Looney stuck his head under.

“This way, guys! Hurry!” Then he screamed like one of my sisters when he saw the gorilla was loose, and disappeared again. I headed for the spot and was almost out when I heard a heavy thud behind me and knew that thing was down. I scrambled out as fast as I could. But it didn't take more than a few feet before I started to feel stupid. On account of everything looked perfectly normal out there. I was on the backside of the tent, next to the fence near the parking lot, and could just see the lines at the corner of the kid castle. Nobody was even looking this way.

“Hey, Boone, can you believe that? Man, I thought we were gonna get killed before—”

But when I looked back, he wasn't behind me.

## Chapter Fourteen

### DESPERATE MEASURES

*"It is only human to hate to be outwitted by  
one more clever than yourself."*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

By the time I ran back and stuck my head under the edge of the tent, (in case Boone was getting himself mauled by a gorilla), there were only three people left in there and they were all laughing. Jefferson Boone Junior was one of them. The other one was a guy in a gorilla suit—without the head part—but I figured that had to be Randal Hamilton. I didn't have to guess who the gorilla lady was, because it was Emily. Without all that wild hair hanging over her face and the overhead light on, it was plain as day.

I guess I should have been embarrassed crawling in under the tent-edge but I didn't much care because I felt cheated somehow. Totally ticked with every last one of them. I was about to punch Boone in the arm (I owed him one, anyway) until he told Rand, "Man, you almost gave me a heart attack grabbing me like that!"

"Yeah, well you almost gave me a black eye," Rand answered. "Would have if I didn't have the mask on."

"That's not how it was supposed to go," Emily reminded him. "No grabbing the customers. Remember?"

We'll probably catch it from Mrs. Boone, now, because you really could give someone a heart attack that way."

"Boone's not a customer—his mom's the original gorilla lady. I figured he'd know we were just putting on an act."

"I never even heard of the gorilla lady. Must have been from her old circus days."

"Well, you got me back." He touched a red blotch under his eye with the back of his hand. He was holding the gorilla head under his other arm like a football helmet, and his blonde hair was damp and curling up all around the edges. Must have been hot in that suit.

"There you are, Will!" Emmy looked at me when I walked up to them. "How'd you get in here? Mr. Pendergast is supposed to be making sure nobody comes back in."

"There's always more than one way into a place," I mumbled, not feeling so bad about Boone, on account of it looked like he hadn't known any more than me about the trick. Not to mention he had a way good reason for not making it out. That Hamilton guy was about a foot taller than him, and had enough muscles to make me figure he was probably on the wrestling team.

"Well..." She pushed the long curls of the black wig behind her shoulders and fanned her face with a folded up flyer. "What did you think?"

"I think it scared the daylights out of me. And forty-six other people besides. Lucky someone didn't get killed."

"Maybe we should tone it down next time, Rand. Really."

"Yeah," Boone added, "Mom could use more than

one day of business before we get sued,”

“Sued—” a familiar voice shouted from the doorway as the flap over the entrance lifted just enough to let her inside. “Did somebody get knocked over or trampled on?”

“Only a couple half-pint employees,” Rand laughed. “And one punched me.”

“You're not being too hard on the staff, are you, Jeffie?” Miz Boone put an arm around Boone's neck and kissed him on the cheek. “Everybody seems to be in pretty good spirits out there, so I think we're OK.”

She had her Gypsy fortune teller costume on, and her curly red hair was sticking out from under a knotted blue bandanna, with big dangly earrings hanging down from underneath. Maybe she always wanted to be in the movies, or something. I don't know. Today she was wearing a skirt made out of the same stuff as jeans, and leather boots with shiny buckles. You could tell she was the head of the show no matter where she went around here. She took a cell phone out of her pocket and flipped open the cover. “Ten minutes before the first race. Let's go, boys!” Then she turned back toward the entrance and hollered, “Mr. Pendergast!” before she even got outside. “Are you ready to emcee the races?”

“Madam, I was born ready.” Except he sounded awful tired, if you ask me. Especially since after that he said, “Just point me in the right direction.”

“Here's the notes. And don't forget your glasses this time!”

The races weren't the kind of thing most people were expecting. I gotta hand it to Miz Boone for that, on account of she can turn anything into a show no matter



what she has to work with. I mean, how many people can get too excited over a couple of broken-down go carts—that could barely hit twenty when they were floored—except maybe a few kids who would have to drag their parents along just to get there. But that's another thing Miz Boone was good at.

This first race was free because it was opening day. After that, it was gonna cost ten tickets just to watch. That race every night would be how we closed down the park. The contenders were the top two kids who had the fastest times during the free drives (that Boone and I had to keep track of), and the grand prize was a hundred tickets. Which was probably the reason most of the town showed up that day. With money so hard to get for fun stuff, a hundred tickets could mean a lot of fun for kids who didn't get allowances anymore.

What nobody knew yet, was the go-carts for the race had stoppers on the gas peddles that only let them go down halfway, and we had all kinds of obstacles and hazards lined up for keeping them from getting to the finish line. Everything from sprinklers coming on to tires popping off. There were a couple of clowns trying to hold things up, too, so the winner would really have to earn those tickets. It turned out to be so much fun I almost forgot about having to face Miz Lucinda the next day.

I got a jolt of a reminder, though, when I caught a glimpse of her sitting up in the top row of the bleachers with the rest of her family (man, there were a lot of them), watching the races. My folks and my sisters were there, too. Even my oldest sister Meg, who drove down from Tucson, where she was going to college. I have to say it was the last time to see everybody so happy, on account

of nothing—and I mean NOTHING—was the same after that day.

Starting with the fake scout trip.

By the time we headed out to Padre Gordo, at about quarter after six the next morning, there were five of us kids squeezed into Miz Lucinda's black SUV. Or, should I say three. The two kids in the front seat were her nephews. Maxwell and Wallace Lee. Who I figured to be around eleven and fourteen. Because I didn't recognize either one of them from Ashbury Middle School. It was a totally quiet trip, on account of I don't think any of us wanted to be there. Including Miz Lucinda.

So, we rode the whole two hours either sleeping or staring out the window, and I couldn't help noticing how deserted the highway was compared to last summer when Miz Boone drove us there. Boone conked out right away. He could sleep anywhere and we stayed up way late talking to his mom the night before. Me, I was too nervous about what we had to do when we got there. And I don't mind saying the plan Miz Boone cooked up for us was a lot worse in real life than anything I was worrying about before I heard it. Seriously.

We pulled off the highway at the usual spot, and Miz Lucinda started plowing over the dessert along a dirt road you would have to know was there to even recognize. The way she wound in and out of the saguaros and between the flat, red-rock mesas, it was obvious she knew where she was going. At least till we got to Grampy's old boxcar house. We stopped there for a minute, but she left the engine running and we just sat looking. Her and I were the only ones awake.

“Just look what a mess that place is in!” she

muttered more to herself than me. "Door hanging wide open... who knows what kind of varmints been in there all this time? I'm probably the last person tried to at least put a little order to it. Obvious none of you ever came back." Then she looked at me in the rearview mirror. "Which way from here?"

"Well..." I glanced over at Boone but once he's out it takes more than a nudge to wake him up, again. "There's a couple different ones."

"The shortest one, mister. I don't want to be traipsing around on that mountain after dark. How far can I get with the car?"

"Not much past the swamp hole in this thing." I figured if I was agreeable on the stuff that didn't matter it would go a lot farther toward holding off her temper until we did what we had to. "After that we'll have to walk it."

"I thought you had a four wheeler, or something around here. What's in that shed over there?"

"A bunch of junk is all. There's a Rhino we could all probably pile onto but it's up in Padre Gordo, already. We can ride it back, though. That'll cut off some time."

She didn't answer. Just put the car in gear and started backing out onto the road, again.

"You know what this reminds me of?" she asked a couple minutes later.

I didn't say anything, on account of I had plenty enough memories of my own to think about.

"You two and that old man trying to trick me into thinking the swamp hole had gone pure. Know what one of those bottles you gave me tested out as? Tap water, that's what. Mmm-mmm!" she shook her head and nailed

me in the rear view mirror, again. "With traces of your blood type in it."

"Miz Lucinda, you know I tried to tell you about that. Except you were in such an all-fired hurry, you wouldn't listen! That was the water bottle I drank out of when I nearly bit my tongue in half. I was gonna dump it out and fill it with the swamp water but you didn't give me a chance!"

"Other one was swamp water—and it was toxic. Just like I thought." She shook her head, again. "Made me feel like a fool back at the hospital! I sure don't know how Uncle Jack pulled a live fish out of that hole, though. Wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. So... maybe it is purifying itself somehow."

I jabbed Boone with my elbow and he jumped awake. Then he shot a quick look out the window. "Where are we?"

"Halfway to the swamp hole!" I whispered.

"Junior?" Now she was looking at Boone in the mirror. "I'll tell you, right now, I'm not gonna put up with any of your foolishness, today. I brought along a map and a compass to check up on you with. We're all gonna stick together. Hear me?"

He didn't answer.

"I'm warning you, boy. First banana out of the bunch is gonna get peeled!"

## Chapter Fifteen

### SKIRMISHERS

*“This force was said to have most marvelous powers of marching and endurance.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Everybody was awake except for Looney when we got to the swamp hole. I looked at the gnarly little juniper tree Grampy sat under when we were here, last time, and got a lump in my throat thinking about him. Funny how that stuff hits you when you least expect it. I could tell the place was having a bad effect on Boone, too. Especially after the news he heard about his dad the day before.

So, trying to mentally change the subject, I leaned over the back seat to where Looney was sleeping next to the ice chest Miz Lucinda brought, and hoped to heaven she wasn't gonna make us carry that thing all the way up the mountain. “Hey, Looney. Wake up, man. We're here.”

He sat up slow, and peeked out the back window. Looney looked the same no matter what time of day it was, on account of all the boys at the home had a buzz haircut, except for an inch longer in the front. He reached for his hat and put it on.

“Everybody out.” Miz Lucinda yanked the the

earphones out of Maxwell's ear and hollered, "I said, everybody out!"

Wallace Lee rolled out first, then Maxwell right after. Neither one of them had said one word or even looked at us since we started. Maybe they blamed us for having to get up so early. Our two groups clustered at opposite ends of the car like boxers going to their corner of the ring, and we all wasted a few minutes just fussing with our backpacks and stretching our legs. The dessert was chilly this early in the morning, and the two nephews bounced back and forth on their feet, on account of they were wearing gym shorts that hung down past their knees, and sleeveless T-shirts.

Our group looked like the Three Race-keteers with our jeans and Boone's Family Fun Park T-shirts on. We even had new ball caps with checkered flag patches. Part of the job was having to agree to be a walking advertisement for the place when you were out and about.

Boone bent down to tie his shoe and whispered, "We gotta wear her out on the first two miles. Then I'll make my pitch."

"Got it," I answered back. "Looney, you start in, anytime, and I'll see how long I can skip out for."

"You boys quit messing around back there and get this show on the road!" Miz Lucinda hollered across the top of the car at us and plopped a safari hat onto her head with a long green scarf tied around the brim. Then she pulled a walking stick out from behind the front seat before she closed and locked the door.

Oh, holy crud.

"Junior? You lead the way and the rest of us will

follow.”

“Hey, what about the first aid?” Looney plowed up next to her and shook her shoulder like she wasn’t listening. “Anybody want to pretend they got a broken leg? I brought my own first aid box.”

“You just keep your hands to yourself, Lewis Martin. We got a long way to go, first.”

“Lewis Martin?” Boone punched Looney in the arm as he passed them up. “First time I heard your real name and I’ve known you half my life.”

Me, I just hung out at the car and let everybody get way ahead. They were halfway up the first rock hill before anybody noticed.

“William Hudson—what are you doing back there!” Miz Lucinda bawled out so loud it threw an echo off the nearest mesa.

“Just needed a little privacy before we got started, Miz Lucinda.”

“Well, ask permission, next time!”

“You gotta be kidding me!”

“Get yourself up here, or I’ll show you how much I’m kidding!” Her huge green backpack matched her green uniform dress so good it made her look like a giant sea turtle walking around on its back two flippers. She pulled a map out of one of the side pockets and studied it while everybody waited for me to catch up. “According to this map, the trail takes off from the other side of the swamp hole down there, Junior—no trail at all on this hill!”

“You want to take the shortest or the easiest?” Boone walked over and ran a finger along some spot where she was looking. “This is a shortcut that takes an

hour off that trail and catches up with it on the back side. It's rugged, though. If you need to rest every fifteen minutes I guess it wouldn't make much difference which one we took."

"Don't you worry about me. Except for the day's paperwork..." She didn't bother folding the map back up, just stuffed it into the pocket like scrunching something up to throw away. "I'm on my feet all day long. So, let's go."

Looney shook her shoulder, again. "Hey—if we make a blanket stretcher and carry somebody in it, will that count? I know how to do that! Tells how right here in this—" He pulled a paperback copy of an old Boy Scout Handbook I loaned him out of his back pocket and waved it at her.

"What did I tell you, Lewis? Now, get that thing out of my face! Not doing any scout stuff till we get to the town. So, pipe down."

"There's a town way out here?" He turned around and looked at me as I came up behind. "Who lives in it?"

"Nobody. It's a ghost town," I told him. For a minute he just stood there, so I walked around him to follow the others.

"But there's no such thing as ghosts." He hurried to catch up. "Right, Hud?"

"Ask Boone. He was born there." Then I whispered, "Get back to your post!"

The two nephews were behind Boone, moving with an extra spring in each step on account of they had their earphones back on and were probably listening to music. Wallace Lee was about a foot taller than Maxwell, but they both looked to be good at sports. Every once in a



while, Maxwell would bend down, pick up a rock, then pitch it over the side to see how far he could throw. I passed them up without saying anything, then jogged past Boone, too, so I'd be first at the top of the hill.

Then I waited just over the rise for him to catch up with me. I pulled my hat off, ran a hand through my hair, then put it on backwards, and was looking out over the dried up river bed we had to go along before I heard him coming. "Hey, Boone, what do you think? How about we—"

When I turned around, it wasn't him.

Wallace Lee smiled when he passed me up (like he knew something, I didn't), and the next person over was Boone, turning his hat around straight instead of backwards. "He's sticking to us like glue," he whispered. "So, let's widen our gap and see how long it takes for him to catch on." Then he skittered and slid down to the bottom, passing up Wallace Lee without a pause, and took off for the river bed.

I took off, too, but practically killed myself slipping on a steep spot and ended up on my butt halfway down.

"AUNT—LUCINDA—SAYS—SLOW—DOWN!" Maxwell called from the top of the hill, in a voice that sounded like he had a bull frog stuck in his throat. "WAIT! UP!"

I didn't wait. I headed down the river bed (instead of up) to where I knew Boone would be hiding, and stood there looking around for a minute.

"He's just around the bend," I heard him say from behind a clump of sagebrush a few feet away. "Book right on past him before he gets a good look at you and we'll meet up at the camp spot. OK—go!"

I turned my hat around straight, again (like Boone's), and took off. Once I got past the bend I didn't see Wallace Lee anywhere but I didn't care. Instead, I headed up the riverbed, zig-zagging around boulders and clumps of prickly cactus like I was running the five hundred. Our camp spot from last year was about a mile and a half away on the south bank and I was making a bee-line for it.

Man, it was good to be out there, again. So good I felt like I could run all the way to Padre Gordo. But we had a plan to work out. And it all depended on whether or not Boone could make Miz Lucinda an offer she couldn't refuse. I hoped so. Because our Plan B for this gig was way worse than the original. If we failed, we would never get a chance to spy on the engineers. Our days of freedom would be seriously over.

About five minutes later I heard Wallace Lee moving up behind me. But running was my strong point, so, I just kicked up my speed and put more distance between us. Being familiar with the territory and knowing where I was going gave me the edge even if he was faster than me. But he wasn't. That's another thing hard work will do for you. A good gym session doesn't hold a candle to hard work for building up endurance. And Boone and I had been working our tails off ever since last summer.

When I got to the campsite, I sat down for a minute, and while I was rummaging around for one of my water bottles I found my rabbit snare. So, I decided to set it up for when we came back this way. This far away from cities the rabbit population was still booming. It only took a few minutes since I put it in the same spot as last

summer. That's why I was back taking a rest and drinking my water by the time Wallace Lee got there.

He was too winded to talk and just sank down beside me on the big flat rock I was sitting on. His black hair was cut shorter than Looney's, and it was glistening with sweat. He had some running down the sides of his face, too, and his ear phones were dangling out of his pocket instead of plugged into his ears anymore. After a few seconds he pulled his red backpack off and dug around in it till he came up with a bottle of Gatorade.

It wasn't until it was half gone before he said anything. Then it was only, "You get free tickets for working there?"

"Nope."

"Bummer."

"Pay isn't too great, either."

"Least you got a job, though."

"Could be Miz Boone might take on a couple more diggers for the miniature golf course, if you're looking for one." I picked up a short stick and started popping out the little rocks that were stuck in the treads of my shoes.

"What's she pay for that?"

"Twenty-five cents an hour. Fifty if you take it in tickets."

He put the cap back on his Gatorade and stuck it in his backpack, again. "I might do it for the tickets."

"There's a lot of kids that'll do it for the twenty-five. So, you better jump on it if you're thinking. They got the course half dug out, already."

We were quiet again for a while. Then he said, "I thought you was Boone till just now when I saw you sitting here."

“Wondered why you were tailing me.”

“Now, we're both in trouble.”

“Man, I hope not. Because I am not gonna hang around if she starts swinging that stick!”

He laughed. Probably because I am not good at hiding my feelings when it comes to Miz Lucinda.

“Seriously,” I told him.

“Only one way to get on the good side of her.” He laughed at me, again.

I couldn't resist any inside advice on how to get around her so I asked, “What is it?”

“You gotta be good, man. Then if you want to get on her good side permanent, you have to help her out with things. Before she asks you. After that she isn't so bad. Took the whole family to the fun park last night. There's a pack of us, too.”

“Well...” I sighed, and felt seriously tired all of a sudden. “I been stuck to her bad side so long, I'll probably be in college before she lets me change over. Just saying.”

“Most of the colleges gonna shut down after Christmas, anyway.”

“What?”

“Some are, already. My cousin Denny...” He picked up the bottom of his shirt and wiped the sweat off his face. “His engineering school back east, closed down. They shuffled those students into work centers all over the country. Now, we can't find him anywhere.”

“You mean she doesn't even know where he is?”

“Don't know which of those center places he ended up in. Cell phone just goes to voicemail when she tries to call him. And he used to call home every Sunday.”

“Man, that stinks.” I thought of my sister Meg, getting ready to head back to the university in Tucson tomorrow, and all of a sudden it felt like the bottom dropped out of my stomach. My parents would go berserk if she disappeared out of state somewhere. We all would.

“Now, she wants to send one of my uncles out looking for him. But that could take weeks with all this mess going on everywhere. And way more money than Aunt Lucinda's got laying around.” He shook his head. “She never would have come up with this crazy idea of hers, otherwise. ”

“What crazy idea?” I asked.

## Chapter Sixteen

### TRAPPED

*"We were practically a pair of prisoners."*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

For a while he didn't answer. But then he looked over—like he suddenly decided something—and said, "Thanks for telling me about that job even though we're not on the same side."

"Not on the same side—what are you talking about? You're one of the cousins, aren't you? If you're in, you're in. You know what Grampy says about that."

"I never knew him. Only heard stories about him. Everybody on our side thought he was crazy."

"Man, that's too bad, Wallace Lee. You missed out on a lot of good stuff not knowing Grampy. He was a genuine hero, too. Don't see many of them around any more. Anyway, he said you have to help anybody that's with you at the time of a crisis. And after what you just told me..." I stood up to fill my pockets with small rocks for if we ran into any snakes. "Doesn't take a whole lot of brains to know we're in the middle of a big one."

"So, you told me about that job just because you and me happened to be sitting here?"

"Sure, why not? Times get hard we all gotta stick together. Especially when most of the adults in town

would rather not believe what's happening than do something about it.”

He went quiet again and I figured we were done talking. So, I wandered out into the middle of the riverbed to see if I could spot the others. But there was no sign of them, yet. Then I went behind him, up along the side of the riverbank, looking around for our old fire pit to see if any of it was still there.

“Aunt Lucinda is fixing to lock Boone up somewhere in the ghost town today if he doesn't tell her where the stronghold is.” He said it so quiet I barely heard him. “That's why Maxwell and me aren't supposed to let him out of our sight. Case he takes a notion to run off and hide, again.”

It was enough to freeze me on the spot and send a cold chill up my spine. I turned back to him. “You gotta be kidding me! His parents would go ballistic! Not to mention kidnapping is against the law around here. She'd ruin any chance of getting help from them, too. You hear me, Wallace Lee? What's she thinking? I never saw so many people go insane at one time in my whole life!”

“Me, either. My mom's about good for nothing lately, too.”

“Then you got a decision to make and you better make it quick.”

“What's to decide, man? I'm just one kid.”

“Kids can do a lot if they stick together. Seriously. You could help us if you wanted to.”

“I'll think about it.”

“Well, don't take too long. Doing nothing is just as bad as being on the wrong side.” He didn't answer and I headed out to the river bed, again. “I'm gonna walk back

and see if I can find everybody.”

I ran into them about ten minutes later. Boone was still way in the lead, and Miz Lucinda was dragging, with the other two following alongside her. Looney didn't look thrashed at all. But then he spent most of every day just walking back and forth across town. Until he started working at the track, anyway.

“I thought I told you to slow down, William Hudson!” Miz Lucinda hollered at me while they were still a long ways back, then mopped her face with the end of the green scarf tied around her safari hat. “When I said I'm not putting up with any foolishness today, I meant it!”

“Hey, Boone—” I whispered when we got close enough. “We gotta go straight to Plan B, man! Wallace Lee said she's fixing to lock you up somewhere in Padre Gordo till you tell her where the stronghold is.”

He stopped like he just ran into a wall. “Mom would be headed out here in two seconds flat if she did that. Soon as we went missing.”

“Well, she'd have to know where to come looking after she got here. And a lot can happen in one day. I say we go to Plan B.”

“I will if she doesn't go for the offer. But I know one thing. I am not gonna be the person locked up in Padre Gordo if that old witch doesn't go for it!”

Boone wasn't his Grampy's boy for nothing. The old man taught him every trick and trail he knew around here. But there was no denying the fact Miz Lucinda was directly descended from the original Mad Maude, herself, who outsmarted the entire town of Ashbury back in the early days. Which wasn't a guarantee she ended up with the same kind of smarts. But combined with the



sheer size and weight of her, I figured she'd have the jump on us even if she only ended up with half.

"Are you gonna wait till we get there, then?"

"No way. I'll take her twice around the mountain and wear the tar out of her before I'd lead her straight to it. She wants to get there she'll have to use that old map of hers and find it by herself."

"But you said she was there once, already."

"That was a long time, ago. When the train was running and there were still a lot of us living up there. Way before Grandma died. Grampy tore so many of those old tracks up for the mines since then, they don't even lead there anymore."

"Well..." We started walking, again, to keep out of ear shot. "Even if she forgot where it was she's got the map and compass. That's enough to get her there sooner or later."

"Doesn't tell her where the stronghold is though. She could look the rest of her life and never find it. Besides, by that time you and me will be long gone."

"Well, I sure hope so." I took a deep breath and blew it out slow, just trying to calm my nerves. "You give her the pitch and I'll try to come up with some kind of Plan C. In case Plan B doesn't take. Know what I mean? Meanwhile, I'm gonna go check my rabbit trap."

"You set up a snare, already?"

"Wallace Lee wasn't as fast a runner as I thought he was."

While Miz Lucinda dropped down onto the flat rock next to Wallace Lee and declared a fifteen minute break for everyone, I headed off to see if I had a rabbit in my snare, yet. No such luck. But Looney followed me and

got interested in how it worked. He was starting to act like I was the brain of the century, so I thought I better tell him it wasn't my idea. Just one I picked up from the Scout Manual.

Then he said it wasn't in there because he looked at every picture last night and would have remembered. So, I figured I better tell him about the real Scout Manual. The one that came out in 1911. The one with stuff in it they don't let kids do anymore.

But about the time I was saying I'd get him a copy if he didn't brag it around too much, Boone and Miz Lucinda started arguing and I had a feeling I better get back and see what was going on. Maxwell and Wallace Lee were off down the riverbed somewhere, and Looney wasn't interested in getting any closer to Miz Lucinda than he had to. On account of she already whopped him once with her walking stick for not keeping his hands to himself.

When I got close enough to hear more than just raised voices, they were into it too much to notice me. So, I sat down behind them (but still a ways off) and just listened.

The tone of Boone's voice told me he was about two steps from going ballistic, already. "What do you think she's doing out there—cashing in on everybody's hard times?"

Sheesh. I couldn't figure how they got on the subject of his mother when he was supposed to be making an offer Miz Lucinda couldn't refuse.

"She's got half the family working out there already," he went on, "while the rest of the town's still busy thinking about their selves!"

“Now, you listen to me, Junior! I've got twenty-three people she's not taking care of, and one I don't even know where he is any more! It's gonna take way more than an airline ticket to find my boy. And whatever it takes, I'm gonna get it.” She jabbed him with her elbow when he didn't answer. “You hear me?”

He moved farther away from her on the rock but didn't run off. Instead, he got that quiet calm tone in his voice and I knew he made a decision. “You can send as many up to Padre Gordo as you want. Long as they don't draw any attention from the soldiers. There's enough food in the cellar to last six months. Maybe more if you're careful with it.”

“That town wasn't fit for habitation last time I saw it, and it's probably gone to wrack and ruin by now. Wouldn't give two shakes for it!” She eased her shoulders out of her big green backpack and unzipped a corner. “With Uncle Jack gone and your dad off in some foreign country somewhere...” She pulled out a bag of barbecue potato chips and squeezed the top till it popped open with a bang. “It's time to divvy up the loot.”

Uh-oh. I watched Boone, expecting him to spout off with something he couldn't take back, then it would be every man for himself just trying to stay clear of that woman. But instead he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money the size you only see in movies. I have to admit my mouth dropped open. On account of I didn't think there was that much money left in all of Ashbury.

“Here.” He handed it over to her. “If this doesn't get Denny back we'll pitch in more.”

She stopped munching potato chips and stared at it.

For a long time she didn't say anything at all. I figured it was because she was about as ashamed as she could get, after the bad things she'd been saying about Boone and his mom. I even expected she was hard pressed not to bust out bawling she'd be so happy. Except the next thing I knew, she pitched the whole lot straight up into the air.

In a second it started to swirl in the breeze, then float down all around us like balloons on a game show when somebody won the prize. "I don't need your money!" she hollered so loud that time the nephews came trotting back to see what was going on.

"You know what this money's gonna be worth next week, Junior? Zero, that's what! Army's gonna be doling out food and services just on credit—so they can keep track of what everybody gets! No more traveling back and forth, either. Except on government business. Next week, it's gonna be against the law even to have this stuff!"

She brushed away a clump of hundred-dollar-bills that landed in her lap, like it was so much trash. By that time, she had all four of us kids standing around her like somebody just cast a spell on us and we all froze into statues. We were that shocked.

Which must have made her a little sorry she blurted all that out because the next thing she said was, "Heard it at a closed door hospital meeting where they were talking to us about handling crowds. I hear a lot of things down there. Way before they get on the agenda for the town meetings. Here, now... you all stop looking at me like that."

She held the potato chip bag out to us but nobody took any.

If the bottom had dropped out of my stomach when Wallace Lee told me about the colleges shutting down, it felt like a volcano about to blow at the thought of not being able to get out of the city if we wanted to. Especially if part of your family happened to be somewhere else when it all happened.

"I'm thinking it's the good Lord Himself put me in that position." She stuffed the potato chips in her backpack again and got to her feet. "Just so I'd know ahead of time what's to happen, and be able to meet the kind of people can help us out. We gonna need the right connections to get where we need to get, and do what we need to do."

It was so dead quiet while we let all that information sink in, I could have sworn I heard an owl somewhere close by.

"Holy Macaroni, guys—" Looney bawled, "That means somebody's about to die!"

"Oh, it does not." Miz Lucinda retied the shoelaces on one of her Army boots, then put her backpack on. "That's just an old wive's tale. Hoot owl's lonely, that's all. It's how they talk to each other. Let's get started, again. We been here long enough."

Nobody budged. It was like we were all robots and somebody had hit the shut-down button on every last one of us. I shot a glance at Boone, but he had a look on his face like he was picturing something I wouldn't even want to know.

"I said, let's go!" Miz Boone yelled loud enough to throw another echo. "It's after ten already and we got another three hours before we get there! Don't want to be toting all that stuff down to the car in the dark!"

## Chapter Seventeen

### A DEAL WITH THE DRAGON

*“That was the scheme. But the difficulty was  
how to play it off.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Boone started picking up money as fast as he could, and I hurried over to help.

“Leave it!” ordered Miz Lucinda. “I just told you it was gonna be worthless next week!”

Which was about the last thing Boone could take. “My mom cleared out her whole savings to get this money! I am—NOT—leaving it here! Go ahead on if you have to! We got about another three miles up this riverbed before we head up into the mountain. When I’m done, I’ll catch up.”

“You better,” she warned. “Wallace Lee? Stay here and help. Every last one of you don’t show up beside me in the next ten minutes, I’ll be whacking some butts!” She swung the walking stick a couple times through the air so fast it made a whooshing sound. “Maxwell, and Lewis—you boys come with me.”

Maxwell trotted up next to her like a pup that graduated obedience school. I don’t know what he’d been doing all morning, but there was a hole the size of a grapefruit ripped in one of the legs of his shorts, already.

Looney wasn't around anywhere.

"Lewis?" Miz Lucinda looked in every direction. "Now, where did that boy go?"

"Probably just needed some privacy." I tried to cover for him. "Nobody can help that."

"He had fifteen minutes for privacy! Next person runs out of my sight without permission is gonna wish they never—"

"Hey—hey—HEY!" Looney hollered from somewhere over the riverbank. "It worked! We got a rabbit, guys—we got a rabbit!"

About the time I thought Miz Lucinda would holler back for him to let it go and quit wasting time, she perked up and started over there. In one big hurry, too.

"A rabbit! Mercy—I haven't seen a rabbit in—hold onto him, Lewis!" She plowed up that bank like she had a steam engine pushing from behind. "Don't let him get away—I'm coming!"

While the nephews took off up the hill after her, Boone and I picked up the last of the money. Then he rolled it up into a tight wad to stick back in his pocket, again. That's when I noticed his hands were shaking enough to have a hard time getting it all in there. Going head-to-head with Miz Lucinda had been harder on him than I thought. But his voice sure didn't give it away.

"We're going to Plan B, Hud," he said in that steady tone. OK, so he made another decision. "It'll work, too. Way she's carrying on about that rabbit, I can see right now Mom was right about her. She'll do anything for food."

"Yeah, remember how excited she got when Grampy showed her all those fish he caught that day? He

must have known it, too.”

“Next time we stop for a rest, we'll make her a dinner she'll never forget.”

“Yeah, she'll be so tired by then she probably won't even argue.” I unzipped my backpack and pulled out a baggie full of pea-green trail-mix. “But we better not count on it.”

Boone, got a bag of the same stuff out for himself. “I hope Looney remembers everything he's supposed to do. What's wrong with him, anyway? If we were inside somewhere, he'd be bouncing off the walls.”

“I don't think he's ever been out hiking like this in his whole life.” I picked a couple raisins out of my bag and popped them in my mouth. “He stayed up half the night reading the scout book, too. Wasn't even the real one.”

We heard the jumble of excited voices as everybody came back over the riverbank. Maxwell and Wallace Lee in the front—they skidded down, first—and Miz Lucinda right behind, using her walking stick for what it was made for, so she wouldn't fall down. Looney was hanging way back, so I figured he must have got walloped, again. When his face finally popped into view over the ledge, he looked like he was about to bawl. I sure couldn't blame him.

“Let's go!” Miz Lucinda chugged right on past us.

“I'll take the lead,” Boone shifted his backpack into a better position and turned his hat around backwards. “You boys hang out behind and get the conversation going.” Then he trotted off.

I turned around to say something to Looney but he hadn't even come off the riverbank, yet. He was just



standing at the top, like he was maybe thinking about taking off back to the car, or something.

“Hurry it up, man,” I walked toward him a ways. “We gotta get to our posts.”

He just stood there.

“You all right?”

“I don't like her! Give me another post, Hud—I can't stick by her, anymore.”

“Looney, when we said stick close, we sure didn't mean close enough to let her keep clouting you with that stick of hers. You gotta watch out for that thing. Now, come on. We have to go for Plan B, and it's gonna take all three of us just to pull it off.”

He jumped down off the bank without even trying to skid down, and fell forward onto his knees when he landed. “I'm not afraid of her old stick.” He got up and brushed off the sharp little rocks that were stuck to his hands. Then practically choked out the next words. “She killed the rabbit, Hud—wham!—just like that. Wham! With her bare fist!”

“Well, sheesh, what'd you expect?” I pulled the sleeve of his shirt to start him walking, so we wouldn't drop far enough behind to get yelled at. “You can't cook something without killing it, first. That's the way it is out here. More food than a grocery store but you gotta work for every bit of it.”

“I told her I wanted to keep it for a pet! But she just—wham! Killed it with her bare hands!”

“Yeah, well...” I stuck my bag of trail mix into my back pocket so it was hanging halfway out. “In case you haven't noticed, there aren't any rabbits in Ashbury, anymore. They've all been killed off for about ten miles

around, that's why. Fresh meat scarce as it is, that's the first thing almost anybody thinks of when they see a rabbit. Not taking it home for a pet."

"We can't have pets at the home. So, all I ever had was mice and bugs. Somebody always finds them. Then I gotta start all over, again. You have a dog, Hud?"

"Not since I was little. Way before we moved here. One of my sisters was feeding a half-wild cat for a while. But it disappeared a couple months, ago."

"Nurse Parker probably killed it with her bare hands!"

"Naw. You won't catch her eating anything like that till the last ham is gone out of Ashbury." I looked over at him. His green and red backpack was so dirty it looked like camo, and one of the straps was just hanging by a couple threads. The thing was loaded down like he had everything he owned in there. "You ready, yet?"

"I guess."

"Then let's do this thing."

"But I do not like Nurse Parker, anymore!"

"You and me, both. But we gotta go for as long as we can hold out. Remember? It's what we all took the swear for. It's so we won't back out during times like this. Half the stuff we do we don't like. Still gotta do it, though. Now, don't eat the green stuff. And especially not the chocolate or you'll be sicker than a dog, Looney. Just the raisins. Got it?"

"I got it."

Boone took off like a shot all of a sudden, Miz Lucinda jabbed Wallace Lee with her elbow, and he took out after Boone. That was the signal that I was up next. So, I jogged up behind Maxwell and Miz Lucinda, and

just as I came up alongside, I noticed a big bulge in her backpack and some rabbit fur sticking out of a place where the zipper wouldn't close.

"Hey, Miz Lucinda? I was wondering if you thought to pick up my rabbit snare. Else I'll have to go back and get it."

"You aren't going anywhere without asking," she huffed. The riverbed was making a gradual turn up into the foothills, now, and we were starting to climb even though you couldn't tell by looking. Walking just seemed harder. "I picked it up for you. That's a nice snare. Worked real good. You make it yourself?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll give you five dollars for it."

"Took me a long time to get it just right. Don't know if I'd want to give it up. Besides, you already told us money wasn't gonna be good anymore after next week."

"You'd still have a whole week to spend it, though, wouldn't you. I'll tell you what. You make one just like it for me, and I'll throw a survival merit badge into the deal."

I was ashamed how quick that idea grabbed hold of me. As far as we knew, there hadn't been a scout leader in Ashbury for years. Boone and I were always making some new thing to practice our skills with, and trying out different stuff from the Handbook, too. But we didn't have any badges. Not even one.

"An official merit badge?"

"Of course it's official. Didn't anyone tell you I used to be Scout Leader around here? Well, I did. Have lots of that stuff left over. Just couldn't find time to do it, since my promotion, so, it's been a long time ago. You don't

think I'd tell people I was taking a Scout Troop up here if I was never a Scout Leader, do you? Course I wouldn't. Like I told Lewis. We'll be doing the handbook stuff as soon as we get to Padre Gordo. And I brought plenty of badges to go around."

It had also been a long time since I had five dollars of my own to spend. Never since the hard times. It could buy a heap of stuff down at Cooper's that we needed for the hideout, too. Prices being as low as they were these days. I had a feeling we were going to need every foot of rope and headlamp we could find, pretty soon. Not to mention we'd need a whole lot more water and food stashed in if things got so bad we had to take those orphans out there to hide.

"Ok, then. I'll make you one." I slowed down enough to get my trail mix out of my pocket and chuck a few more raisins into my mouth. "You'll have to come all the way out here to use it though, on account of the rabbits around Ashbury have all been trapped out."

"I'll be coming back and forth here regular from now on. Once I get my bearings back to where everything is. Be a big help if you could tell Junior to get along with me. Not for a child to decide how to take care of the family."

"It is if he inherited it." Man, I didn't mean for that to pop out, and the look on her face said she wasn't gonna let it by, either. So, I did the only thing that came to me. I took a deep breath and let my eyes bug out like I couldn't breathe all of a sudden.

"Here—what's the matter with you?" She slapped me on the back like I was choking.

I started twitching my left shoulder up and down,

then kicked a foot out like I was aiming for a touchdown from the fifty yard line.

“Stop that!”

“It's this—Quantum Energy—Trail Mix! If I don't run it off, right now—it'll set every muscle in my body to twitching!”

“What?” She grabbed for the baggie but I jumped out of her reach. “Where'd you get that!”

“It's just an old Apache recipe we got from Grampy last summer. Gives you enough energy to run five miles.” I started talking fast and bounced a full circle around her and Maxwell at the same time.”

“I want some trail mix,” Maxwell croaked. He must have had a cold, or something.

“Heck, no,” I told him. “Even a little would be too much for you. Gotta work up to it.” I let out a loud hoop and started twitching my shoulder, again. “Little at a time for two weeks...” I did a waist-high Karate kick into the mid-air. “Or you'd be—puking till Sunday!”

After that, I took off running.

“William Hudson—you get back here!”

I heard the whoosh of the walking stick behind me—man, could she move out when she wanted to! But it only barely caught the edge of my bag of trail mix and knocked it to the ground. By that time, we were getting to the place where the big old boulders were flung out all over that river-bottom, and you either had to go around, or climb over. The closest one to me was about seven feet tall, and I took a flying leap up the side of it without even losing my momentum. It was kind of cool, actually, and I raised my arms up and down and did a little victory circle before jumping down the other side.

Last thing I saw of them was Maxwell digging into the trail mix while Miz Lucinda had her back turned. And Looney moving up into position alongside him... without saying a word.

## Chapter Eighteen

### LONG RUN

*“They examined all the country over which  
they were likely to fight...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

By the time I caught up with Boone, Wallace Lee had already gotten ahead so far he was totally out of sight. That's because Boone's about as expert as you can get when it comes to hiding. He's a good runner but only for short spurts. Me, I can keep running all the way to Sunday. I don't know why. I guess I was just made that way.

Anyway, when I saw a rock come skidding out in front of me, I knew Boone was behind one of the big boulders a ways off, and Wallace Lee was still running for all he was worth thinking he had lost him up ahead somewhere. I leaned over and rested my hands on my knees a minute to catch my breath.

“How's it going?” he asked when he walked over.

“I figure we got about an hour till we have to go to Plan C.” I stood up and looked at him. “Maxwell ate the green stuff, already.”

“Dang... we'll only be halfway up the mountain by then. Did you come up with any ideas?”

“Yep. We fall back on just being Boy Scouts. Rig a blanket stretcher, and haul Maxwell back to the car, puking over the side every fifteen minutes. By that time, Miz Lucinda will be worried enough to let a couple of us run up to Padre Gordo and haul a quick load back down to the car with the Rhino. She'll want to get him home if he's that sick, so she'll have to come back another time.”

“What's to keep her from just letting you go, and holding me back to keep you and me from taking off? I'll tell you right now, I'm not hanging around long enough for her to tie me up, or something.”

“I'm betting she'll want to get busy cooking the rabbit when everybody stops for a rest halfway back to the car. Probably want to keep Looney with her, too. On account of she knows we wouldn't just run off and leave him.”

“She isn't gonna let us go.”

“She will if we take Maxwell Lee.”

He kicked at a centipede that was crawling up to him fast, and it ended up on its back for a few seconds with all of its legs waving. “Wouldn't feel right leaving him out in the desert by himself somewhere. Especially if it's dark by then.”

“We don't have to ditch him. Just drop him off a little ways past the campsite where they'll be resting. Then we can take off for home. Let them get their selves back to the car after she finds out we're gone. She's going to be hopping mad when she gets back, though.”

“She won't wait till she gets back. First thing she'll do is call the police out here. Soon as Wallace Lee rats on us. We'll get turned over to the county, again.”

“He won't. I got a feeling he's about to switch over



to our side.”

“Even if he does she'll still call. We'd get rehabilitated for sure if that happens.”

“Not if it's a life or death situation.”

“Nothing life or death about a day hike,” he said. “And that's just what she'll say when she gets back and tells them. Her word against ours, again.”

“Not if we make it back first and they have to come and rescue her out of here instead of us,” I reasoned. “They'll think we're heroes. Might even give us a medal for risking our necks hiking out for help.”

“Yeah? What if they don't?”

I usually like to hold something back in a talk like this. An idea that beats all heck out of the other ideas because it was the best one all along. Sort of a debate tactic I learned in government class I discovered worked great for real life arguments, too. A “save the best to last” type thing even your opponent can't disagree with.

Except I didn't have anything like that this time.

Not to mention whenever Boone and I get into it about anything, I usually spill the beans right off the bat. And even though you'd have to use torture to get me to admit it, he's way smarter than me in some things. Especially when it comes to getting around adults.

So, I ended sort of lame by saying, “Your mom always believes us. Maybe she can come up with something.”

“It's going to take more than Mom's carnival tricks to fool the Army, Hud.”

For a minute we were both quiet, just thinking about it. Then there was the snap of a twig from somewhere behind us and we both started moving out quick, again,

without saying a word to each other.

After a while Boone said, "Maybe we better just run for home, right now. Could be the only chance we get to hide before she calls in the troops. Those Army guys have equipment that can spot you moving around even at night."

"Holy crud, Boone!" That thought gave me a shiver when I wasn't even cold. "What about Looney?"

"We're the only ones would be in big trouble. He'd be home in less than an hour. Once the helicopters come."

"Helicopters—"

"Yeah, this is it, Hud. Time to bug out to the stronghold. I can feel it in my gut."

For a minute I felt like I couldn't breathe. Almost like a bomb went off, or something. Bug out to the stronghold? This was awful! Way worse than when I couldn't decide if I wanted to go there with him and Grampy last summer, because I didn't have a choice this time. I already made a swear—to Grampy—I'd help Boone out whenever the time came.

"Whoa—wait a minute—wait a minute!" My mouth started watering like I was about to puke but I just spit and went on talking. "What about the whole bunch, Boone? We can't just bug out and save ourselves during a war! You know? What about the orphans—they're depending on us! Heck, what about our families?"

I had to spit, again. "I gotta be home before Meg leaves tomorrow night and tell my folks about the colleges shutting down. If I don't she'll turn up missing just like your cousin Denny, next week!"

He stopped all of a sudden and looked hard at me,

so I knew I had his attention. At least he wasn't struck blind and deaf with his own idea and headed after it like a crazy person. So, I figured I had about three seconds to convince him. That's about how far he was from going ballistic.

"That's what happened, Boone. They shut down his college, took away his phone, and CENTERED him in who-knows-what-city. That's why Miz Lucinda went so crazy over all this! She's not worried about how much money it will take to find him anymore, she's worried about never finding him, again."

He was still looking at me without saying anything. But I knew—better than I knew my own name—he was making a decision that very moment and the next thing out of his mouth was going to be one of those strong quiet sentences I wouldn't be able to go against even if it killed me. On account of I couldn't break a swear on the Bible. A few weeks in hell wasn't worth an eternity in heaven, if you know what I mean. Just the way I was raised.

So, I gave him my last shot and hoped it was enough to knock as much wind out of him as I felt a few minutes ago. "She might be the wicked witch of the west, all right, but don't forget she's a direct descendent of Old Mad Maud. How'd you like to be haunted by someone like that for all eternity? This could be the one—and ONLY—time we will ever have to do her a good turn. And we're gonna need those kind of points to survive this thing, Boone. Seriously!"

He took his hat off, ran his hand through all those tangled curls and stuck it on backwards. "How far do you think we can trust Wallace Lee, right now?"

"Only about as far as we could throw him." Hey, I

had to be honest.

Disaster averted.

In the end, we came up with a new Plan C. Which meant I had to act like a decoy, again, and try and lead Wallace Lee off the trail long enough for Boone to take off up to Padre Gordo for the Rhino. So, I switched places with him and ran ahead.

I zipped past Wallace Lee, a while later, sitting on a rock about a half mile up the riverbed. Winded. He took out after me anyway, and I had to slow down a couple of times just so he could keep up. I guess the day was starting to take its toll on him even though it wasn't noon, yet.

After that, I ran past the turnoff to Padre Gordo, then wound in and out of the same saguaro forest Boone and I used for a Rhino track, last summer. Finally, I just sat down in the middle of the trail and waited for him. By that time, I was getting way tired myself.

He dropped down next to me, rolled over onto his back, and moaned, "Man, I can't believe I fell for this twice—Aunt Lu's gonna kill me!"

"She's gonna kill both of us, then, 'cause I don't know know where he is, either."

"What?"

"Looks like he ditched us."

"You guys have a fight, or something?"

"Something." I picked off a piece of sage bush next to me and started chewing on it.

"Now what do we do?"

"I don't know. Go back and join the group, I guess. Good thing Miz Lucinda has that map because I think I missed a turn somewhere."

Now, he sat up like something bit him and said, “What?” like he couldn’t believe it. “I thought you spent a couple weeks out here before!”

“Not by myself, I didn’t. I was always with Grampy, or Boone. There’s all kinds of trails up this mountain and some of them are dead ends. Old broken down mines, too. Gotta watch out for those.” I stood up and looked around, like I was trying to figure things out.

Wallace Lee stood up and wiped a trickle of sweat off the side of his face with the back of his hand. “You can get us back to the riverbed, though. Right?”

“Uh...” I turned around and looked in the other direction. “I think so. Except everything looks the same all of a sudden.”

“Man—what’d you leave the riverbed for if you didn’t know where we were?”

“You were chasing me.”

“Oh—man!”

“Give me a minute, I’m probably just tired. See any of our footprints? We maybe could follow them back.”

“Dude! This ground’s too hard for footprints. You’d have to be half Apache.” He shook his head and tried looking for some, anyway.

“Not if you know what kind of signs to look for. Grampy was an expert at following sign.” I started walking down the trail a ways, looking around for things. “Did you know he got called in on special assignment during the war to find some pilots that went down in enemy territory? Just because he was so good at tracking in the dessert!”

“I know most of what he said was a lie or a trick, that’s what I know.” He was following behind me, sort of

slow, and still looking for footprints. "I also know they wouldn't call up a hundred-year-old crazy guy to go into a war zone on any special assignment. So, if you believed that windy, no wonder we're lost."

"Not this war. The Desert Storm war. That was a way lot of years before we were even born. And he wasn't a hundred." Funny how I felt offended hearing him talk that way about Grampy even when I knew it wasn't true. I actually felt like taking him another loop through the saguaro forest just to wear him out some more. But I stifled it.

Mostly because if Grampy was to look down this very minute (like he said he was going to from time to time, to check on Boone and me), and see me getting distracted from my mission just because another kid riled me, I would be totally ashamed of myself. Especially if he had any of his folks around and was in the middle of bragging about us, or something. So, I just kept to the trail.

"Hey—" Wallace Lee piped up from behind me. "Here's where I tripped over a rock and skinned my knee. Right here. See? We are going in the right direction. How'd you know which way without any footprints?"

"I'm following a trail."

"What trail?" He looked ahead and behind, again, to see if he missed something.

"Something bigger than us that went through here. A Rhino."

For a second his brown eyes looked about to pop out of his head, then they got narrow as button holes when he scowled at me. It was a Grampy scowl. The same kind Boone made whenever he got irritated about something.

Strange how you can inherit things like that from your relatives even if you never knew them.

Now, he was getting mad. "I don't know much about the desert—I don't even want to. But I sure enough know we don't have rhinos running around wild in America!"

"Could be one got loose from some traveling circus passing through here a couple years ago, and nobody could catch it. Then went sort of crazy on account of there's not much grass for it to eat out here, so it had to go to eating meat. Like mad cow disease. That comes from cattle being fed meat products when they're only made for eating grass."

His eyes popped, again, and I knew he was picturing that in his mind, the same way Boone always did when he thought about something awful. Then I remembered back, last summer, when Boone was teasing me about that very same thing and I felt like he was some kind of liar—or a cheat—trying to trick me like that. For sure not my friend.

What was I doing?

I was supposed to get Wallace Lee won over to our side. We needed him! And if he couldn't trust us farther than he could throw us—sheesh, that's just what I said about him, a while ago. Now, here I was getting off my mission, again, not five minutes after I decided to do right. I gotta say doing right when you're so used to doing other things, is harder than training for the hundred-yard hurdles.

"I said, COULD BE a rhino got loose. I was just speculating."

His eyes got narrow as button holes, again, so I tried

to explain better.

“That off-road thing Boone's got up at Padre Gordo is called a Rhino. It's the brand name. I don't even know if they make that kind, anymore. Anyway, I'm following the tire tracks.”

“I don't see any tire tracks.”

“I'm looking for the places we looped around or did donuts. We drove all over here, last summer. They're faint 'cause there's been a lot of wind and weather since then, but you can still find them if you look close. Here's one over here. See?”

“Then what are you fooling with me for?”

“Just giving my man a head start, is all.” I took a deep breath before telling him the real truth. “We can't let Miz Lucinda get anywhere near Padre Gordo, today. Not after what you told me. So, we had to go to Plan B. On account of we got us a flat-out life or death situation—right here—and right now, Wallace Lee.”

“Hey!” There he went with the scowl thing, again. “Aunt Lu's mean when she gets mad but she sure wouldn't kill a kid. She took us all to the Fun Park, last night!”

“Yeah, and you're cheating with her this morning.”

“She's trying to save the family! Probably the only one in the whole town got the nerves—and the connections—to do it, too. Makes a lot more sense than a couple kids passing the goods out to whoever they feel like.”

“She only wants to save her own family.”

“Life or death situation, you' gotta do what you gotta do.”

“No, you're gonna do what you think you gotta do.



Right, or wrong.”

“Nobody can do right all the time.”

“You think.”

He flopped down onto the trail so fast it was almost like somebody shot him. But instead of dropping over dead (it was more like a fast sit-down), he pulled his knees up, and leaned his head against his arms across them. That's when I noticed one of them was bloody from when he fell a while, ago. I have to admit I didn't know if he was for us or against us at that second. I was only hoping I wouldn't have to take another turn around this saguaro forest before the rest of the group found their way to the turn-off up to Padre Gordo. Sheesh, I didn't have time for that.

So, I moved closer to him and lowered my voice like I was giving out the secret of secrets. “Right makes you strong.”

“That's a lie!” he snapped back. “Everybody knows only fighting better or being smarter is what makes you strong!”

“Yeah, that's what most people think. Most people think Looney Martin is about the dumbest kid in town, too.”

“Well, he is.” He looked up at me like he couldn't figure what that had to do with anything. “Teachers been passing him through just to get him out of their class ever since he started school. Kid's a pain in the butt, too. Everybody knows that.”

“Looney's back there—right now—sticking to his mission, taking hits from Miz Lucinda every time he turns around, on account of he decided to throw in with us. You keep your eye on Looney Martin and you'll see

he's getting stronger every day. Because..." I pointed my finger at him each time I said the last words. "Right. Makes. You. Strong."

He didn't answer. But I could see his thought wheels turning almost like I could see straight into his brain. I had a feeling I won—just a feeling—but I knew I had given it my best shot and couldn't think of anything else to say. So, I just turned around and started walking. A few minutes later, I heard him following behind.

"How come you didn't skin out with Boone?" he asked.

"Because I promised Grampy to help take care of the whole bunch. I hate to say it, but that includes Miz Lucinda. On account of she's part of his family."

"Listen, Hudson. We can't tell her we lost Boone. She'll wallop us black and blue."

"You got any better ideas?"

## Chapter Nineteen

### ENEMY TERRITORY

*“The worst of spying is that it makes you always suspicious, even of your best friends.”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

He was quiet for a few seconds and then said, “What if I was to throw in with you guys.”

Bingo. Finally! I hesitated for a while myself, trying not to act too excited. “Well, you can't just say you want to throw in, Wallace Lee. Not when the only reason is you can't take a couple hits from some measly stick you could break in two with your own bloody knee. You'd have to prove we could trust you. Put something up for collateral. Know what I mean? Something of value. Like what a bank wants when you're asking for a loan.”

“Only thing I got worth anything is my video games.”

“I'm not talking video games.”

“I guess you'd want me to do some kind of mission, just to see if I could do it, first.”

“No. That wouldn't prove anything. That's what spies do. Get in and work with the opposite side, then work against them from the inside as soon as they get

trusted.”

“What then? I'm telling you I don't have anything of value!”

“Yes, you do. Something nobody can take away unless you give it to them.”

“So, what is it?”

“Your soul.”

A light came into his eyes. “That's it?” Then he laughed, looked away for a second and shook his head before looking back at me, again. “My soul? Sure, you can have it. I don't even believe in that stuff. You want it? It's yours.”

“I can't take it.”

“I gotta give it to Boone?”

“He can't take it, either.”

“The devil, then.”

“No way. You don't have to do anything to get on his side, he just comes after you. Half the world's gone to the devil, case you haven't noticed.”

“You fooling with me, or what! Just tell me what I have to do to keep Aunt Lu from finding out I lost Boone! That's all I want to know.”

“Uh... you have to swear on a hundred and fifty-year-old Bible that belonged to the Fat Priest. It's up at the ghost town.”

“What?”

“Yep. Scared the daylights out of me when I did it. But since you don't believe in any of that stuff, shouldn't be a problem. Right?”

“I never said I don't believe in ghosts.” His voice sounded worried all of a sudden.

“I hate to say it, but they're all over the place up in

Padre Gordo.”

I never did so much talking and negotiating in my life. Made me figure I might make a pretty good lawyer, considering how I changed the mind of everybody on this hike at least twice, already. If we ever got back to normal before the end of the world, anyway. Then I started wondering if people could survive all the radiation that came after a nuclear bomb if they stayed inside a mountain for a couple years. After that, I wondered if you'd get the radiation if you were really high above it. Like on top of a mountain.

Any way I looked, it didn't look good.

I just knew I sure didn't want to go through any of that stuff without my family and friends around. That's when I realized having the whole bunch around you might have some benefit to it, after all. By that time we were back at the riverbed, again. I looked each way, but it was empty on both sides. Quiet, too. Either Miz Lucinda was lagging behind or she was way ahead of us, already.

“OK, so here's the deal.” I looked at my watch. “It's a little after eleven.”

“How much farther to the ghost town?” Wallace Lee sat down on a big flat boulder at the edge of the riverbank.

“Getting too warm to sit on the rocks, anymore,” I warned him. “That's where the snakes like to hang out when it gets over seventy.”

He popped up like a jack-in-the-box and danced back to the trail.

“I figure we can either go and face the music with Miz Lucinda, right now or high-tail it up to Padre Gordo

and help Boone load up enough supplies to make her change her mind about going there this weekend.”

“She's not going to change her mind.”

“She will if Maxwell's too sick to go on.”

“He's not sick, he has allergies.”

I looked at my watch, again. “I'd say right about now he's got way more than allergies.”

In the end, Wallace Lee made the very same decision as I did when I finally decided to go into the mines with Grampy. He decided to put trouble off till later if he was headed for it, anyway. So, I took him up the shortcut instead of around the long way. It was steeper, and we had to climb over a couple of rock slides (which I don't mind saying gave me the jitters now that it was getting warmer out), but we didn't see any snakes and it got us up to the post office in about half an hour.

After that, we sat down on the rickety, busted-up porch and rested for awhile. Neither of us said anything. And neither of us wanted to go inside and look around, either. I started to remember some of the spook stories Boone told me about the place, last summer, but I sure didn't feel like bringing that stuff up. Not when I'd already had the experience of scaring myself ten times over, the last time I was here. So, we just sat there quiet and listened to the wind blow warm and chilly at the same time as it flew through the gap in the mountains where Padre Gordo was.

About fifteen minutes later, Boone showed up.

“Man, am I glad to see you guys!” he said before he even finished climbing up out of the riverbed. “I so did not want to get all that stuff out of the cellar by myself. You know, I could've swore I smelled bacon a couple

times? Almost like Grampy was up there cooking breakfast and waiting for us.”

Wallace Lee gave a shudder like it got cold all of a sudden. “I smell something cooking.”

I did, too, now that they mentioned it. Not bacon, though. “Hey...” I got to my feet and looked up the road. “It smells like fried chicken.”

“Oh, no—it's rabbit!” said Boone. “How the heck did she beat us up here?”

“She has a map with a shortcut on it,” Wallace Lee answered.

“There isn't any shorter way than the one we just took,” Boone argued. “And it isn't on any map, either. On account of Grampy made it himself when he was working one of the mines over on this side.”

“The one on Aunt Lu's map,” said Wallace Lee, “been in our family for over a hundred years.”

“Where'd you get it?” Boon wanted to know.

“Got it from Mad Maude, I guess. She was Aunt Lu's great, great—I don't know how many greats—granny. Got stuff on there nobody knows about. Not even Uncle Jack.”

“You gotta be kidding me!” I couldn't help it, that was the worst news I heard, yet.

Boone's face turned sort of gray. “Then what's she need me for if she already knows where everything is?”

“Because your Grampy made a real mess of the place, that's why. Lot of the old passageways are blocked off with landslides, or something. It'd take forever to check them all out. We don't have that kind of time if we're gonna find Denny. Longer we wait, the harder it'll be to pick up his trail. She's gonna hire a private

detective but she needs something better than money to do it with."

"You mean to bribe him with for ten times more than it's worth," Boone accused.

"Something like that," Wallace Lee admitted. "Now, what do we do?"

"Doesn't look so bad for you, anymore," I said, "But the rest of us have had it."

"Suppose I could distract her long enough to give you another head start?" he suggested.

"How come you're so willing to throw in with us, all of a sudden?" No way Boone could have known Wallace Lee already decided to join up, so he was still way suspicious.

"I want a job at the Fun Park," he answered.

"Even if it's just digging?" I could tell by the look on Boone's face he was making a judgement about whether he could trust Wallace Lee, or not.

"Diggin's better than no job, at all," Wallace Lee said.

Boone slipped out of his backpack, unzipped the top, and then fished out Grampy's old Bible. When Wallace Lee's eyes looked about to pop out of his head, he threw me a look like he maybe wasn't so sure anymore.

"Aunt Lu's got a piece of red cloth with a fancy cross like that sewn on with gold thread. Said it used to cover the altar at the mission in the old days. Mad Maude got it from some old Apache she made friends with back in her day. The Apaches were about the only friends she had when she was hiding out up here all those years."

"Yeah, that's why you and me are cousins," said



Boone. "Raise your right hand, and put the other on this Bible, Wallace Lee. That is, if you're ready to swear to stand by Hud, and me, and Looney, for as long as you can hold out, even if it means sacrificing yourself to save the whole bunch."

"Whoa." If his eyes could get any bigger they just did.

"But don't worry. If that happens, all us heroes are gonna meet up in the middle of the biggest flank maneuver in the history of the world. Then everything'll be all right, again. Guaranteed."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Grampy told me. You follow the Hero Code, you get a hero's honor. That's what he said."

"But he was—"

"He wasn't crazy, he was a gen-u-wine hero! Just like his dad and his grampy, and his dad before that. There's a place for you in that line, Wallace Lee, but you gotta earn it just like the rest of us. Tell him the code, Hud. We don't have time to get the book out and look it up, we're wasting daylight here."

"It's uhh..." It took a couple seconds to think of all the words since I hadn't rattled it off since that night I said it to Grampy, myself. But it was still in there. So, once I got the first part, the rest just spilled out after. *"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."*

“Well, if Looney Martin could say it, I guess I can, too. OK. I swear.”

“All right, then.” Boone put the Bible away. “From now on, we’ll be watching your back the same way we would Grampy’s. But man—you gotta help us with that Nurse Parker, because she’s smarter than all of us put together. Which is why we all got to skin out, right now.”

“What? We can’t skin out and leave Aunt Lu all by herself up here—she’ll be after us as soon as she gets back! You gotta have a better plan than that!”

“Give us a better one and we’ll throw in with you,” I suggested. “I say she’s gonna be after us whether we walk in now, or later.”

“I’ll give you a better plan,” said Wallace Lee. “You gotta let me be a spy. You know, work undercover for you and all that. I can be way more help working from the inside.”

All of a sudden, I didn’t know whether we could trust Wallace Lee, or not. Why should he care what he swore if he didn’t believe in any of the good things, anyway? What if he only believed in the bad stuff and was spying on us right now? Getting ready to spill the beans to Miz Lucinda about all the plans we just told him about. That thought gave me a chill, all right.

It must have had the same effect on Boone, too. Because the next minute he came up with a plan I knew he couldn’t mean for one minute. Which I did not object to because I figured it was just another decoy maneuver so we could skin out back to Ashbury the first chance we got. Not to mention I had known Boone long enough by now to know he always had at least two ways of escape out of any corner. Sometimes even three.

He was sort of like his mom that way.

So, when he said we were going to use an old coyote trail down the backside of the Devil's Highway to get home, I didn't even blink. On account of I knew Boone wouldn't do that even if his life depended on it. I mean, the worst kind of criminals you can imagine move up and down those trails, and nobody in their right mind would want to cross paths with them on purpose. Not for any reason.

His real plan was probably to duck out with the Rhino before Miz Lucinda called in the troops and make a beeline for our stronghold over at Little Heely Mesa. Of course, we would have to duck and hide when the helicopters flew over, or they'd be onto us before we could even get there. As for Looney, I don't know what Boone's plans were to get him back.

Maybe he didn't have any.

## Chapter Twenty

### GHOST TOWN

*"I did not understand his language, but I  
could understand his gesture well enough  
when he presented his rifle and took  
deliberate aim at me..."*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

While Boone took off for the airplane hangar, where we left the Rhino last summer, Wallace Lee and I headed for the hotel. Seems Miz Lucinda knew her way around Padre Gordo a whole lot better than any of us figured. We found her in the kitchen, frying up the meat on that big iron stove, with a pot of Gran's bean soup bubbling away on a back burner.

She was humming a tune—like she didn't have a care in the world—and said, "What took you so long, boys?" Then she laughed at us.

I looked around for Looney and Maxwell, but didn't see them.

"Hud, here, got us lost," Wallace Lee answered. "Boone skinned out ahead and we got mixed up on one of the turns. He doesn't know his way around here any better than me."

"I know some things." I couldn't let that pass, on account of I was starting to feel betrayed, already.

"Where is that Mr. Boone?" she asked. But she sure didn't seem too worried about him. "You tell him if he doesn't show up at the car by three-o'clock, with the rest of us, I'm gonna leave him here. Course, I'd have to report him as a runaway soon as I got back to town. Can't have a child running around alone out here. No matter whose child he is."

Wallace Lee didn't answer and reached for a golden brown biscuit off a pan of about thirty of them, instead. But she walloped his hand with the spatula.

"Oww!"

"Go wash up, first. Then tell everybody it's time to eat."

"Where do we wash up at?" he asked.

"First two floors are all ghost town. But the third one's done up better than the Grand Hotel."

Uh-oh. How did she know that?

Then—almost as if she read my mind, she said, "Used to spend summers with my granny out here when I was just a child. Helped out in this very kitchen more times than I can remember. Lot of people came to this hotel in those days. Times were hard for everybody back then. Get going, now. Just 'cause we're having a good meal doesn't mean we can waste time. We got a lot of loading up to do. So, go wash up."

She took a long drink out of a glass mug I knew came from the saloon. It was the same kind we drank our sarsaparilla out of, last summer. "If Maxwell's asleep, don't bother him. Been feeling poorly ever since he ate that Apache concoction."

Then she nailed me with one of her own Grampy scowls. “Which I don’t for a minute believe was a old Indian recipe, William Hudson! Gonna have a word with your folks about this soon as we get home. You can take that to the bank!”

Sheesh. So much had been going on today, I hadn’t even thought what my parents would say about what we’d been doing up here. I was pretty sure they wouldn’t like it though. Especially after that talk Dad and I had at the library the other night. He’d think I went off the deep end, or something. That was way worse on me than if he was hopping mad. Like I say, if it’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s Dad being disappointed in me.

Which is why I didn’t waste time trying to give her an answer. That lady seemed to have us blocked in, no matter which way we turned. She was that smart. I only hoped we could skin out before she realized we were gone. I just had to figure a way to get Looney outside, too.

Without letting Wallace Lee in on it. Just in case he chickened out and ratted on us.

Then I got an idea. If Maxwell was sick and Wallace Lee was about as thrashed as he could be without falling over, I figured neither one of them would be in too much of a hurry to do any of the loading. I wouldn’t have trouble getting Looney to help, though. He’d been ready to skin out since ten, o’clock in the morning.

We went back through the old saloon—the one with a bullet hole in the mirror put there by Public Enemy Number One Back in the Depression days. The tables were all empty and some of the chairs toppled over but I didn’t take any time out for ghost stories and Wallace

Lee didn't ask about any either. So, maybe he did believe in something besides himself when he was walking through haunted places. When we finally got to the nice part upstairs, it just looked like a regular hotel. One of the doors was open on the third floor but only Maxwell was in there.

"Hey, Max," Wallace Lee flopped down on a bottom bunk across from where his brother was laying. "Lunch is ready. Aunt Lou's got all kinds of good stuff cooked up."

Maxwell didn't answer. In fact, I was thinking he looked about dead until he reached down for a bucket on the floor and puked a bunch of green stuff into it. Wallace Lee popped up from the bed, hit the door, then headed for the bathroom across the hall like he was next in line for a relay. Some people can't stand the smell of puke without puking themselves.

So, I figured it was now, or never for skinning out.

"Looney!" I called down the long hallway sort of quiet, looking in both directions. "Looney Martin—where are you!"

Two rooms down a door opened up and he poked his head out. I don't know what he was doing in there but his hat was on crooked. I motioned for him to hurry, then headed for the stairs. He practically ran into me when I stopped on the second floor instead of going all the way down. On that floor everything looked like the Old West all over, again. But you wouldn't catch me looking into any of the rooms. Stuff like that could get you running around like a crazy person if you let the fear of it get hold of you.

I'd rather keep my wits about me in situations like

this. I wouldn't have stopped there at all if I hadn't remembered an outside door on the farthest end of that hall. Maybe nobody would have to see us leave, after all. About the time I was feeling pretty smart for thinking that up, I realized it was stuck shut. Either that or nailed. Probably hadn't been opened in years.

"Let's just climb out the window," Looney suggested. I guess he was expert at that stuff. "It's busted out, anyway." He stuck his head out. "Long way down but there's a pipe we can scoot across to those stairs."

Great. If there was one thing I didn't like it was high up places I had to scoot across. But Looney was out before I even peeked my head through to decide. Wasn't that high up but it still made my stomach feel like jelly. I eased my weight onto it and felt it sway a little. "Oh, holy crud..."

"Come on, Hud!" He was already across and clamoring over the other stair rail. "It's easy as—" There was a loud crack when a rotten board busted through about two steps down. But he had a good hold on the rail and hardly missed a beat swinging his feet back up, again. "Whoa—watch out for that one!"

I inched my way down about as fast as a snail but I didn't care. I knew my limits and I seriously did not want to die falling into a pile of rocks and broken glass at the back end of some ghost town alley. By the time my feet finally touched down, Looney was already moving off behind one of the buildings.

"Not that way, this way!" I headed for the Main street, instead.

We should have been more careful and sneaked around the other way to keep out of sight, in case



somebody came looking for us. But the minute I heard the sound of the Rhino revving up, I took off like a shot and Looney wasn't far behind me. The last thing I wanted to deal with was Miz Lucinda busting through the hotel door with that walking stick. Something I kept expecting any second.

Just then, Boone came shooting out of the broken-down barn at the end of the road, where Grampy kept the old biplane left over from the war in France (the one that happened even before the World War II), and made a fast loop around to pick us up. He didn't stop, just slowed down, and the two of us flew into that thing like the whole town was about to blow. Me in the passenger seat, and Looney in the back.

"Buckle up, boys!" Boone shouted as he tromped on the gas peddle. "We're riding for our lives!"

I never looked back to see if Miz Lucinda was after us. It was all I could do to hang on. Not to mention that jelly-place in my stomach turned into a cannonball when I saw where he was headed. Down the backside of the mountain and onto a narrow winding trail I knew was hardly wide enough to keep all four wheels on.

The one they called the Devil's Highway.

I snapped the end of my seatbelt in and shot a glance back at Looney to make sure he did the same. He was busy trying to loop the end through his backpack first, before he got his-self buckled in. About that time, we took a flying leap off some whoop-de-doo and—if he hadn't been hanging onto the roll bar when he was about to snap in—he would have flown out. He looked down at the steep drop-off.

"Whoa—whoaaaaa!" he hollered. "Where's my

helmet—I need a—” We hit another dip and fishtailed into the next turn.

“Buckle in, man—you wanta get killed?” We caught some more air and I almost got seasick facing forward, again. There was that much centrifugal force pulling us around the tight curve. “Dang, Boone—slow down before—”

We didn't make it.

Both wheels on Boone's side slipped off the trail and the Rhino tipped over the edge in a long slow slide down the mountain with all of us hollering our heads off. I think I even prayed the loudest prayer I ever made in my life. Which must have worked because—no kidding—we came to a sliding stop up against a dead saguaro that threw a bunch of its wooden ribs up into the air then rained down on top of us, again.

“Owww!” Looney yelled when one got him in the back of the head. “Did I say I need a helmet? I need a helmet, guys—there's no roof over back here!”

“Look under your seat!” Boone hollered at him. “We can't stop for anything—we're right out in the open, here!” He gunned the engine and let off a few times, to get us rocking, before putting enough steady pressure on the gas peddle to drag us out of the huge rut we made on our way down. When he finally got us headed downhill, again, it was at least slow enough to keep some control, this time.

I had to hand it to Boone. He could drive that thing like you wouldn't believe. Mostly on account of he'd cracked up in it so many times out in this desert, he knew pretty much everything it could—or couldn't—handle. Scared the daylights out of passengers, though. Not to

mention he'd been riding so close to ballistic the last couple weeks, I wasn't sure he had much of his judgement left. But we weren't dead, yet.

Which only gave me about thirty seconds of relief, on account of, right about then I looked down into the flat part of desert we were headed for, and... saw people. They were moving through the brush down there. About ten of them, and most were looking up. Watching us.

"Hey, Boone—" Every hair on my head felt like it was trying to stand up, and I could only get those two words out.

"Don't worry—I got it—I got it!" He was so zeroed in on driving through all that loose rock and sand without losing control, he wasn't looking anywhere but under his nose.

"Boone! Turn around, man—we gotta go back to the devil!"

"No way—I hate that place!"

"You gotta! There's a pack of coyotes down there—and—holy crud, Boone—they're looking at us!"

Like I say, it's amazing how quick you can get over being afraid of something as soon as something scarier pops up. Boone threw a look down the mountain to see for himself, and looped back uphill without so much as thinking about it. He didn't even tromp on the gas.

Hey—" Looney glanced up from fooling with his helmet. "There's people down there, guys—a whole bunch! Sure a lot of people hiking the desert, today."

He didn't get it. But after thirty seconds of Boone driving like an old lady, I was starting to get the jitters. I felt sweat starting to prickle under my hatband. I threw another look back to see what was happening down

there. "Punch it, will you?" My voice came out shaky but I couldn't help it. "Three of them are headed up here! Any slower they'll catch us!"

"Oooohhh...I can't go any faster! It's too steep!" He sounded in pure misery. "If we stall out before we get all the way up, we've had it!"

"OK, I'm buckled in," Looney said like that's all we were waiting for. "Let's go!"

"Keep an eye on 'em, Hud! If they get too close—" We slipped in some loose gravel, and for a few seconds, one of our back wheels spun. "Dang! We're not gonna make it!"

"Are you kidding me? You gotta be kidding me!" I couldn't believe it. "This is a Rhino—you said it would go anywhere!"

"Too much loose stuff on this slope, there's only one thing we can—"

"Hey—" Looney interrupted him. "That guy in front has a—"

There was a pop like a firecracker behind us.

Boone jerked the wheel and tromped on the gas.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### COYOTE COUNTRY

*“It would be difficult to go and stay there  
without being noticed at once...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

We started sliding sideways again, the minute we took off. But we were picking up speed faster than we were slipping. It got more stable as we gathered momentum, and—even though we were on a slant so steep Looney and I had to hang onto the high side—we were putting some serious distance between us and the coyotes. We heard another couple pops, but it sounded more like popcorn than firecrackers by then. After a while, we lost sight of them all together.

The last time I looked, all I could see was the red side of the mountain and a couple big boulders we had swerved around. Boone didn't let up though. He was hanging onto the wheel, jerking it one way, then the other as we weaved in and out of the rocks too big to run over. Somewhere, the slippery stuff gave way to harder packed ground that was dotted with a few saguaros, and some huge jagged rocks that looked like miniature mesas stuck onto the side of the steep hill.

We were in total control now, and I knew by the way the engine sounded he had the gas peddle squashed against the floorboards as hard as he could. Racing our way in one long slant down the backside of Padre Gordo. The mountain named after the fat priest. I wasn't sure how long it would take for us to get all the way down. That mountain was so huge it had a whole different terrain on top. Tall trees and sweet grass meadows. Grampy said it even snowed up there once in a while if the winters got cold enough. It was way the heck up to the top, though. The ghost town of Padre Gordo was only about half way.

Still, it was higher than the trail they called the Devil's Highway that followed the old Apache wells across two or three states. Which was probably where the coyotes were headed. That trail had been a road for bandits and Indians for a thousand years. Not to mention the wild things. You had to be one tough character to even try going up there, these days. On account of the law didn't patrol it anymore. Too many worse things going on in the world, I guess.

Just one more reason why the ghost town made such a great hideout. Stuck halfway up the inside of a two-mountain pass, it was practically invisible. You'd have to know about it to even go looking up there. Anybody that found it on accident would just hang around and look at the old things for a while. Which were mostly creepy. And considering most people aren't real comfortable around ghosts—whether they believe in them, or not—it was a perfect hideout for a whole lot of people. Where Boone's family always headed if ever they had to take care of the whole bunch.

It wasn't the real stronghold, though. That was a place only Boone and I knew about. His dad knew, too, but he'd been gone so long I wasn't so sure he was even still alive. Something I'd never come right out and say on account of Boone just plain couldn't take it. But I thought about it a lot. Mostly because I couldn't figure out how a couple kids like us could ever outsmart a grown-up adult as tricky as Miz Lucinda. Especially if she already had us cornered.

She'd been playing us along with all that talk about food and money. What she was really after was the gold. The one thing we swore to Grampy we'd never tell about. But what the heck were we supposed to do about somebody who already knew? The only thing she didn't know was exactly where it was, anymore.

She knew we did, though.

Which is why I figured it was time for us to hide out somewhere else. That way, even if Boone's dad never showed up, we could still keep our promise to Grampy. Of course, we'd have to sneak back once in a while to get enough supplies to take care of whatever bunch we had around us from time to time. Right now that was the orphans. But we'd have to do it at night or something. For sure not when Miz Lucinda was anywhere close.

The way she was talking, like it wasn't such a bad place, after all—now that she'd been there a few times and reminded herself—I wouldn't be surprised if her whole family moved in. Especially after Boone gave her the permission. She'd get us to spill the beans one way or the other if we had to be around her all the time, though. She even had ways to get us rehabilitated. No, I figured we had to skin out and stay skinned out.

And the only way I could think to do that was move into Little Heely Mesa.

At least long enough for our families to start believing us. We seriously had to get some adults on our side!

“Hey, Boone.”

“What.”

“How much gas did you bring?”

“Just enough to get home. Then we can get all we need from the fun park.” He backed off on the gas a little. “Won’t get us all the way at this speed though. But I guess we’re far enough away from the coyotes, now. From that bunch, anyway.”

“Sheesh, how come you didn’t bring a little extra? Especially if we have to go all this way.”

“I thought we were gonna pack some food.”

Looney stuck his silver helmet between the seats so fast it knocked me in the ear. “We didn’t bring any food? Heck, guys, I ate mine already. Everything but the green stuff. The way Maxwell was hacking it back up I had to find somewhere else to hang out.”

“Yeah, what did you do, fall asleep in there?” I asked him. “I was looking all over for you.”

“Naw. When I heard you guys talking, I thought there was one of those heater vents you can see down to the next floor in. Thought it might be big enough to crawl through.”

“Man, Looney,” Boone laughed his hyena laugh for the first time in I don’t know how long. “You’d escape through a gopher tunnel if you thought you could squeeze into it!”

“What’s wrong with that?” he asked sort of



defensive like. "Never know when you might have to."

"You can say that, again." I guess Boone could relate. On account of he was always looking for a good place to hide or run off to.

"Where'd the heater vent lead?" I wanted to know in case I ever needed to crawl through it, myself. Situations we'd been in, lately, I figured I couldn't be too careful, either.

"There wasn't one. By the time I got that far under the bed to find out, I didn't hear anything else. There was a handle, though. Made a weird bump under the rug like a trap door, or something. I was about to look closer but then I heard Hud calling me from down the hall." He sat back in his seat again, and started looking around at the sights.

"I thought you said Hud was downstairs talking to somebody."

"What would I be doing halfway down the second floor hallway just talking to somebody?" I asked. "Place gives me the creeps."

"Must have been somebody else then," said Looney.

Boone and I looked at each other. "What room number were you in?" He asked.

"Number seven."

"Just what I thought. That's right over the top of where Public Enemy Number One, used to stay. The same place the bellboy always shows up. See, he had to stay up all night sometimes on account of they worked him so hard. Bringing him and his gang every little thing they might need. Which is why that kid ended up dying there after he got the pneumonia. It's also why—"

“Hold it—hold it right there, Boone,” I interrupted. “Do not—repeat—not—start in with any of your spook stories when we gotta ride under the Devil's Highway for who-knows-how-long it'll take to get off this mountain. Hear me?”

“I love spook stories!” said Looney.

“Yeah? They cloud your judgement,” I told him. “Scare the bejitters out of you if ever you have to walk through some dark place with all your brains intact. Seriously.”

“Mrs. Dumfries says there's no such thing as ghosts.”

“Some people say there are and some say there aren't. And I agree with them.”

Boone laughed his hyena laugh again, and we couldn't help laughing with him. I don't know why. That laugh of his is catching, maybe. Either that, or driving down the side of a steep mountain, getting chased by coyotes, or scared silly by Miz Lucinda, was starting to get to us.

“Hey, whose the Public Enemy Number One?” Looney asked when he could talk, again.

“A bad guy from way back. Even before my dad was born. Some gangster dude named, John Dillinger.”

“He was a gang leader?”

“They called them gangsters back then, but it's the same thing.”

“Oh. We had a guy at the home for awhile who was a gang member, but he didn't stay long. They took him off to juvie almost soon as he got there. Never did come back.”

“That juvenile hall...” I shook my head and turned

around to make sure no one was gaining on us from behind. "I sure have heard some awful stories about it." After that, I looked down onto the flat desert in the far-off distance, but I couldn't see the town. In fact, I didn't recognize anything out there. "Hey, Boone, you got any idea what direction we're headed? Nothing looks familiar to me out here."

"Me, either," he admitted.

"What? You gotta be kidding me! I thought you knew everything about this mountain!"

"Don't know anything about the back side. Never been over here before. I was figuring on going dead west once we got to the old Apache ruins we were supposed to spend the night in, last time. But that was before we slipped off the trail and couldn't get back up, again."

"Well, what direction are we headed, now?"

"Uh..." He squinted at a compass mounted on the driver's side of the dashboard. "Mostly south."

"South—that's Mexico! You want to slip past the coyotes you at least gotta steer clear of Mexico!"

"Too steep to turn back west yet, and we sure can't go east." He aimed downhill a little more to get past a red rock pile that looked like some giant had come along and stacked a bunch of boulders one on top of the other. "Don't worry, though. Oughta level off some more somewhere. Then we'll be able to get our bearings."

"I don't know how we can get our bearings if we never had any to start with. Seriously, Boone. It's only about ten miles to the horizon and if there's too much junk in front of you to see it to begin with, you could pass it right up without knowing."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

“Everything! That's what. Because you'd have passed up Ashbury, already. It wouldn't matter how long you went west, then. You could go west for three hours and it wouldn't help. You'd be in Mexico! Next thing you know we'd be driving right into downtown Nogales. All kind of bad things go on there.”

“Well—dang—I sure can't drive us over a cliff! If we don't find a way down soon, we'll just have to head north for a while to make up for it.”

“We passed up Ashbury, already?” Looney leaned forward and popped his helmet between the seats again, but this time I moved out of the way in time. “I don't have permission to stay out another night, guys. I gotta check in by dinner.”

“What do you mean you don't have permission?” I asked him. “You're supposed to be staying with us, now. Hiding out with the other orphans that don't want to get shipped.”

“I am.”

“Then what are you worried about permission for if you're not even living there, anymore?”

“Mrs. Dumfries likes me to check in every couple hours, anyway. Besides, I have to walk Jonesie through town after dinner to visit Samantha. She's scared climbing two stories up on a ladder without someone holding it from down below. Only way to sneak into that sick room is to climb up the outside wall. After dark.”

“Sheesh—are you kidding me? You'll get caught taking all those chances. Sooner or later, somebody will either see you running through town or catch you back there at the home. Might even get the whole bunch caught, Looney. Here me? I can't believe Samantha

would ask you to do that.”

“I told you she was trouble.” Boone bounced over a rock he should have gone around and Looney’s helmet hit me in the ear, again.

“Will you sit back?” I pushed against the helmet till he backed off.

“I can’t hear so good with this thing on.”

“What’s the difference? Even when you do hear you don’t listen most of the time. Taking care of the whole bunch means the whole bunch. Get it? And you don’t go against orders, no matter who asks you.”

“Samantha’s where Jonesie gets all her inside information from. We’d never known we were getting shipped if she hadn’t been in the sick room all this time.”

“You remember what I told you when you made the swear, Looney?” Boone asked him.

For a few seconds he was quiet, then answered, “Yep.”

“Well, I meant it. First time you get someone else in trouble.”

“But I been doing my missions!” He popped his head between the seats, again.

“I still mean it. Nobody that’s hiding out leaves the fun park anymore. Especially after that new curfew starts up. They’ll be patrolling the streets then. You guys get caught by the soldiers and there’s no way we can get you back.”

Seems like whenever Boone talks straight up with somebody in that for-sure kind of tone he gets whenever he has to make a decision, people listen to him. No matter who they are. About the time I was thinking you had to be born with that talent, and it wasn’t something just

anybody could learn, he got a look on his face like he just saw the ghost of Public Enemy Number One pop out of the radiator.

“Ooohhhh—noooo!” He yanked his foot off the gas but we kept rolling down the hill, anyway. “The Border Patrol—it's the Border Patrol! Look at that—she must have turned us in, already!”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### CRASH

*“I resolved to see what I could do in  
the space of time allowed...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

The instant I heard the thump-ity thump-ity thump-ity of helicopter rotors, I caught sight of a big one flying in low around the mountain and headed right for us. “Crash into that big clump of bushes next to the outcrop!” I hollered. “Maybe they won’t see us!”

Boone must have had the same thought because he was steering for it even before I quit yelling. We bumped over a rock pile we didn’t see at the base of it, and the thing tipped the Rhino onto its side against the red wall. If we hadn’t all been buckled in, we’d have probably flew out and killed ourselves. A bunch of stickers ground into my arm from the open window area underneath me, and Boone’s backpack bounced down onto my head.

“Oww!” I couldn’t help squalling when I tried to move. “This is—a big patch of—tumbleweed!”

The engine went quiet all of a sudden as Boone turned off the key. “Shhh! Don’t anybody move!”

I didn’t hear a peep out of Looney but I sure couldn’t

turn around to check on him. The thump of the helicopter was getting so close I could feel it in my chest, and a few seconds later a bunch of sand started to fly against the side of the Rhino. All I saw was a big shadow, though. When the sound got farther off and the debris settled, I knew it must have gone past. I shoved the heavy backpack from between my shoulder and head with my free arm, and tried to unbuckle my seatbelt.

“Wait! Not, yet!” Boone whispered like somebody might be coming up on us any second. “Could be they're just looking for a place to land.”

“Could be just a regular patrol.” I looked at my watch. “One o'clock. Miz Lucinda said we had till three to get back to the car, so maybe it wasn't her.”

“Sure would explain that bunch of coyotes hanging out in the bushes instead of up on the trail when we slid down.” Boone unsnapped his seatbelt and fell smack on top of me.

“Owww! Do you mind? I'm sitting on a bajillion stickers, here!”

“Sorry.” He dug a knee into my shoulder and raised himself up high enough to reach the top of the roll bar and pull himself up. “I'll bet those coyotes knew the regular patrol was coming, and just jumped up to see who was driving down off the Devil.” He stuck his head out a little at a time, until he could see all around. “Nobody out here. They flew around the curve already.”

I unsnapped my own seatbelt and crawled out after him. My arm felt like a swarm of fire ants was eating on it, and when I looked down there were bloody scratches and thorns sticking up all over it. “Oh, holy crud...” I tried to pick one out but my fingers were shaking too much to



grab hold.

“You all right, Looney?” I heard Boone's shoes crunching on the rocks as he moved to look over the side and peek into the back. “Hey—he's not here! What the heck?”

I scrambled to see for myself. There wasn't anything back there except a seatbelt hanging loose from the seat that was bolted down. We had crushed a pretty good path through the giant tumbleweed, and at the end of the short corridor, there was the big wooden box with our camping supplies in it. Hadn't busted open or anything. Next to that we saw the five-gallon gas can. That hadn't busted, either. We didn't dare call out to Looney in case anyone was close by, but you can bet we were looking all over for him.

A few seconds later we heard a choked-short howl from somewhere behind us, and turned around to see him staggering up out of the tumbleweeds with his mouth hanging open and nothing coming out of it anymore. He was covered in dirt, his helmet was cocked at a weird angle but still hanging on by the chin strap, and he had way more blood and stickers in his arms than me. He must have flown over the top of us and hit that tumbleweed head on.

“Dang, Looney—what'd you take your seatbelt off for?” Boone leaned over and spit on account of the sight of all that blood and stickers turned your guts to jelly just looking.

But he still couldn't get a word out and busted out bawling, instead.

“OK...” I had to take a couple of deep breaths, myself. “OK. Everybody just hold on a minute. We

haven't even been gone an hour and we've had two crackups already! If we don't decide on a plan and follow it through we'll be dead before three o'clock. Seriously!"

Looney dropped to a sitting position and quieted down some. Boone turned his back on us and walked a few steps away. Probably to look out onto the desert and see if the helicopter landed somewhere, or listen for anything besides us. Me, I just sat down in the dirt and breathed deep for a minute. Not long after, the total hugeness of the place smothered even our own noises with a quiet so big it made me feel like nothing but a half-dead nat hanging off a dog's ear.

I looked at the Rhino wedged against the side of the big rock with hardly any room to tip it up right, again, and wondered how in the world we could get out of such a mess. It would take a couple hours to get it pulled out of there ourselves, and at least two days to hike home from here without it. By that time the curfew would be on, and Miz Lucinda would have every policeman and soldier around looking to slap us into juvenile hall the minute they spotted us. Since our parents got us off once, they probably couldn't do it again, even if they wanted to. I just plain couldn't see any way out. Other than staying hid like some wild thing and living up on this mountain for who knows how long.

Looney shuddered, sighed a big sigh, and turned a bunch of dirt into a smear of mud on his face when he rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hand. It was the only part of him that wasn't bristled all over with stickers like a porcupine. I was thinking how maybe we should pour some water over the rest of him and try to get some of those things out before he swole up, or something. Then

I thought again. If we ended up very long in this desert, we'd have to find another source of water before we went pouring it out for anything but drinking.

Looney stifled another sob, hiccuped, and finally quit bawling. Which was a good thing, on account of—by that time—I felt pretty close to bawling, myself. Then Boone let loose with a loud, shrill whistle that made us both jump.

“Sheesh, Boone!” I got to my feet and looked around in every direction. “What are you trying to do—let every coyote within ten miles know where we're at? Holy crud—they could be right behind us somewhere!”

“Maybe they'll think it's the patrols out looking for them, and stay put.”

“Fat chance—if they know the helicopter didn't land. They'd kill us in two seconds flat just to get the Rhino!”

Looney busted out bawling, again.

“Then we better cover it up with bushes, hide somewhere farther off, and wait things out.” He started back toward the Rhino while he was still talking. “I say they'll be headed for the Devil 'bout as fast as they can go, and after that the old ruins for the night. Don't know how much they can see of down here from the Highway, but it's better not to take chances. We gotta hide for awhile.”

“Yeah, well if they don't head for the Highway and come this way looking for the Rhino, they'll be here any minute!” Even though I was arguing, I was following behind him.

When we got back he climbed in to get our backpacks, and a few minutes later we were cutting off big branches of tumbleweed with our hand-axes.

Burying every inch of the Rhino that was sticking out. Looney was still sitting where I left him, and I couldn't blame him. At least he was quiet, now. A few minutes later, we heard rocks scuttling down from above us off the highway.

Somebody was up there!

Boone gasped, dropped a big branch he was getting ready to toss onto the top of the pile and lit back down the corridor with me right behind. No time to hide the camping box or gas can. All we could do was hope Looney would follow. We had to find somewhere farther up the mountain to hide. Not that whoever it was wouldn't come looking, but it would at least buy us some time to double back somewhere above the Highway while they were distracted.

Because let's face it. Anyone who sees a big wide set of tire tracks sliding into a clump of bushes is going to investigate. No doubt. I only hoped we could skin out with our lives before they stopped being all excited about the Rhino. Not to mention the gas and camping stuff. Having wheels this far out on the desert could mean life or death to people who were risking their necks hoofing it across on foot. Maybe they wouldn't chase us at all and just take the prize.

We high-tailed it to the next rock outcrop higher up and climbed to the top instead of hiding behind it. There was a slight (really slight) chance we had got far enough around the curve of the mountain for whoever might still be up on the trail to see us by looking down. Anyway, we flattened ourselves against the top of the rock like lizards, and hoped so. None of us moved a muscle. Even Looney's survival instincts must have kicked in because

he was as quiet and still as a snake beside us.

For a few more minutes nothing happened. I figured they must be trying to get into the tumbleweeds by now, but we were too far away to see anything from here even if we poked our heads up. So, we just waited. And waited some more. A few minutes after that we heard footsteps headed in our direction. Boone made a soft quiet moan against the arm his forehead was resting on, and I knew he was scared enough to bust.

The footsteps stopped.

Then started up and came closer.

Boone's breathing got heavy and I felt about to bust, too. The footsteps stopped, again. About the time I was trying to remember something—anything Spanish I knew (Que mas? No, that was how much)—to try and talk us out of this, a loud—really loud—sound of somebody blowing raspberries blasted all around.

Boone's head popped up like a Jack-in-the-Box. Then he stood up and took a flying leap off the rock before I even realized what was happening. There was a soft ker-thunk and I couldn't tell if he was crying or laughing before I scooted up to the edge and looked down there. Of course, the first thing I hoped was that his dad had come back from the wars, tracked us all the way out here, and was going to save us in the nick of time. But it wasn't.

It was the next best thing, though. It was Grampy's old white mule, Miss Jenny. She must have heard the whistle and come lickety-split down off the mountain, thinking it was Grampy calling her. I guess Boone took that flying leap onto her back before she realized it was him and not Grampy. Now, he had both hands latched

into her short mane, just trying to hang on as she ran round and around our rock like a crazy thing.

“Get me a rope, Hud!” he hollered. “Before she throws me!”

I slid and skidded down the outcrop with Looney not far behind, and headed to where I left my backpack over by the Rhino. We always carried a rope for emergencies. I gave Looney one end, and ran across the place Miss Jenny was going to come around the outcrop, again. “Hold tight!” I hollered at him, as she came busting up against it, and stopped short, totally surprised. Within a few minutes we had a rope halter on her, and she was calm as a house pet after that. I think she was even glad to see us.

“I gotta hand it to you, Boone!” I told him as we all headed back to the Rhino. “Whistling her up like that was brilliant!”

“Will she bite?” Looney wanted to know.

“Only if you're mean to her,” he answered.

“I'd never—I love animals.” He patted her thick neck with his one hand that didn't have stickers as we walked along. “Are we gonna use her to get home? Take turns riding her maybe?”

“No, we're gonna use her to pull the Rhino up out of that slot,” said Boone. “She wouldn't do good in town, so we leave her up here with the rest of the herd.”

“You mean there's more?”

“Yeah, there's a whole bunch. We use them for packing stuff in and out of the mine tunnels. OK, let's tie the other end of the rope to the bumper. We gotta get outta here!”

It didn't take us more than fifteen minutes once we

got everything tied in the right places. Which just goes to show you can do almost anything as long as you have the right tools to make it happen. By the time we got the camping box and gas can—along with the extra time it took to find Looney's backpack in the mess of tumbleweed he dove into—I don't think much more than an hour had passed since we tipped over.

Boone took an extra few minutes hugging Miss Jenny's head against his chest until she quit trying to pull away and just breathed in the smell of him. Then he sent her off up into the mountain, again, with a smack on the rump and an, "OK, get!" She headed straight up to the Highway, moving out fast like it wasn't any harder running up than running down. He didn't turn around, only stood there watching her for so long it occurred to me he was probably thinking about Grampy. Wondering what he would do if he were here to decide. But he wasn't.

"What if the coyotes get her?" Looney asked me.

"They won't. Most of them think the mules are too wild to catch and they'd take too long to mess with. They're in a hurry, same as us." I looked over at him. Man, was he a sight. Even his t-shirt was torn. "You know it's lucky you didn't get killed?"

"I had to unbuckle to get into my backpack."

"Sure picked a bad time to do it. Come on, let's go."

"What about Boone?"

"He'll be along."

I drove this time because scared as I was to drive down the mountain, I figured I couldn't do any worse than Boone had, getting us into two crack-ups, already. He needed a break, anyway. I wasn't as good as him driving by the seat of my pants—like the machine was

part of my body—but I was getting there. So, I didn't make any excuses when he slumped into the passenger side without saying a word. Instead, I just climbed behind the wheel, buckled myself in and said, "Let's go boys!" the way we always did when we took off in one of the vehicles at the fun park.

It was mostly for Looney. Boone and I had been through so much together ever since last summer, we hardly needed words. And I knew what he was feeling being out here, again—without Grampy—because I could feel it in my own gut, too. Didn't matter that we weren't really related. That's when I realized how strong a thing being adopted into something really was.

Made me realize something else, too. Somewhere along the line I started feeling the same way about Looney Martin. Didn't make any difference how he busted his way into the group, didn't do half what he was told, or that his brain worked crosswise to everybody else most of the time. He was one of the bunch same as Boone and me, the orphans, and even Miz Lucinda, if you came right down to it. We didn't all get along, and we maybe didn't even all like each other. But the bunch was the bunch.

Which is why I swore to myself, right then and there, no matter what was going on down in the flat back at Ashbury, I was going to get every last orphan that wanted to join us hid away safe inside Little Heely Mesa. Even if no adults ever came over to our side. My own family included. That's how it was as I hung onto the wheel, weaved in and out of the rocks too big to bounce over, and inched our way down the the steep back side of Padre Gordo. I never felt so sure of anything in my life.



I never felt so sure I could actually do it, either.

Here I was—William Hudson—driving us down out of danger like I'd been doing things like this all my life. Same as Boone. I wasn't born into it like he was, but it didn't matter. I got there by making my own choice for it and getting adopted into the good stuff as much as the bad. But I didn't care. The important thing was I was there.

Thinking about all that stuff made me feel like I could win World War Three single-handed, if that's what all this was coming down to. Which is why it surprised me—and I mean totally out of left field surprised me—when I heard the phone ring inside Boone's pocket (we must have just come into range), and I hollered out, “Don't answer it—don't answer it!”

Scared silly, again.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### OVER THE EDGE

*"We went for a considerable distance along a splendid high road which led up into the mountains..."*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

"If it's Mom, I gotta." Boone took a two-second look at his phone then popped it back into his pocket again, without answering. "It's just her."

He never called Miz Lucinda by her name. Just "that nurse-lady," or something worse. He didn't realize she was as worried about him as he was about her. But I was starting to think she was too smart to do anything really bad to us before she figured out where the gold was. As long as she still didn't know, I had a feeling she wouldn't turn us over to the Juvenile Hall, either. Because once the system got hold of us, nobody could get us out, again. Especailly if we got centered to some place far away.

Then she'd never know where the gold was.

"Hey, Boone," I was sort of thinking out loud. "I wonder if anyone ever escapes from those places they get sent to. I mean, I wonder if they're like jails, or if they're just another place like Ashbury. Think about it. Nobody's

standing guard-duty at the highway to make sure cars don't go in or out. Denny could be on his way home right now. Just hasn't got here, yet."

"Yeah, but if what she says is true, all that's going to change next week. When the curfew starts and we can't buy food at the grocery store anymore. Won't be any traveling on the highways except government business. She won't be able to just send somebody looking for him anymore. Starting next week, there'll only be one way to do it, and that's with a bribe. So, since money won't be any good then, she needs the gold."

I expected Looney's head to pop between the seats and ask, "What gold?" When he didn't, I threw a look over my shoulder to see if he was still there. He was slouched over with his head leaning against his backpack, and the helmet still on. Sleeping like the dead.

"He's been zonked ever since the engine started." Boone answered like I came right out and said it. "I figure we won't have to worry about things for at least a couple weeks. Long as we make it home first. But if she's calling, she's not up in Padre Gordo anymore. No reception up there. Town's cut too deep into the mountain, with the other mountain too close in front of it for a signal to come through. So she's either down on the flat, or back at the car, already."

"She said she'd wait till three, though. Probably why she's calling. To see if we're coming, or not."

"She knew we weren't coming the minute we skipped out on lunch. But it could buy us some time if she actually waits till three like she said. If she gets home too early, though, people will think she didn't look hard enough for us. She's no dummy."

I swerved around a cactus clump I hadn't noticed and slid about ten feet sideways before catching control, again. It was the first time something like that didn't make my heart jump into to my throat, thinking we might roll over. But after two crack-ups, and knowing a roll-over at this slow speed wasn't going to kill us, I wasn't so scared of it, anymore.

I looked at my watch. "Two-thirty. Even though it's longer by the highway, she could still beat us leaving at three. Going seventy miles an hour she can. We'll be crawling like a caterpillar till we get down off this mountain. Even on the flat when we can do forty."

"If we do forty we won't make it."

"Dang, Boone—just one more gallon could've got us there. What were you doing all that time in the cellar if you didn't get any food or gas?"

"Setting up a trap for you-know-who."

"Well, if she just called us she got out of it already."

"Wasn't that kind of trap. It's for later back home. And I was about to swing back with the Rhino and put the food in, but soon as I saw you guys running toward me, I figured she was right on your tail. So, I just picked you up and tromped on it."

For a minute neither of us said anything.

Boone sighed and looked up the hill. "Can't see the Devil anymore, so the coyotes probably can't see us, either. Farther we get away from the route they were on we might not see any more of them between here and home. We'd have a better chance if we were down on the flat, though. But..." He turned back around and looked as far as he could see downhill. "I don't think we're even halfway off, yet. Hard to tell when you can only see a

little of it at a time.”

I looked at the compass on the dash. “Still headed mostly south, too. Which means we won't be making as much of a beeline as we thought, once we get down.”

“She's gonna beat us.”

“Maybe you should call your mom and let her in on what's happening. I bet if you turned off location services on your cell, and kept it short, we might not pop up on any Border Patrol surveillance.”

“I promised Mom not to. She wouldn't let me come otherwise. Says she has to have some place to start if we turn up lost.” Boone never went back on a promise no matter what kind of trouble it caused him. Just the way he was raised, probably.

“Well, then...” we came out onto a sort of peninsula that stretched right out into the mid-air where you could see a long way out over the desert. It went on for so far, and we were still so high up, we had to make a choice which way to head down. “To the right would keep us north,” I said. “But we could get spotted if the Devil winds around on this side. Do you know how long it stays on the mountain?”

“I think it winds down into the pass, underneath Padre Gordo. Otherwise the town would have been overrun by coyotes a long time ago. I don't know where, though. I've never been on it. Seen it on maps a couple times but never paid much attention. All I know is you can't see any of it from Padre Gordo, and you can only pick it up way down the mountain from the back side of the stronghold. Where we came down with the mules, last summer.”

“If we go left, there's nothing says we won't end up

in Mexico.”

“Pick the side that's less steep, then. If we crack up on the mountain too far south to get ourselves out, we're gonna be beat no matter where we are.”

I went right.

“Hey, wait.” Boone turned around and looked behind us again, and then stared hard out in front. “This looks like some kind of gully. Probably one of the places where water gushes down after a winter we get a good snow-pack on top. See all these rocks? Sort of rounded over like river rocks.”

“Looks awful steep, though. Be more like a waterfall if water was gushing down.”

“Wouldn't be that much water. Just sort of a wide constant flow that only lasts a week, or so. There's a lot of them on the other side. Usually so shallow you can walk through them. Most years they don't get any water, at all.”

“Man, this is no time to stop and see the sights.” I was getting nervous about getting off the mountain if it suddenly got too steep to drive down and we had to head back toward the Devil's Highway, again. Not to mention I do not enjoy sitting on a piece of mountain this high up where I could spit out into the mid-air on both sides. Who cares what the view looked like, I just wanted to get off.

“Let's ride it down.”

“What? You gotta be kidding me! Sheesh—what if it takes a pitch over some rock face, or something?”

“Then we get out of the gully.”

“By that time, it could be too steep to get out!”

“Will you chill? What could happen at ten miles an hour? It's a shortcut, see? Headed mostly straight down.”

“Oh, holy crud...” I could feel little prickles of sweat starting under my hatband.

“Don't worry, there's no way we can tumble all the way down this mountain, Hud. Too many rocks in the way. Sooner, or later one will pop up in front to stop us, just like before.” He took his hat off and reached for one of the helmets down by his feet. “We better put these on though. Just in case.”

“Holy crud, Boone!”

“You said that, already. Want me to drive?”

“Not really.”

“Well, let's go then. Think of all the gas we'll save when all we'll have to do is ride the brakes.”

I pushed my hat off, took the helmet he handed me, and shoved it down onto my head. How come every time I started to get comfortable with something we had to notch it up to where I was scared silly, again? Then I wondered if being in that kind of state for prolonged periods could take years off your life. If it did, I'd have a hard time making thirty at this rate.

“You gonna drive like an old woman, or what?” Boone laughed his hyena laugh, which actually made me feel better. He might not know the back side of this mountain but he definitely had driven over every kind of terrain there was on it.

“Gonna try to,” I answered. “See if Looney's buckled in tight enough.”

He reached back and yanked on the seatbelt. “Yep, he's good. Let's go.”

I gave it a little gas and eased forward, thinking I'd tromp on the brakes as soon as it started to slide, so I could figure how much control I had. But it didn't slide.

Instead the river rocks slowed us down like trying to run through deep sand. And even though it was steeper, I could put us in a dead stop anywhere I wanted.

"I gotta hand it to you, Boone." I eased off on holding the wheel so tight, took a deep breath and let it out slow. "For never being out here before, you sure guessed right on these rocks."

"I didn't guess."

"Calculated, then."

"Didn't do that, either. Got stuck in some of the same stuff, year before last, and my dad and Grampy had to rig a pulley up from the top of the slide just to get me out. Got my hide tanned too, on account of I wasn't supposed to be there."

"Why, 'cause it was too steep?"

"Naw. Because it's hard to tell the difference between the natural ones, and the man-made kind they used to bring water down to the mine holes with. There were a lot of little operations, back in the Great Depression days, and people were working ore right at the entrance to their holes. That's mostly all they were. Just holes dug into the side of the mountain. Saved a lot of hauling if only one or two people were working it."

My stomach felt like a flock of birds just got let loose in it. "Boone. Are you telling me there could be mine holes in this gully, if it's the man-made kind instead of the God-kind?"

"Even if there was it's been a way long time since the Depression. Anyway, most of those holes were only big enough for a man to crawl into. Three of us could get ourselves unstuck easy."

"What about the others? The big ones."



“Gotta watch out for those, all right.”

“Sheesh, Boone! How can we watch out for anything when it's too steep to see more than thirty feet ahead of us at a time?”

“We're going plenty slow enough to drive around.”

He sat up straighter and got serious about looking. “Keep an eye out for man-made things. Like lumber. Or old sluice boxes. The bigger mines had to be shored up with lumber if they got any deeper than about ten feet in.”

“I wouldn't know a sluice box if it spit at me!”

“It's sort of like a really long planter box. Look for metal stuff, too. Like chains and cables for pulling heavy stuff up out of the holes.”

For about the next half hour I had my teeth clenched so tight my jaw started to ache. I seriously had to relax. If we got this far without seeing anything man-made, it was more proof with every mile we were in a God-made slide and not a man one. I took about three deep breaths and forced myself to calm down. Less than five minutes after that, I saw something. An old rusted out coffee pot sitting on a flat rock, off to one side.

We were driving down a man-made slide.

Chapter Twenty-Four  
THE GOLD MINES OF PADRE GORDO

*“I whipped out my prismatic compass and quickly took the bearings of two conspicuous points on the neighboring hills, and so fixed the position which could be marked on a large scale map...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

“Hold up.” Boone took off his seatbelt and reached for the handhold at the top of the roll bar to pull himself out. “I better walk up ahead to make sure we don't ride over the top of a big one and crash down into it.”

I couldn't answer because my heart started pounding like it was trying to bust out of my chest. Nobody in the world could find us if we crashed down into a mine. Even the location services wouldn't work down there. I was for putting out a call, right now, just so there would be a record of where we were last. Miz Boone was almost supernatural when it came to knowing if Boone was in trouble, but even she would be stumped if we were halfway to the Mexican border instead over on the other side of the mountain where we belonged.

“Hey, Boone!” I hollered before he got too far ahead.

Looney popped his head between the seats and our

helmets bumped into each other. “How come we stopped? Whoa—whoa!” He did a three-sixty trying to figure out where we were. “Did we fall off the mountain, again?”

I heard his seatbelt click and snapped my head around to look at him. “Leave it on, man—you want to get pitched out, again? We’re on the edge of a cliff, here!”

He buckled back up.

When I looked forward, again, Boone wasn’t there anymore. I knew he probably just moved too far down the slant of the mountain, but I was only going to give him about three more seconds before jumping out, myself, to see if he fell into a hole. We were almost to the coffee pot, so I figured if I kept to that side of the gully—where the miners must have gone back and forth on their daily routine—I wouldn’t fall into it, myself.

“Looney?”

“What.”

“Crawl up here and keep your foot on this brake while I go see what happened to Boone.”

“OK.”

I heard the click of the belt, again, and he climbed over the seats instead of going around to the door opening. “Mostly it’s the rocks holding us back but I don’t want to take any chances.” I pulled myself out slow and easy and waited until he was in the driver’s seat before starting down the hill. “If we’re not back in five minutes, ease over to the right bank and start inching your way down till you catch up to us. Isn’t much different than the go-carts but it has a way lot more power. So, don’t tromp on it.”

“OK.”

Looney wasn't afraid much of anything and he had turned out to be pretty good at driving the go carts. It was looking for something to do when he was bored that got him in trouble most of the time. Right now, I wasn't worried half as much about him as I was Boone. While Boone knew almost everything there was to know around here, he lived mostly by his instincts and never thought twice before he jumped. For all I knew, he was sitting about fifteen feet down some hole with something busted.

I took my time moving along because I had to get used to letting my feet sink down into the rocks about six inches and then sticking there before I pulled my other one free from behind and stepped ahead. It was like walking with suction-cups. Like the gravity went cross-wise, up here instead of up and down. After a while, I felt like I could do a hand spring off the face, straight out into the mid-air, and the gully rocks would catch and hold me no matter where I landed. By the time I had all that figured out, and started looking up ahead instead of at my feet, I caught sight of Boone. He was on his knees with his head stuck into a hole.

He popped up as soon as he heard me coming, and I saw he had his flashlight and had been looking around in there. "Hey, Hud—you gotta see this!"

"I thought you were supposed to be warning me where the holes were." I unhooked my own flashlight from my belt and knelt down beside him.

"I don't think anyone's been here since the Depression days. Look at that, they were camping out in the front part, here."

I panned the bright beam of my little LCD over a cot

with old dusty blankets on it, and a wood table with metal scales, a couple of books, and some rolled-up papers on top that could have been maps. The opening was small and shored up with wooden beams but it went down on a slant and opened up to at least ten feet tall inside. I don't know how far it went back because there was a jog off to the left with another shored up opening that went somewhere else. On the other side, there was another cot, and a wooden trunk with an old lantern on top.

"This is a good hideout if we ever have to come back up the south side, again," Boone said. "Plenty of room inside, too. You maybe should make some notes so we can map the route. Like you did back in the tunnels when we were with Grampy. At least write down the landmarks and stuff, so we can find it, again."

"How far do you think we are from Padre Gordo?" I couldn't take my eyes off a couple picks and shovels leaning against the back wall, and was wondering if they ever got any gold out of this thing.

"Five miles, maybe. Six at the most. We wasted a whole hour up at the rock, so it seems like more."

"I'll start from the rock place, then. We can put our heads together when we get home and try to figure out before that. Between the crack-ups and the coyotes I'm not sure where we started."

"Better write down the compass points, too, then. If we could find a route back to Padre Gordo that stayed clear of the Devil—well-hid most of the time—we maybe could set up a supply line no one else would know about."

I heard the sound of the Rhino coming closer, so I stood up. "Give a whistle if you spot any other ones

because we can't see far enough over the rise for you to signal. We'll be hugging the bank just to be safe." There was a loud clanking sound as the coffee pot came tumbling past. "Looney's hugging the bank."

Farther down, we found a whole community of little holes, but none of them were as big as the one higher up. You could tell where they were by the pile of ore rocks in front of each one. Some crushed to pebbles, and other big chunks, but all of them a darker color than the river rocks we were slogging through. Boone walked ahead, Looney drove, and I started making a map in a notebook I kept in my backpack. I don't like to brag but I'm pretty sure I could get us back through the caverns of the stronghold just by following the notes I made when we went through there with Grampy last summer.

After the community mines, we weren't that far up the mountain anymore. Less than an hour after that we were back onto the flat. Now, if anyone spotted us we'd just look like off-roaders whomping around out here in the desert, enjoying Saturday. We cut northwest for a while, and after about an hour of that Boone turned on the maps app in his phone.

"We're still twenty-eight miles away." He clicked it off, again.

He was back behind the wheel, Looney was stretched out on the seat behind, sawing Zs, again (but he was buckled in just in case we took a spill down into a dry riverbed, or something). By that time it was closing in on five o'clock and we were racing sunset. As fast as you could race at twenty miles-an-hour, anyway. On account of we didn't want to run out of gas five miles out of Ashbury.

We also didn't want to get pulled over by the police for driving an off-road vehicle through town. So, we made a bee-line for Little Heely Mesa, and figured we'd just head for the fun park through that stretch of desert at the back. About the time we got there the show would be starting up, so we shouldn't have any trouble parking the Rhino inside without attracting too much attention. In the carport behind Miz Boone's office, we decided.

Me, I just wanted to get home as fast as I could and talk to my sister, Meg. In case she wanted to head back to Tucson early, like she did sometimes if she had a lot of homework to do. Not to mention I wanted to get all the dried-up blood and dirt off my arm so I could pull the stickers out. Every time I forgot about them and bumped into something they still hurt like fire. I figured I better take Looney with me, too, on account of he was worse off than I was.

Mom was used to me coming home in a mess, so we had lots of whatever we needed to take care of that kind of stuff. I have to admit I got butterflies in my stomach as soon as we passed Little Heely though, on account of I hadn't exactly thought up a good excuse to tell my dad why we took off from Miz Lucinda and lit out down the mountain on our own. Probably shouldn't mention the coyotes right away. I'd have to tell him sooner or later. So, I decided later.

Boone must have been feeling the same way because he got quiet the closer we got, too. Thinking what and how much he was going to tell his mom about everything, same as I was. Miz Boone was different though. She had some kind of respect for Boone even though she jumped and hollered a lot. She trusted him

with stuff, too. Me, I'd be lucky if my sisters didn't grab me the minute I walked in the door and pulled every last sticker out before I even had a chance to take care of myself. Then harp on me for whatever it was made me do such a thing.

As it turned out, it was almost eight o'clock by the time Looney and I dragged ourselves around to the back door and tried to sneak in quiet through the kitchen. At least Emily and Hannah would still be working at the fun park for another hour, and Mom and Meg might even be visiting in the downstairs den while Meg got ready for another week of school.

No such luck.

Turns out they were all having a snack in the kitchen when we walked in. Dad and Meg were talking at the table, and Mom was cutting everybody a slice of warm gingerbread when they looked up and saw us. We were getting a lot of interesting desserts in our house ever since we had to start making everything from scratch. Mostly out of the same three ingredients.

"William, what on earth!" Mom dropped the knife back into the pan and headed over. "Have you boys been in an accident?"

"We had two of them," said Looney. "The second one I pitched right out of the—"

I nudged him with my foot.

"Head-first into a sticker patch," he finished. "Didn't have time to pull 'em out, so, now we're all swole up."

I nudged him, again.

"I'll get the first aid kit." Meg headed for the bathroom where we kept it. She was wearing a red



University of Arizona T-shirt, but her long brown hair covered up all the words except "Wildcats" at the bottom.

Dad scooted back his chair and didn't say anything for a minute. Just flashed me a look like, "We'll talk about this later," and slid his plate of gingerbread that he hadn't taken a bite of, yet, toward the nearest empty chair. "Sit down and have some Looney, you look starved."

"Thanks, Mr. Hudson." He dropped his backpack in the middle of the floor and plunged into the chair. "I ate all my lunch by ten o'clock."

"Well, at least wash your hands, first." Mom pointed the knife toward the kitchen sink and went back to cutting more gingerbread. "Because the rest of you is going to take quite a while. Isn't like Nurse Parker not to take care of something like that right away. Or drop you off without saying anything, either. Where is she?"

"Uh... Maxwell got sick and started to throw up, so..." I sat down in Meg's chair and took a bite of her gingerbread just to give myself time to think of something without telling a lie.

"Well, no wonder she decided not to camp out then." Mom put another plate of gingerbread down for Meg. "Sometimes things just don't work out."

"I certainly hope you boys didn't give her such a hard time that she couldn't get home fast enough." Dad looked at me hard for a minute and then said, "William," in a way only he could say it.

"Some girl named Isabella called three times today, Will." Mom grabbed two mugs out of the cupboard and poured coffee for her and Dad from the electric pot. "About a science project, she said. You're not falling

behind on schoolwork since working at the fun park, are you?"

"No. We have a presentation due Friday and she probably just wanted to make sure I have my part done."

Looney jumped up so fast he knocked his chair over. "I gotta do my science project!"

"Let's get the stickers out, first." Meg came back in just then and motioned Looney toward the sink. She was the official nurse whenever she was around, on account of that's what she was studying to be at school. "Will can be next, since he doesn't have as many."

"I'll jump in the shower while I'm waiting," I got up before anyone could object. "Be right back."

Man, I needed some time to get my information straight. I tried calling Jones on my way past the upstairs phone but she wasn't home. She was probably wondering if we got an OK on the orphans staying at the fun park. Even though I was pretty sure Miz Boone would go for it once she knew all the facts, I really couldn't promise until Boone talked to her and made sure. I could at least say it was looking good, though. Maybe even by Monday, before the curfew went into effect.

After that, I got my strategy figured out for telling my family everything—and I mean everything—about what had been going on over the last couple days. Especially what we heard about the colleges closing up and students getting shipped off to different job cities. Except I couldn't think why Denny's cell phone wouldn't work if all that happened was he changed to a different location. Had to be a place to plug-in somewhere.

I almost always think better after a shower. Something to do with the warm steam clearing my brain

cells, I guess. Anyway, it occurred to me as I was heading back downstairs that there was only one reason to get your cell phone confiscated, and that was if you went to jail. But I changed my mind about that before I even got to the bottom. Miz Lucinda lost touch with Denny about the same time Boone lost touch with his dad. So, maybe it was just some complication with the communication systems, like everyone was saying.

“Your turn, Looney!” I hollered into the kitchen as I was jumping over the last three stairs.

But when I got back to the table, he wasn't there.

“He left, already,” Mom was stacking the empty plates, except mine that still had gingerbread on it. “Said he had to go work on his science project.”

“What?” I yanked open the back door and yelled for him.

He was nowhere in sight.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### SPILLING THE BEANS

*“On this occasion I thought the simplest way  
would be to go undisguised...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

“For heaven sake, Will.” Mom started running dishwasher into the sink to wash the couple of dessert dishes instead of using the dishwasher. “If he wants to work on his science project, let him go. Could be the first time in his life he's been that interested in any kind of schoolwork. Close the door now, it's getting chilly out there.”

“He didn't take off to do his science project.” I shut the door. “He'll just be out running around places he isn't supposed to, getting himself—maybe even a bunch of other people—in trouble.”

I sat down to finish my gingerbread, Dad got up to get himself another cup of coffee, and Meg moved into the chair next to me with the first aid kit. All the planning I did in the shower didn't seem so important, anymore. Not with Looney running loose out there even after Boone warned him not to.

"I take it that means he was a handful on the camping trip." Dad sat down at the table, again. "Kids like that usually are. Not much he could do to surprise Nurse Parker, though. She seems pretty capable."

"Oh, she's capable, all right. Especially when she uses lying, cheating, and a stick that can beat you black and blue from three feet away."

"William!" Mom turned around from the sink, dripping suds all over the floor and looked at me like I just let loose with a swear.

"It's the truth. You can even ask Looney, if he ever shows up, again. He got the worst of it all day, on account of—OWWW!!!"

"You missed one." Meg tossed the tweezers back into the box, and smiled her prettiest smile. Like she just gave me a treat instead of pulling a fire thorn out of the sorest, fleshiest part of my underarm. I thought I pulled them all out, myself, already.

"Dang, Meg! That hurt like—"

"Will, you know I don't like that kind of talk." It was Mom, again.

"But she just—"

"Don't argue, son." Dad said. "I want to hear everything that happened before I talk to Nurse Parker. So, get on with it."

"First of all, she only told us kids we were going on a day hike. To earn a genuine Boy Scout survival badge. That's because what she was really up to was—OWWW!" A blast of sub-zero antiseptic spray hit my arm like an electric shock.

"All done," said Meg. "That should make it feel better in a few minutes, and take some of the swelling

down, too.”

“Maybe she didn't want to go back on her word if you kids didn't behave,” Mom suggested. “Then with Maxwell getting sick it didn't work out for other reasons. There's always a logical explanation. I don't feel comfortable about her smacking other people's children, though. You should talk to her about that, Fred.”

“I'll mention it.” Dad rubbed a hand over his chin while he thought for a minute. He never shaved on Saturdays but by the time night rolled around he always wished he had. “Go on, Will. I want to call her before it gets too late. What's this you said she wanted to do?”

“I guess I should back up and tell you from the beginning.”

“Just tell me the important parts so I can give her a call. You can tell us the rest, afterward.”

“Right. Well...see, it's like this. Miz Lucinda's boy...”

“Who?”

“I mean Nurse Parker. Her oldest boy that went away to college up and disappeared, and she's about to go crazy looking for him. His college got shut down—just like yours is going to be any time now Meg, so you—”

“What?” She looked at me like she hadn't heard right.

“You can't go back there! I'm telling you, that's what happened to Denny. Miz Lucinda—I mean Parker's — son. They centered him off somewhere nobody can find him. Even his cell phone went dead!”

“Why that's just this solar flare we've got going on,” Mom came and sat down at the table with us and let the dishes go. “It's played havoc with all the long distance

and Internet for a good week, now. Right, Fred?"

"So they say. But I don't see what that has to do with the camping trip, Will."

"It's got everything to do with the camping trip! She needs something to make a bribe with so she can get him back. Now, here's the deal. There's only gonna be two things worth that much after next week. Food and—"

"A bribe!" Mom looked at me like I was delirious, now.

"Seriously, Mom, I am not making this up! She said our regular money isn't going to be any good after next week. You can even ask her yourself, Dad. And we won't be able to get in or out of town anymore, either. On account of that's gonna be outlawed, too. Except for government business."

"Why on earth would anyone want to scare children with stories like that?" Mom was looking at Dad when she asked, like Meg and I weren't even there all of a sudden.

"That isn't half of it. Wait till you hear—" I felt like I better hurry and get it all out, as long as they were listening.

"Daddy, I have to go back to school, I have mid-terms next week!" Meg jumped up from her chair about as fast as Looney, only she didn't knock anything over. Which made me pretty sure at least she believed me, on account of she only called him that as a last resort. Because she knew he couldn't resist it. "If I don't keep my grade points up I could lose my scholarship!"

"I better get to the bottom of this, right now." Dad got up from the table and headed for the phone in the hallway.

I figured I had about ten minutes to win Mom and Meg over before Miz Lucinda told a whopper I wasn't prepared for, on account of I couldn't even imagine the sort of things she could think up. She was that far ahead of kid thinking. Mom was still looking at me like she hadn't heard right, and Meg looked sort of scared all of a sudden.

I decided to work on Meg.

"I wish all we had to worry about was science projects and mid-terms," I told her. "But think about it. If somehow you got a tip that terrorists were gonna hit your university next week—maybe blow it up, or something—"

"William Hudson!" Mom interrupted.

But I had to keep on going. "Listen! Nurse Parker was in a meeting where they were briefing all the hospital people about how to handle things when the public starts to panic. That's where she found out about the money getting outlawed—it's so they can keep control of us with credit cards—and not being allowed to go out of town anymore without government permits. We already knew the curfew was coming since they told that at the last community meeting."

I stopped for a breath and for the first time, neither one of them said anything. Meg dropped back into her chair, again, and both of them just sat there staring at me like I had turned into something they never saw before.

"Nurse Parker already spent everything she had trying to get her son back," I explained. "So, she decided to try and bribe somebody in the military to help her. Well, the Boones have access to plenty of food and plenty of money. On account of they own the gold mines



up in Padre Gordo.”

“Those old gold mines have been tapped out for years,” Mom folded the blue dish towel she was still holding and laid it on the table. “Amelia told me herself, she has to work just as hard as the rest of us to make ends meet.”

“Mom. Believe me. They got a whole lot of gold out of them before they played out. It all gets shared out to take care of the whole family. Even the ones who live down in Texas. Anyway, Nurse Parker is a Boone. Not just any Boone. She's some kind of weird clone of Mad Maude, herself. Only meaner. You know what she was going to do?”

“Land sakes!” Mom was about as frustrated as she could get without walloping me. “If you come up with one more wild story, William—I'm going have your head examined!”

“But she was gonna lock us up somewhere in the ghost town and leave us there till we told her where the—”

“Vera?” Dad called from the hallway. “You have another number for Nurse Parker besides the one scribbled on the notepad, here?”

“No, that's her cell phone in case there's an emergency and we have to get hold of her wherever she is. Try calling information.”

“I did. It's busy. Like all the other long distance numbers. Where's the phone book?”

Mom slid her chair back and went in to help him look.

“Will?” Meg asked before she came back, again. “How do you know this kid didn't just quit college and

not tell anybody? A lot of people do.”

“Because Nurse Parker already investigated all that. Nobody answers at the college, anymore. Period. Besides that, Denny's been calling home—and coming home—regular, ever since he started there.”

“That could still be the communication system, though. When I tried to call home Thursday to see if Mom needed anything from the city, I couldn't get through. Then when I got here, everybody's fine. It did give me a start though. I mean, what if I had car trouble on the way back or something?”

“That's what I'm talking about, Meg! Don't you think it would be better to wait a few days just to make sure how all this goes down instead of getting separated from us for who knows how long? We'd go crazy worrying about you!”

Meg sighed, gathered her long hair up into a pony tail, then dropped it loose again, because she didn't have anything to hold it there with. I don't even think she knew she was doing that. It was just a habit. “I don't actually have a test until Tuesday,” she mumbled more to herself than me. “And that one's only online. Maybe I could wait a couple days. We'll know more by then.”

“Thanks, Meggie!” I got up and practically knocked her chair over with a bear hug. “I got enough to worry about without—”

“William?” Dad was standing in the doorway and Mom was right behind him. “Nurse Parker's daughter says she isn't coming home until tomorrow. Now, you better tell me, right now, how you boys got back almost a hundred miles all by yourselves.”

“And so help me!” Mom whopped me on the

backside before I had a chance to sit down, again. “If I find out you hitch-hiked all that way, you'll be grounded till Christmas!”

Chapter Twenty-Six  
THE BEGINNING OF THE END

*“And yet, somehow, I don't think we were worrying much about the consequences, but rather were busy with the present--as to how to evade pursuit and recapture...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Nothing ever works out like I plan. Not really. I fell into bed that night thinking everything was a bust. Our one chance of getting to Padre Gordo, and we didn't bring back even a lick of food. And after the things I told my folks, I don't think they'd ever let me go there, again. I didn't see how I could help anybody at the end of the world if I was grounded til Christmas, either. Turns out Mom thought just as low about off-road vehicles as hitchhiking.

After that, I was pretty sure if I let on about the Border Patrol or the coyotes, even Dad would get physical. It's his totally last resort when he thinks everything's out of control. Maybe it was. I sure hoped Boone had better luck talking to his mom than I had with mine. Not to mention the big lecture I got in the den from

Dad later on, about how I should have known better than to scare the daylights out of the girls that way. Better I should have talked it over with him, first. For all I knew, he had even less faith in me now than when we had our talk at the library.

At least Meg believed me.

I think I fell asleep the minute my head hit the pillow. And a minute's about all I got before I woke up to the loud racket of somebody trying to break in through the window. I hauled myself out of bed and unlatched it, ready to give Looney a piece of my mind he'd never forget for going against orders, like that. I shoved it up and dragged him in so fast he fell in a heap on the floor.

"Looney Martin!" I grabbed the back of his coat while he was still on the floor and shook him as hard as I could before pulling him up onto his feet. "I ought to knock you to the moon! For two cents I'd—"

It was Jones.

She was wearing a baggy leather jacket and a knit hat with her hair all stuffed up into it, but it was her. Even without her glasses and just the moon shining in I could tell. I expected I'd have to let her take a swing at me for pushing her around like that, but instead, she just choked out the words, "Looney's caught!" then dropped to the floor again, like she needed a minute to catch her breath. "And they got all the other orphans, too."

I felt like somebody punched me in the gut and sank down onto the floor, myself. "No way—I can't believe it! He can hide better than a snake if he has to—what happened?"

"He—he did it on purpose so we'd know where they took everybody! He's going to try and get out again, but

he wanted me to tell you, so you could figure out a rescue. Can you do it, Hudson?"

"Sheesh, I don't know. Where did they go?"

"They're all down at the hospital somewhere. Even Mrs. Dumfries and Uncle Ding. But that place is so big it could take all night to find them. We tried to ask at the desk but they wouldn't let us see anybody. Just said they're shipping the last of the orphans out, tomorrow—even the sick ones! Except Rand Hamilton. Nobody's seen him since yesterday. Once he heard that, Looney came right out and admitted he was one of the orphans only he'd been gone on a camping trip!"

"Oh—holy crud!"

"Hoping to end up in the same place. The nurse said for him to wait until she got someone to come down and verify. That's when he told me how to get here and up to your window, too. We have to do something!"

"How come it took you so long? He left hours, ago."

"I had to get back to my house and wait till my own parents went to bed. It's not like they let me wander around town after dark all by myself. They'd be terribly disappointed if they knew I was here. But I had to come."

"You did the right thing."

"If we can't save them I'll never forgive myself!" She sniffed, like she was maybe going to bust out crying.

"Don't worry, we'll think of something." I said that even though I didn't know exactly what, or how. I just knew if she went into another one of those crying jags like she did at school, she'd wake my parents up for sure. "I better slip down to Dad's office and call Boone. Whatever we do it will have to be tonight or they could be lost for good!"

“Just a minute.” She started feeling around on the floor. “My glasses got knocked off somewhere.”

“Man, I'm sorry, Jones. If I'd known it was you...”

“Just a natural reaction I guess.”

“Here, I'll turn on the light.” I moved off careful, dragging my feet across the floor so I wouldn't step on them. By the time I looked she was already putting them on. “I'll be back in a few minutes.”

The downstairs was dark and quiet, except for the ticking of the wall clock in the hallway. Eleven-thirty. The basement area of our house had been turned into a den and Dad's office. I figured no one would hear me talking down there. What I didn't figure was Meg still being up instead of sleeping on the pull-out couch. She was doing something on her computer and looked up the minute I walked in.

“What are you doing up so late, Will? Is something wrong?”

As if I hadn't said enough to get myself hung, already, I totally caved when she closed down her computer and motioned me over to sit by her. I told her everything. Spilled the beans about the orphans, too. Twenty feet more and I'd have made it to Dad's office if she'd been asleep. Now, she was going to either wake up Mom and Dad—and it would end right here—or help us out. It seemed like a long time before she finally said anything.

“OK. Go get something else on. You sure can't go anywhere dressed like that.”

Which was the first time I realized I was running around in a cut-off pair of old Batman pajamas Hannah got for my birthday a couple years, ago. I would have

tossed them but they were stretched out just right and too comfortable, now. Man, if my room was going to stay as busy as a bus stop, I decided I better start wearing the new ones I got, this year. At least they were from the men's department.

I called Boone but he didn't answer. Which didn't surprise me much on account of he slept like the dead once he ever laid down. I only hoped he'd wake up before his mom did if I had to make the kind of racket on his bedroom window Jones made on mine. I didn't feel half as bad walking back upstairs as when I was coming down. Like a big weight lifted off my shoulders. I don't know what it was about Meg, but things always seemed to work out whenever she took over. Besides that, she was nineteen, and about as close as you could be to an adult without actually turning into one.

She could maybe even talk Mom and Dad onto our side.

I opened the door expecting Jones would still be sitting in the same place, only to find there were three kids in there, now. Looney jumped up the minute I walked in. His upper arms and forearms had gauze wrapped around them (I guess Meg did that) but his face was swollen up like a balloon from all the scratches and thorns she pulled out of it.

"We climbed out a third story window," he answered before I even asked. Then he added, "I told her not to but she came anyway."

"I just had to get out!" Savannah explained when I didn't say anything right away. She was dressed like a boy, too, with her hair all stuffed up into a black ball cap and only a few red curls hanging out. Her and Jones



looked like a couple of twins sitting there. She had a gray knit scarf wrapped around her neck so I couldn't tell if it was still swollen from the mumps, or not.

Sheesh, I didn't know what to say. They were all three looking at me like I had the keys to the universe, while I was feeling about as valuable as a fly standing there in my Batman pajamas.

"She's a lot stronger than she looks," Jones spoke up. "She took ballet lessons most of her life."

"Well..." I should have been madder at Looney except I was too relieved to see him, and way glad he could at least handle what I expected he could. More even. It took a lot of guts to turn himself in like that, then get himself right back out, again. He really could move like a rattlesnake if he had to.

"OK. My sister's got a car and she's gonna help us." I headed for my dresser and pulled out a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt. "I don't know what she's got in mind, yet, so I'm not sure I should tell her you guys are even up here. In case my parents wake up and we all get in trouble before we get out of here. It can't get any worse for me because I'm already in big trouble. You should be OK in here for a while though, since they're expecting Looney back anyway."

I went for the door but turned around one more time before opening it. "My parents' room is at the right end of the hall, and my sister Emily is across from this one. Bathroom's at the end on the left. Best place for everybody to hide out will be the fun park but I'll have to wake up Boone to get a key."

"Rand's got a key," said Looney. "But nobody knows where he is."

“I'll wake up Emmy and ask her. Since they work together she probably knows where he's been staying. I'll be back to let you know the plan as soon as I can. Looney, you better come with me in case we need you for something. But stay in here until we're ready to go. If you hear my parents get up, you girls hide in the closet, so they'll only see Looney when they open the door. I'll try and head them off first, though.”

Turns out Emmy not only knew where Rand Hamilton was, but they had a code worked out so he'd pick up his phone if she called. He was staying at the Gorilla Lady tent after the park closed down. He had a place all rigged up with a cot for himself under the stage, and he hid out in there while the security guy made the final rounds of the place every night before he locked up. Emmy didn't think twice about saying we had to tell Miz Boone, on account of she was the only one that could maybe work things out without kidnapping everybody. Which would really get us in trouble. Meg agreed. I had to agree, too, because I sure didn't want to end up in Juvenile Hall at a time like this.

In the end, we decided it was best to take the girls with us, too, and at least hide the orphans we already had in case things went wrong all the way around. So, we left Savannah and Jones to settle into the loft area of the go-cart garage on account of they wouldn't set one foot in the Gorilla Lady tent all by themselves. Not after Jones saw the show and got scared out of her wits Friday night. When we told them it was only Rand Hamilton in a gorilla suit, they wouldn't even stay there with an empty gorilla suit. Especially since we had to take Looney and Rand along to help with the rescue.

Girls.

Meanwhile, we were cooking up a Plan B in case Miz Boone's plan didn't work out. Except her plan turned out to be way bigger than ours. It even made what Miz Lucinda told us seem like small stuff. It wasn't hard to figure out something had gone way wrong in Ashbury while we were off running around Padre Gordo all day. Whatever it was, I knew my own parents didn't know about it, yet, or they wouldn't have been just sitting around eating gingerbread and visiting with Meg when Looney and I got back.

But all I had to do was walk into Boone's house to know something totally bad had gone down somewhere. First off, all the lights were on when we pulled into the driveway. After we came in, it looked like he hadn't even gone to bed, yet. He was sprawled out on the couch under a blue and gold quilt with stars and moons on it, wide awake, and looking more worried than I'd ever seen him before.

It was only one step down into the living room from the entry way, and he popped up as soon as we walked in. Miz Boone—quieter than I ever knew she could be—had come to the door in a long pink bathrobe, with her red hair all tumbled down to her shoulders. But there was tea and hot chocolate stuff set out on the coffee table. So, I figured Emmy must have called her before we drove over.

Everybody grabbed a cup of something before they settled down.

"How come you didn't answer your phone?" I asked Boone while they were all busy.

"I didn't hear it. Mom just woke me up a few

minutes, ago.”

“They have our orphans down at the hospital, waiting to be shipped out tomorrow. So, we gotta try for a rescue.”

“We have way bigger problems than losing the orphans, Hud.”

“What?”

“This is it. The beginning of the end. Just like Grampy told us about.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven  
THE GREAT ORPHAN RESCUE

*“Had we been spotted? Should we be missed? Were we being followed? These questions would answer themselves as we progressed with our plot...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

For a few seconds I couldn't say anything. I had a sinking feeling inside way worse than wondering how to get the orphans free, or even find a good place to hide them. The beginning of the end! What the heck did that mean? I didn't have to wait long because Boone went right on talking without me giving an answer.

“All the old people in town got notices they have to leave for centralized senior centers in two weeks. Anybody over sixty.”

“What?”

“Yeah, and all they get to take is one suitcase, even if they have a whole houseful of stuff. Half the people Mom's got working at the fun park are over sixty. Mr. Pendergast, and Mr. Pickler...” He yawned, and then shook with a chill, like he was just starting to finally wake up. “Old Mrs. Thomas that works the ice cream booth for Mad Maude's. Professor Jones over at the high school, too. He doesn't believe anyone's really going to senior centers. On account of that happened to his family back

in Europe before he came over here. He thinks everybody's being shipped out to refugee camps. Or worse."

"You mean, Isabella Jones' dad?"

"Yeah, he does our accounting for the fun park."

"She would have said something to me about it!"

"He didn't tell her, yet. And he's not really her dad, he's her grandpa. He's sixty one. His wife could stay because she's only fifty-eight. But they don't want to be separated."

"Wow, she's going to totally lose it when she hears that. She's halfway there, already."

"Mom says it's time to get as many people up to Padre Gordo as we can tomorrow, before the curfew sets in on Monday. Nobody will be able to move around easy after that. Especially in and out of town. She's going to talk to your parents about it in the morning to see how much they can help and if they want to come, or not."

"They still think they can get jobs somewhere else. I tried to tell them what Miz Lucinda said was gonna happen but they didn't believe it. All I did was get myself in big trouble for us driving down off the mountain by ourselves."

"They'll change their mind after Mom talks to them."

"I wish. They think everything General Philby says makes sense. Even centering the food supply on account of there's so much rioting going on in the big cities. I tried to tell them World War Three was about to bust open and it was the end of the world and all that, but..." I felt prickles around my hatband, pulled it off, and stuffed it against the couch cushion behind me (Miz Boone kept

the heat on to at least eighty). "Now, Mom's gonna take me to get my head examined."

"What about your dad?"

"He'll probably agree with her after the stuff I tried to tell him about General Philby."

"Man." For a minute he just sat there, picturing it. "Well, don't feel too bad. The only reason my mom believes any of it is because she saw something, today."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, she's holding out on me. She only does that if she thinks I can't take it. Never lasts very long, though. Especially if Dad's not around to handle things. I thought that's what she woke me up for."

"Emmy woke her up hoping she'd help us with the orphans."

"Maybe. If we know where they are we might be able to sneak everybody out when she talks to Dad tonight."

"Boone, how's she gonna talk to him when there's no Internet and no long distance?"

"They got Internet and long distance right there at the hospital. That's how the nurse lady did all that looking around for Denny. Calling up the university and everything."

"And they let your mom use it? She actually talked to him?"

"Not really. She figures he must still be in blackout while they're in transit back to the states. Which means he could get here any day."

"Boone."

"Seriously."

"OK, listen up, kids," Miz Boone came back into

the living room and this time she was dressed up in jeans and a blue pullover sweater—about as ordinary as I ever saw her look before. No dangly earrings on, and her red hair was pulled back in a ponytail at the back of her collar. “Here's what we have to do.”

The buzz of everybody talking disappeared and Looney quit chowing down on the marshmallows before she could notice he ate half a bag, already. Except she had her mind on other things. You would think I'd be used to her wacko ideas by now but I wasn't. Which is why I inhaled a half-melted marshmallow and then choked it back into my hot chocolate when she said, “Truth is, we're at war and nobody told us about it.”

Boone pounded me on the back and I caught a glimpse of Meg across the room, sending me a message that didn't need any words. So, I grabbed a couple napkins off the coffee table to sop up where I spilled. Any other time, Miz Boone would have yelled about not eating in the living room but she kept talking like she hadn't even noticed.

“About one third of the adults we have working for us at the Fun Park are senior citizens. And every one of them have been given notice they are going to be relocated into large senior centers out of state. Of course they don't want to go. Most of them have lived here all their lives. But a lot of things are going to change—for everybody—next week.” She took a deep breath and then a sip from her mug of mint tea.

I knew it was mint because she was sitting so close to us on the couch I could smell it. I didn't have any doubts she could get everybody up to Padre Gordo, but I had a way lot of doubts we could do it without getting



into some major trouble from the military guys. People might not notice eight no-account orphans that got so little attention they were practically invisible, but they would for sure notice almost twenty folks who didn't show up for their jobs on Monday. Especially the teachers.

"Anyway..." Miz Boone banged her mug down on the coffee table like she just made up her mind. "We're going to need everyone who can drive a vehicle to get them out of town tomorrow. That way, it'll all be over by the time authorities find out and—with any luck—they'll be too busy with the big changes around here to investigate right away."

"What about the orphans?" I asked. She hadn't said a word about them even though Emmy had come right out and told her that's what we were here for. "I mean, the seniors might not be missed tomorrow, being it's Sunday and all, but the orphans are scheduled to leave on a bus first thing in the morning."

"Any of them that want to stay can come with us tonight," she answered. "Let's just hope things haven't sunk so low they wouldn't think twice about barging into people's houses to look for them. How many are there?"

"Only five since we have three of them out already," said Boone. "More if you're gonna let anybody that wants to come. And two old people."

"Uncle Ding might be able to climb down on the sheets," Looney piped up all of a sudden. "But No way Mrs. Dumfries can. She's too fat."

You would have thought he said something easy like there was going to be one more for dinner and we'd have to stretch the food. Because Miz Boone got to her

feet like it was no big deal and said, "I'll have to trade places with her then."

Which made Looney crack up laughing since she wasn't even as tall as my sisters and just about as skinny.

"And you're going to help me." She pointed a finger at him and he stopped like somebody choked him. "You and Jeffie. The rest of you will be waiting in the cars under that window as they come down. Let's hope we can get everybody in one trip."

After that, she took Meg and Emmy to another room somewhere, and sent all us guys out to the garage to find a couple of ropes and anything else that would be safer than bed sheets for people to climb down on. We thought of all the rope ladders back at the hideout but there wasn't enough time to get there and back. If we weren't out of there before the shifts changed at the hospital there would be too many cars coming and going from the parking lot and someone might notice us parked where we shouldn't be.

Everything sounded pretty easy as long as we didn't get caught.

Miz Boone had the hardest part on account of she had to disguise herself to look about twice her size. Which I couldn't believe she did so well. Especially when she added a gray wig with a red knit cap and scarf. Since it was cold outside at this hour it looked natural enough and would be the first thing anyone would remember about her. Something told me she had done this kind of stuff before. I mean, what kind of person would just happen to have a gray wig laying around the house somewhere?

The rest of the plan was so simple it was brilliant.

She was going to take Looney to the emergency room and say he needed some better medicine to put on his face because he couldn't sleep. Since it was still swole up like a blowfish, who wouldn't believe her? Her story was going to be that his family was out of town and he was spending the weekend with Boone. Which wasn't really a lie considering they'd been out of town for so long he couldn't even remember them.

While they were waiting, Boone was going to look for a bathroom and see if he couldn't get past the third floor nurse's station and into the room everybody was in. It wasn't a regular room. Sort of a conference room set up with a lot of cots so the kids wouldn't have to be separated from Uncle Ding and Mrs. Dumfries before they left. Boone had the rope and a climbing harness in his backpack, and while he was setting things up, his mom and Mrs. Dumfries would change places in the nearest ladies room. By the time Looney got out of emergency, everybody would be loaded into the cars.

The worst part was the waiting. Emmy and Rand were in the truck, and Meg and I were behind them in Miz Boone's SUV. We'd be able to get more people in it than Meg's little white Subaru, so that one stayed in the parking area in front of the emergency room for the other three to drive home in. I usually talked about a bajillion miles a minute whenever I got a few minutes with Meg to myself. But since I already rattled off every bad thing I'd done over the last couple weeks, I was sort of wore out.

“Are you cold, Will? We put a couple blankets on the backseats since everyone will probably be in their pajamas. Can't turn the car on till we're ready to go.”

“Naw. Just sort of nervous, is all.” I didn't realize I'd been tapping my foot and sitting there with my teeth clenched until she said that.

“You don't have to be scared about anything. Even if we all get caught the worst that could happen is Mom and Dad would have to come down and get us at the police station.”

“Oh, holy cow...” I probably wouldn't even get let go if they did come down to get me.

“There's actually no law against taking someone out of a hospital if they want out. So, the most they could get us for is being here after visiting hours. I mean...” She pulled her black knit cap farther down over her ears. “It's not like we're trying to break anybody out of jail.”

Usually I get a whole lot of comfort out of Meg's logic. The thing is, I knew her about as well as she knew me and I could tell just by how she kept looking at her cell phone every thirty seconds, she was as nervous as I was. For one thing, we were about as close as it gets to being under military law around here, and I had a feeling it wasn't the local police we were going to be talking to. It was General Philby's guys. Maybe even the General, himself.

Not to mention the orphans belonged to the state, not us. They didn't have the same kind of freedoms. But I decided to keep that thought to myself. On account of I had a feeling Meg was about to speed dial Dad at the first sign of trouble. That made me realize Boone and I needed to get everyone hid before that happened. Really hid. The time for explaining things was over.

About that time, the door on the passenger side of Emmy's truck opened up, Rand got out, and motioned for

me to follow him. Which I didn't think twice about—just did—even though my stomach felt like a swarm of bats just flew through and were about to exit out my mouth. Other than that short conversation we had in the Gorilla tent on Friday, I hardly knew him, at all. But the fact he was on the football team gave me an automatic respect for whatever he said. I don't know why.

He didn't say anything. Just smacked me on the shoulder sort of friendly-like, and pointed where he wanted me to stand on one side of the first floor window. The blinds were closed but you can bet somebody would pop them open fast enough if we made too much noise. He took the other side, and rested his hands on his hips for a minute—same way he did in a game when he was waiting for the referee to make a call—then looked up just in time for the third floor window to slide open and see Boone stick his head out.

He was in.

Next thing I knew, he dropped the rope down to us—the one we tied knots in so no one would have trouble climbing all the way down without a place to rest their feet for a second—then I saw the shadowy outline of two dangling legs sticking out over the sill as the first person crawled over. After that, everything stopped, like a movie set to pause. One second...two seconds...three seconds...

First person out was hung up, already.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight THE BREAKING POINT

*“Spying brings with it a constant wearing  
strain of nerves and mind...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

It wasn't a kid it was an adult. I could tell because his feet looked huge swinging back and forth in the mid-air, feeling around for one of the knots to stand on. Had to be Uncle Ding, on account of he was the only other adult up there. Mrs. Dumfries should have slipped out to wait for Miz Boone in the nearest bathroom by now. Man, if anyone saw her wandering around and actually talked to her they'd know something was up. Especially if a look-alike showed up about then.

I started to break out in a sweat even though it was cold out there. “They should send the kids first,” I whispered.

“Shhh.” Rand didn't even look over at me, just kept his eyes on Uncle Ding. Like he could move the old man's foot into the right spot just by looking at it hard enough. Then, “Get ready to try and break his fall.”

Break his fall—if that guy fell on top of us from so high up we'd be killed. “Holy crud, Rand—why don't we stretch out one of the blankets, or—”

“Shhh. He's got it, now, here he comes.”

Next all I could see was a shadowy form bearing down on us like some giant slug inching over a water pipe. I admit it was going to take major self-control to keep from jumping out of the way if he slipped. Which I was not proud of. I tried to stand there all cool and collected, like Rand, but it wasn't happening. When the man finally touched down it caught him off-guard and he swayed in my direction. I grabbed him before he toppled against the glass of the first floor window.

He gave a startled sort of laugh and held onto me. His gray hair was sticking out on one side, like he had already been asleep for a while. “Good boy,” he said quietly, after he steadied himself.

“No problem,” I answered.

“Shhh,” Rand whispered over at us. “Here comes Jimmy.”

By the time I looked up he was already halfway down, dangling all hung over and lifeless in the harness, not moving a muscle. Sheesh. Little kids can sleep anywhere. Rand had him out and handed over to Uncle Ding in less than a minute and he never even opened one eye. After that came two girls—also with the harness—who I figured had to be the fifth-graders we got homework for last Friday. They were awake but so bundled up with coats over their pajamas and backpacks on top of that, Rand just swung each one up as he got them out and carried them to the SUV. I could tell they were scared spit-less on account of they hung onto him for dear life as he walked past.

Before he got back to his spot someone else was already down, and I stepped over to help him out of the

harness. He was younger than the girls—the third grader, probably—and I was thinking I should walk him over to the car, too, when he took off like a rabbit. Zig-zagged around me and headed toward the circle of light from the nearest street lamp about twenty feet away.

Rand darted out and intercepted him before he got past the car. He grabbed hold of his backpack and the seat of his pants, and tossed the kid in through the open door with the warning, “Stay put, Mikey, or I’ll wallop you!”

About that time, I saw the lights of one of those little security vehicles as it passed by the end of the side alley we had driven down to get to this spot, and felt a sudden jolt at the thought if they hadn’t seen us, yet, they’d be coming around from the other end in about five minutes. Probably making a circle just to check everything out.

“Tell Meg to go, right now, before they come back, again!” I whispered over to Rand, who had froze in his tracks as soon as he caught sight of them. “The rest can hide in the back of the truck in case we get stopped on the way out.”

He snapped out of his freeze and sprinted back to quietly push the door closed and wave them on. Better to get some out than none. I pressed the tiny light on my wristwatch. It was quarter after three already and I knew it would start getting busy in the parking lot with the shifts changing over at four o’clock. Not long after that, the military guys would wake up and start moving around. Which any other time would have given me another jolt I had to choke down even to think about. Except the moment Meg started the motor and drove off, somebody hollered.

“Shut up, man!” That was Boone, and he wasn’t



whispering. "There's no way you can fall, I got two lines on you!"

"Shhh!" That was Rand.

The light popped on in the window we were standing in front of, and we jumped to the sides to press ourselves as flat as we could get against the wall. The blinds opened up. I didn't know if it was a patient or nurse, a man or a woman—I couldn't see anything from that angle. But they maybe couldn't see us, either. I hoped not. Just then, Emmy got out of the truck, went toward the back to kick one of the tires, got back in again, then started the motor and—to our amazement—drove off.

Rand muttered something Mom would have smacked me for and leaned his head back against the wall like we were all as good as dead. Like he couldn't believe it. Me, I went for a prayer because that had been working for me ever since I could remember. Not to mention it was going to take a major miracle to get us out of here. What was Emmy thinking? She just blew the whole mission! She just—

The blinds closed and the light went off.

"Oh, no—I'm—I'm slipping! I can't get my—" It was the voice over our heads, again.

So many of us busted out with "Shhh!" at the same time we sounded like a bunch of snakes somebody stepped too close to. Then the kid—well, he wasn't a kid—that guy was bigger than Uncle Ding as he came bouncing down against the wall so fast, I knew the only thing keeping him from breaking his neck was Boone hanging onto the other rope from up there. Rand and I lunged at the same time to keep him from plowing into the first floor window.

He toppled over as soon as he touched down and we hardly got him off the ground before a rain of backpacks and sleeping bags started tumbling out. Boone was tossing them into the mid-air before dancing down that line as fast as he could just to get out of there. He dropped the last six feet, turned around, and gasped, “Where the heck is the truck?”

“Emmy took off,” I practically choked on the words because I still couldn't believe it.

“Grab as much of this stuff as you can and let's get out of here.” Rand started picking up backpacks and sleeping bags without waiting for answers.

“I'm too loaded down, already,” the big shadow spoke in a normal tone, like it was all over now that he was on the ground.

I figured he had to have a brain the size of a pea to be that stupid.

Rand shoved a sleeping bag and two backpacks at him anyway, and whispered, “Shut up and get moving, Tater.” Then gave him a little push in the direction Emmy drove off in to get him started.

Maybe the guy really did have a problem with his brain.

Everyone took as much as they could carry, and about the time I was thinking we would have to leave a few behind because I kept dropping things, an extra couple arms scooped them up. I caught a glimpse of two brown braids hanging down before the familiar figure took off after the others without a word.

“Hannah!” I dragged after my youngest sister—who I was sure we left sleeping at home—but she was out of whisper range already. She was wearing a jacket over

her pink pajamas, too, and I could tell by the velcro straps around the legs she had ridden her bike over to get here. So much for keeping secrets. If I tell one sister something it's the same as telling all of them. Just the way it is in our family. Anyway, I was glad for the extra help on account of I had a feeling the orphans were going to need all this stuff a lot more than we realized.

On account of the military was going to be looking over every inch of this town the minute none of them showed up for the bus ride tomorrow. They wouldn't be able to stick their noses out from their Fun Park hideouts for days. If we could get them all hid in time.

Or if we could even get them away from here.

By the time I got around the corner of the building, I saw the pickup pulled over about a hundred feet ahead, with kids and sleeping bags piled up in the back. Rand was standing there waiting for me. We didn't say a word to each other—we didn't half to. Already the light beams of the security vehicle were bouncing off the fence at the end of the parking lot farther down and it was only a matter of seconds before they would turn down this alley to finish their rounds.

He grabbed all my stuff as I dove into a hole in the mountain of baggage, then tossed everything on top of me before we took off. I hardly heard the door close before we made a quick u-turn and headed back the way we came to keep ahead of the security guys. All we had to do was get to the main parking area where people were coming and going all the time. I started to calm down a little then because I figured it was still a free country and we had the right to come and go anywhere we wanted in it without being stopped by anybody, unless they had

some legal reason to do that.

Like looking for missing persons.

We bounced over a speed bump and Tater yelled, “Ouch!” loud enough to wake the dead. Which is how I knew Emmy must really be nervous because she usually drove over those things about the speed of a snail just so she wouldn’t bust anything while she was driving a vehicle that didn’t belong to her. At least she didn’t leave us stranded like I first thought. Then all of a sudden I heard the first few bars of that Air Force song, “Off we go into the wild blue yonder...” and realized Boone was buried somewhere only a few feet away from me.

“We’re out,” he spoke into the phone like we were sneaking past the Gestapo. “Something came up and I couldn’t help it. OK, we’ll be there in about five minutes.”

“Man, Boone—what if that thing would’ve gone off when you were still hanging out the window—what was she thinking?”

“I was supposed to put it on vibrate but I forgot. Here.” He shoved the phone at me. “Call your sisters and tell them to drop us at the Fun Park before they head back to our place to wait for Mom. We got to get everybody settled in before it gets daylight. No telling how much longer it’ll take to get Looney out of the emergency room.”

I got through to Meg okay but when I dialed Emmy, Rand answered. Which I would have just passed off as her wanting to concentrate on getting away from the hospital except I heard sounds in the background that made my stomach feel like I was going down fast in an elevator all of a sudden.

Emmy was having a melt down.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### BUGGING OUT

*“Everybody's attention was centered on these and no one had time to notice or observe what we were doing...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

Boone and I jumped out to open the gates at the Fun Park for the vehicles to drive through but by the time we got them closed, again, they had driven on to the gorilla tent. I guess they figured to keep everybody together until we knew what to do next and that was the biggest enclosed area on the place.

Not only that, it had a lot of hidden passageways behind and under the stage so the performers could exchange places without being seen, and absolutely no one else was allowed inside except at showtimes. That's how carnival people keep their secrets. What looks like magic on the outside all makes perfect sense if you ever get to see how it's actually done. Only I wasn't thinking about any of that at the moment because I was too worried about Emmy.

When I saw Rand climb out of the driver's side

instead of her I kicked into a sprint to get over there as fast as I could. Something really bad must have happened because—of all my sisters—Emmy was the calmest, most level-headed. He leaned back in as I got close and I heard him say, “I’ll be back as quick as I can,” before he started shuffling the last of the kids and gear into the tent. The driver’s side door was still hanging open, so, I climbed in.

“Oh, Will!” She practically put me in a choke hold before I even slid across the seat. “You were right—you were right!”

“About what?”

But she just started crying all over, again. Like once she let the dam burst she couldn’t stop it even if she wanted to. Man, I knew how that felt. So, I just sat there for a minute, trying not to lose it myself, until she got a grip. I don’t know why but when one of my family is upset, it’s like the same feelings shoot right into me, even if I don’t have a clue what the problem is. I can’t think clear and stay cool like when I try to help other people.

“About what, Emmy?”

She finally let go of me and pulled a tissue out of her jacket pocket to blow her nose. “About the people getting out of the busses at the hospital the other day—they were soldiers! I saw one looking right at me when he opened the window blinds back there! He had a black band tied around his head—and a—a—machine gun—slung over his shoulder! All I could think was to kick the tire like I stopped to check it, then drive off.”

“That was a good call, he closed the blinds right after you left.”

“They really have been lying to us! We need to

wake up Mom and Daddy!”

Which should have taken the weight of the world off my shoulders right then and there. Our families would believe us, now. It's what I had been praying for. Most of all we wouldn't have to keep going up against adults who were smarter and stronger than us just to save people's lives. We could maybe save the whole town—or what was left of it—if only everybody would work together.

“You better come with me, Will.” She said it in a tone I knew meant business.

“I'll ride home with Meg as soon as we get things settled,” I answered quickly. “Like Miz Boone said, they'll be looking everywhere for these kids as soon as they find out they're gone. On account of they don't have any families of their own to stick with.”

“We'll divvy them up between all of us, then. That's the best thing.”

“Except it takes time, Em. We still gotta keep them safe until the families figure out what to do.”

“Mom will have fits if I don't bring you back with me!” She looked about to cry, again.

“I'll go when Meg goes—I promise.”

I hopped out of the truck before she could answer and collided with Boone. Without saying a word he pulled me into the shadow of the deserted ticket booth where we could talk. He was not panicked, which is how I knew he had heard every word. It's also how I knew I had to go along with whatever he said because this was it. Maybe not the end of the world just yet, but definitely the beginning.

We were at war!

"The kids can't stay here," he said. "It's not safe enough. We gotta make a mad dash to Little Heely—before the sun comes up—then take them in small groups up to Padre Gordo. The back way. At night."

"But Boone, if the families that are already going up tomorrow each take one or two—"

He leaned one hand against the jungle green colored wall and hung his head. At least he was listening.

"Then they'd be out of here in no time." I tried to stay calm, too, but I wasn't as good at it as he was. Especially after just catching all that emotional stuff from Emmy. "We wouldn't have to put them into all that danger for no reason."

"If the soldiers are already here," he answered without looking up, "there's gonna be roadblocks around this whole town by eight o'clock in the morning. Tomorrow's the day they make their move. It all adds up, Hud. Anybody that isn't out, isn't getting out."

"Wo..." I felt like I just got punched in the gut. "Wo—you mean not even the families? What's going to happen to the families?"

"Probably just what the nurse-lady said. Curfews, food ration cards...the whole city locked down into some kinda martial law. Maybe even prisoner of war camps if we're already occupied territory."

"Occupied territory—holy crud, Boone—this isn't what I expected!" I leaned back against the wall, then slid down slow until I was sitting on the ground. "Occupied territory? We didn't get any warning!"

Boone sat down, too—like all the strength had suddenly gone out of him—and neither of us said anything for a minute. I pressed the little light on my



watch, again. Twenty minutes to four. It had taken less than a half hour to get everybody out and nearly settled in back here. But—hey—if we were going to take them to Little Heely as soon as the cars left, it would just be a waste of time to have to pack all that stuff up, again. Plus, we had to fill all the go-carts with gas and make sure we had enough extra to make it all the way out there before sunrise.

“I better get rid of the cars so we can get started.” I got to my feet. “If I know my sisters they’ll hang around for an hour just fluffing pillows and making sure everybody gets tucked in. We better get Savannah and Jones over here to organize everybody while you and me get the vehicles together.”

He just sat there without saying a word.

“Boone, if we don’t get out of here before our parents come looking for us we’re not going anyplace, either. Which means the orphans have had it. Being at war puts a whole new slant on things. The town people will do whatever they’re told—they’re not soldiers. They might even get locked up in some—”

He shot up like somebody lit a fire under him.

“I’ll meet you back at the go cart garage soon as I talk to Meg.”

I had more problems in the last week than my whole life put together. But if it’s one thing I knew without even having to think at all, was how to send my sisters to the moon at a moment’s notice. I just had to get Rand out of the way to do it. Which was easier than I thought because he was worried about Emmy. I really think those two had something going for each other. Anyway, I told him the rest of us could handle it from here if he wanted to drive

her home.

He clapped me on the shoulder like I was one of the team and said, "Thanks, man."

Meanwhile, Meg, Hannah, and Uncle Ding were untying sleeping bags from backpacks and getting ready to roll them out in Rand's hideout under the stage. Little Jimmy was still asleep, spread out on the cot that was already set up, and Tater was making hot chocolate for everybody else on a little one-burner camp stove he found under there. Which gave me the jitters on account of whatever was missing in his brain. The last thing we needed right now was a fire. Except he was filling cups and handing them out like a professional short-order cook that had been doing stuff like that for years. He even had a big smile on his face like we were all on vacation, or something.

"Hey, Meg." I had to bend down to whisper in her ear because she was on her knees helping one of the fifth grade girls untie a knot. "This is the only place we haven't fumigated, yet, so I'm thinking maybe we should move over to the house of mirrors."

"What?" She sat up straight.

"There's still probably a lot of scorpions and spiders under there because we only sprayed on top of the stage. Not under it."

She jumped to her feet like a bomb just went off.

"Besides, you should probably get back to Miz Boone's right away because something came up the adults have to discuss. Emmy already went to get Mom and Dad and they'll feel better if we're all there."

"You and Hannah come with me, then."

"I gotta stay and help Boone move the mirror panels

so that center room just looks like four walls. That way nobody will figure it out even if the whole place gets searched. After that, I'll be outta here."

"Promise?"

"Promise." Well, I wasn't telling a lie, really. Because I would be outta here. I just wouldn't be going back to Miz Boone's.

None of us would.

But I sure wasn't going to hang around long enough for Meg to look right through me. She could do it, too. Instead I just raised my voice and said, "Listen up, everybody—we have to move to another location. On account of this one has a gorilla in it. So, get your stuff together and let's go."

There was a frozen silence as the whole bunch stared at me.

"William Hudson!" It was the exact same tone as Mom's so I figured I better get out of her reach. "You know better than to scare children like that!" She swung but missed.

"Just trying to get them moving, Meg." I headed for the entrance. "Let's everybody meet in front of the House of Mirrors in about five minutes, Uncle Ding."

"We'll be ready, my boy. Tater? You pack up the portable kitchen."

## Chapter Thirty

### DESERT RACE

*“We drove off down the street towards the station  
until we were out of sight...then we called to  
our driver and said we should like  
to go to a different station...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

I figured we'd be lucky if we had half an hour—tops—before our folks realized we weren't where we should be. But I also figured Miz Boone would calm things down from her end since she knew right where we'd be headed in the long run. We'd all end up in the same place eventually. So, it wasn't like I was leaving my family in the lurch during a time of crisis or anything. Anyway that's what I kept telling myself.

Until Hannah looked at me for a second—just before she and Meg drove off—in a way that made me almost sprint over and tell them not to worry, everything was going to be ok. That we had the safest place in the world to hide out in, and there was enough room for everybody and their brothers. But instead, I just gave her a wave and a thumbs-up. In all the excitement, I hadn't thanked her for helping us out the way she did. But she got the message and smiled. Which gave me sort of a

lump in my throat, so it's a good thing they left right then.

Things were already starting to happen over at the go-cart garage. Jones was throwing stuff down from the loft while Boone was busy pushing out the carts that were inside, onto the track. I got there in time to help with the last one—him pushing from the back and me steering and pushing from the side—we were halfway to the door when Savannah leaned her head over the loft and asked Boone to help her down.

“What!” he stopped pushing and looked up at her like she was nuts. “If you can't even climb down a short ladder like—”

Jones chucked her backpack down so close to him he had to fend it off. “She's just getting over the mumps! She shouldn't even be out in this cold air—we have to help her! Come on, Savvy.” She pulled her up into a sitting position. “Just swing your legs over and get your feet on the ladder while I—” She had to stifle a yell when Savannah slouched forward all of a sudden—totally limp—and would have toppled over the edge if she hadn't been hanging onto her.

Boone bounded up the ladder and caught hold of her from below just as Jones lost her grip. Her hat tumbled off and her long red hair spilled out all over him.

“She's a little lightheaded,” said Jones.

“Lightheaded—she's out cold.” He lowered her down to me. “Put her in the back of the Rhino, I guess.” Then he turned around to help Jones but got an opened-up sleeping bag dropped onto his head, instead.

The Rhino wasn't too far off, just past the open doors. I couldn't believe how light Savannah felt. And a lot smaller than when she was running around all full of

life and everything. She must have used what little strength she had keeping up with Looney all the way to our house, then climbing up the lattice to the bedroom window. I was pretty sure Jones exaggerated about her being over the mumps, though, because she felt hotter than blazes even through the jacket she was wearing. By the time I set her on top of the tarp in the back, she hadn't moved even a little.

Jones climbed in right after and spread the sleeping bag over her. I could tell by the way she tucked it under all the way round that she was worried. "Her hat—she needs her—"

Boone came up behind us and handed it over, and about the time he leaned closer to see if she was still passed out, her eyes fluttered open for a few seconds and looked right into his. She smiled a little and then they closed, again.

"She's just exhausted, that's all," Jones put the hat back on to keep her head warm. "She's really very strong—you'll see—she's been taking ballet lessons for years."

"Don't worry, we're not going to leave anybody," I answered. "But you gotta help us get the rest of the kids and their stuff into all these go-carts so we can get out of here. We have to move someplace safer. Fast as we can."

"What about Dummie?"

"Who the heck is that?" Boone sounded like he was out of patience five minutes, ago.

"Mrs. Dumfries. Everybody calls her Dummie."

"We can't wait for any adults or none of us will get out of here," he said. "Got it?"

I was worried she would throw something at him, again, but instead she just nodded and climbed down out

of the back of the Rhino. Without another word. Then headed out to join the shadowy group already moving toward us from the other end of the track.

“How many of them do you think can drive?” Boone asked me.

“I better find out.”

We only had enough to take three of the go carts and the golf cart Miz Boone used to run around the park from one end to the other all day long. So, we put Uncle Ding and little Jimmy in the golf cart along with the two fifth grade girls. Me, Jones, and Tater would drive the go carts. Boone would lead out with the Rhino and a small trailer attached that would have two five-gallon gas cans, along with all the frozen hot dogs and cans of chili we could fit in from the hot dog stand. The sleeping bags we piled onto the two wagons we used in the races—hooked behind Jones' go cart and mine—and some in the golf cart. Everybody would wear their backpacks.

We put the six-year-old girl, who was as hard asleep as Jimmy by that time, in the back of the Rhino with Savanna, and the third grade kid, Mikey—who was way too tired to make any more trouble—in the front seat next to Boone. The go carts hardly had any power compared to the Rhino, so they could only pull a wagon if it wasn't loaded down too heavy. About the time we were all finally ready, Looney showed up, hanging onto one of Mrs. Dumfries' arms, and practically dragging her along behind him. I couldn't believe it.

She still had on the big blue coat Miz Boone was wearing the last time I saw her, and the curly white wig was sort of crooked under her hat like it was about to fall off. She was breathing heavy—like she'd been wore out

for the last three blocks—and didn't even ask questions when he gave her a boost into the golf cart with Uncle Ding. It was too dark to see her face very well.

Then I heard her say, “Well, Ding...we've really done it, now. Haven't we.”

“Only thing we could do, Edith. Unless we want to send all these youngsters out on their own. I'd say it's a miracle out of scripture we didn't have to wave them off forever at the bus tomorrow.”

“I'm certain of it. My heart was breaking just to think about it! Where are we going?”

“Haven't the faintest idea,” he answered.

“What?”

“Looney's two friends seem to have everything planned out. Nice boys. They've been awfully good to Looney.”

Having Looney show up made me feel a whole lot better than taking off without him. He didn't know we were going for Little Heely until he saw all the vehicles in a line. Then it only took a minute for him to nab the stash of popcorn and candy he kept hidden somewhere in the garage and jump into another go-cart. I think that kid lived almost entirely off sugar. After everything we'd been through in the last twenty-four hours, I guess he was starting to trust us enough to fall in with whatever we were doing. I realized right then he wasn't as dumb as I first thought he was. Probably just been a loner most of his life.

The plan was for everybody to start their engines at the same time, push the gas peddle all the way to the floor, and follow the vehicle in front of them. Which was going to make quite a racket. But the Fun Park was built



on the edge of town for that very reason and far enough away from the neighborhoods to maybe only sound like a bee in somebody's dream before we got away into the desert.

Boone jumped out of the Rhino long enough to open the back gate and I hung out last to close it after everybody got through. The fewer signs we left to point where we were headed, the better. Bringing up the rear would also give me the advantage of making sure nobody dropped out of line or stalled out without somebody who knew where we were going to help them. Especially if they ended up having to limp along by themselves or resort to walking the rest of the way.

I have to admit I was shaking when I first got out, and it wasn't from the cold. But the moon was bright enough to light up the future miniature golf area where the diggers had been working, so we could at least see well enough not to fall into any holes. It was times like these I would have traded my brains for that iron calm Boone automatically clicked into except I didn't have a clue how he did that. Maybe we were just made different.

Whatever it was, at the very same time he took his place at the head of the convoy and pulled out, I couldn't keep my mind from ticking through a dozen scenarios of what might go wrong and what we could maybe do about it. I heard in a sermon once how you could ask God for wisdom anytime you needed it and he would give it to you. I never tried it before—but, hey—I wasn't about to cross off any of my options. As I was climbing back into the go-cart to take off, I asked for my brain to work like a computer and not freeze up. No matter what went down. Anyway, it made me feel better.

Boone turned his lights on as soon as we were facing away from town, and everybody followed his lead. Somewhere during the night we had made a pact to do whatever he told us—no matter what—and we were all in. We were on a mission to save lives and the clock was ticking. Which I could really let myself get off on except about that time I hit my first rift and dropped off the edge so hard I thought my ribcage was going to slam right up into my head. These things had no shocks and were so low to the ground I felt like my butt was dragging every time I rumbled and bounced over a rough patch. Tater whooped and laughed loud enough to wake up the mayor every time he hit one. But I couldn't think of anything to do about it. He was two vehicles ahead of me.

The golf cart and Jones were between us, and my view was totally blocked from even being able to flash my lights at him. Which wouldn't do any good anyway, since he probably wouldn't even get the message. So, instead, I just focused on the back of Jones' helmet and worried her head might fall off if it got shook any harder. But I couldn't think of anything to do about that, either.

We were out on the open desert, now—like the starting gun had just fired off—and we all had our pedals to the metal, bumping and ripping around rocks too big to run over. Between the dark and the engine noise it felt like we were racing the famous Baja Five Hundred instead of fifteen to twenty miles an hour practically in our own backyard. At least that's how it felt to me since Boone and I had been out here enough times to know exactly where we were, even in the dark. Within ten minutes, we were in a whole new world.

Our world.

The sky was still black and full of stars but the moonlight cast enough glow over the desert for us to follow the familiar swerves around boulders, clumps of tumbleweed, and the giant saguaros that dotted our way to the mesa. After a while the bumps and vibrations of the ride shook the fear out of me, and I could finally take a few deep breaths to catch a little of the excitement and freedom I always felt every time we came out here. I could do this thing.

Whatever I had to do I could do it. Because there wasn't anything that could happen out here I hadn't already practiced enough times to be able to know just what to do in any kind of situation there was. Life might be hard to figure out everywhere else but out here it was as simple as it gets. There was a comfort in that I hadn't even realized until now. Not to mention the worry of saving the orphans—that I had been carrying around like a big rock somebody shoved into my backpack without me noticing—suddenly rolled away like a seam busted open and let it go. Gone. Not even there, anymore. Man, the adults were with us now! They would know what to do about the big stuff.

I guess you could say I had about three minutes of relief and feeling on top of the world before a wheel came flying at me so fast it bounced off the top of my windscreen before I could even swerve around it. Which was the only reason I flew off a rift on the diagonal instead of head on, came down hard on the front wheel and dumped it.

Right on top of where Jones had already crashed.

## Chapter Thirty-One

### BAD NEWS

*“The scout is looked up to as a brave man...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

I cut the motor and hollered for her to hold on, even before I wormed my way out of the seat and climbed over the roll-bar to get out. No answer. Her cart and wagon jack-knifed when it lost the wheel, slid over the rift sideways, and ended up against a rock pile. But at least she didn't tip over. The truth is, go-carts are not off-road vehicles. Considering all the repairs we had to do just to keep them operational on the track, I was surprised we even made it this far.

“Hey—” I reached down and unlatched the seatbelt out of habit. All those hours of making sure kids were buckled in tight and unbuckled quick enough to keep the line moving at the Fun Park, I guess. “Not hurt, are you?”

“No, I—I can't find my glasses, though.” Her voice was shaking.

That's when I noticed she hadn't pulled her visor down or even snapped the chin strap. No wonder her helmet was wobbling like crazy the whole way. “Better let me look, then.” I reached out to give her a hand up and

felt her whole body was unsteady as she climbed out. “You should have told me you never drove anything before.”

“I drove a bicycle once.” She pulled the helmet off and dropped it on the ground.

“Did great for your first time.” I unclipped a mag light from the side of my backpack and flashed it around the floor boards. “Here they are—not even cracked.”

“Thank God!” She fumbled them on and looked up at me. “How long before someone comes back for us?”

“Nobody needs to come back for us. It's only about a twenty minute walk from here. Anyway, this little gully is a good place to hide the go carts.” I slipped out of my backpack and took my pocket-knife out. “Might as well sit down and rest for a minute while I cut some tumbleweeds out of that clump over there to put on top of them.”

No answer.

“It's too cold for snakes right now,” I thought I should mention it. “You could step on one and it wouldn't be able to bite you.”

She hobbled over to the wagon and sank down on top of a sleeping bag.

Uh-oh. Melt-down on the way. I unzipped another pocket of my backpack and grabbed a granola bar. “Hey, we got the orphans out. No matter what goes on in town...” I tore the wrapper and handed it over. “We can keep them safe out here. Guaranteed.”

She gave a half laugh and wiped the side of her face with her jacket sleeve.

By the time I got the two go-carts covered up she had a grip on herself. I unhooked the wagons—which

would come in way handy for hauling water from the well—and we started walking. It was quarter to six and already and I could just make out the top of Little Heely, about a mile ahead of us. Behind the mountains the sky was lightening enough to see a bit of color over Padre Gordo off in the distance.

“Sure smells good out here,” Jones said.

“It's sage. One of my absolute favorite things. You can do all sorts of stuff with it.”

“It's good in soup and spaghetti.”

“That, too.”

“How come you only covered the tops? Anyone who walks by will know what's under there.”

“Nobody walks by this far out of town. The cover's just for the Border Patrol. And being in a rock gully this close to the river they won't even look over here. Too busy watching the water for coyotes.”

“There's coyotes out here?” Quavery voice, again.

“Uh, yeah. But they're not dangerous. Sort of friendly, actually.”

“So, why should the Border Patrol care about—oh—the other kind of coyote. I forgot about them.” She reached into her pocket and when she pulled out a cell phone, a bunch of little wadded up papers fell out. “What time do you think we'll get back to town? My parents are early risers and—”

“Jones, we're not going back to town.”

“What?” She stopped stuffing the papers back into her pocket and looked up at me.

“Something happened back at the hospital and we have to go to plan B. But don't worry. The adults are in with us now and we don't have to handle it all by

ourselves anymore. You did good. You're the reason everybody got out. Seriously."

"But I—I still have to check in—they won't know where I am and be worried sick."

"Trust me. By now, Miz Boone's told everything to anyone who works at the Fun Park and made them an offer they can't refuse. Including your folks, on account of they do the books and all. In fact, it was your dad—grandpa, I mean—who was trying to tell her for the last three days this is what would happen. She just couldn't believe it, yet."

"Tell her what would happen?"

All of a sudden I felt like someone who accidentally blurted out to a little kid there was no Santa Clause. Then I realized the Jones family was probably the old-school types who never discussed anything too serious or scary in front of their kids. Could be it never even occurred to them how most kids these days could be more serious and scary than their parents. So, I had a decision to make.

Which I made in about ten seconds flat. Isabella Jones was no doubt the smartest kid in the school and had already proved how brave she was by what she did for the orphans. In spite of her melt downs. Taking off in a go cart full blast—in the dark—across a rocky desert when she had never even driven one around a track, proved it. Seeing how she snapped to and did what Boone told her, even though I knew (the same way I knew my own sisters) she would rather hit him with something instead, told me she had a fair-size reserve of self-control when she needed it, too. So, I figured she could take anything I said, no matter what her first reaction was.

But I wasn't taking any chances, either. Better to

have it happen out here than cause a chain reaction at Little Heely and get everybody howling at the same time. A noise of that magnitude could seriously blow our cover if there happened to be anyone snooping around looking for us within the next couple of hours.

“Isabella...” I took hold of the back of her jacket in case she went ballistic, or something.

“Uh-oh.”

“There's a whole lot of soldiers hanging out at the hospital and—”

“That's because there isn't enough room at the motel or orphanage to—”

“They're not our soldiers. We. Are. At. War.”

She went dead still and I snatched the phone out of her hand before she could even let out a holler.

“Except nobody knows it because they haven't made their move, yet.” I held the phone behind me when she tried to get to it but I still had the back of her jacket with the other hand and she couldn't reach that far around.

“Give it back, Hud—I have to call them!”

“They're over at Boone's place and his mom is handling that part of the plan. Only nobody knows exactly where we are right now, because if they did, the orphans wouldn't have a chance.”

She stopped dead still, again, staggered back a step, and would have tripped over a wagon if I wasn't still latched onto her jacket. She gasped a couple of times then put her hands over her eyes quick, like she maybe could keep from losing it if she counted to ten, or something.

“Now, listen. The Boones have a place up in Padre



Gordo where their family's been hiding out for years during hard times. Ever since the Indian Wars. Even people who know about it can't find it unless somebody shows them how to get there. Especially now, because it hasn't been used that way for so many years it's all grown over and busted down. Nothing but an old ghost town. People who accidentally stumble onto it, that's all they see. But it's a stronghold. You know what that is?"

She shook her head but didn't uncover her eyes.

"It's a hidden place that has a water source and supplies. The kind the Apaches used when they used to wander in and out over two or three states when all this land belonged to them. They're all over the old trail. The one they call the Devil's Highway."

"Oh—" she gasped, again, but at least she uncovered her eyes. "I heard about that! It's haunted and people die on it every year!"

"They die on it for other reasons." I let go of the jacket and she sank down on the sleeping bags and just sat there instead of doing anything stupid. "Now, the plan is for all of us—anybody from town who wants to, in fact—to go up there and wait this thing out. The Fun Park families were going to take as few cars as possible so they wouldn't attract attention, and head up to Padre Gordo before the curfew goes into effect on Monday. But that was Plan A. Before we knew about the soldiers."

"Oh, no!" She re-covered her eyes and flopped flat out on top of the sleeping bag pile. When she did, a shower of those little wadded-up papers fell out of her pockets, again.

"What is all that stuff?"

"Take one and read it," she moaned. "If ever we

needed one, we need it now!”

It was still too dark to read anything, so, I unhooked my mag light as I picked one up. It said, *Better make a decision. Time is running out.* “You gotta be kidding me!”

She sat up, again. “What did it say?”

“It said we gotta get out of here, that's what it said. Now, let's get going!”

I pulled her up by the jacket, we grabbed the wagon handles, and started high-tailing ourselves toward Little Heely Mesa. Disaster averted.

“It couldn't have said that. That's not one I entered into the program.”

“Well, that's what it meant. My personal interpretation, anyway.”

“Really?” She pushed her glasses farther up on her nose and switched pulling hands. “That's what they're supposed to do! I've been testing them out, myself, for the last two days, but I thought it was just me.”

“So, what are they?”

“Answers for the answer machine, of course. I was trying to get our presentation ready for Friday. Mrs. Brawley is going to be totally amazed. Hey—I think I'll call it the Amazing Answer Machine. Then more people will want to ask it questions at the science fair.”

“You really ought to go into marketing when you get out of school because that's brilliant. But Jones, you do realize we're not going to school on Monday. Right? There might not be any for a long time after that, either. War changes things.”

“Then it seems to me we might need things like this even more. We might even have to set up our own school.

We certainly have enough teachers. Are you sure my parents are coming, too?"

"Positive."

"And you're sure Mrs. Boone will tell them I'm with you and all the other kids?"

"Definitely."

"How long before they come get us?"

"We should hurry. It's getting lighter by the minute."

"It's a little hard to keep up with you. Your legs are longer than mine."

"Sit in the wagon and I'll pull you the rest of the way."

"But aren't you tired? You've been up all night for heaven sake."

"In a situation like this I could run all the way to Padre Gordo if I had to." I stopped the wagon so she could get on. "Better hold a couple sleeping bags on your lap or you'll be falling off every five minutes. OK, let's go."

I figured I could make it in about eight minutes, tops. We could take all the time we needed settling in but everybody—and everything—had to be totally out of sight by sunrise. And it was moving up fast. I was pretty sure Boone would have everyone inside and him and Looney would be busy hiding the Rhino and golf cart by now. Wondering where Jones and I were, too. Which they ought to know pretty soon because we were making enough noise with the wagons to be heard a hundred yards away. So, I kept scanning all around for movement up ahead.

In fact, I was so into it I was almost there before I

realized I hadn't heard another word from Jones since we started. So, I threw a quick look behind me to make sure she wasn't about to fall off. Probably fell asleep as soon as she got comfortable. Which maybe she did. Except I never saw her. Because the minute I turned around to look I saw something that made my blood freeze so cold and so fast I could hardly keep moving. Like all my muscles were suddenly turning to cement, or something.

It was a long line of Army vehicles snaking into the desert behind us and headed this way.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

### THE INVASION

*“Troops deployed themselves in every direction.  
Look-out men with telescopes were posted to  
spy on the neighboring hills...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

All of a sudden Boone showed up next to me like a shadow coming to life. He fell into step and took the handle of Jones' wagon and we doubled our pace to the entrance over on the back side of the mesa. Through rattlesnake territory.

“Is she hurt bad?” He asked as we wound our way to the big flat rock under the narrow tunnel.

“No, just exhausted. Wheel popped off when she went over the gulley and I dumped mine before I ran into her.”

“Fixable?” He jumped onto the rock and I started tossing the sleeping bags up to him.

“Yeah but it'll take a while. They're covered up though. Long as that column doesn't pass too close and they aren't looking for us, yet.”

“Ooooh...” Jones sat up and pulled her knit hat back on that was starting to fall off. “Where are we?”

“At the hideout.” I chucked the two sleeping bags she was holding to Boone and pulled her out of the wagon. “Come on, we gotta climb up to it.”

She looked all the way to the top. “Oh, wow.”

“Not that far. There's a little tunnel we can crawl through just a ways from here.” I laced my hands together to make a stirrup. “I'll give you a boost.”

Boone reached down from the top so she could grab his hands and I launched her high enough for him to catch hold. After that I shoved the two empty wagons into a space where the big rock hung over a bit, then jumped up myself.

“Ninja ladder,” Boone said to me as he crawled like Spiderman ten feet up the steep side to the entrance.

I got as close as I could to the rock face and held a hand out to Jones. “That means you climb up onto my shoulders to get as high as you can so he can reach you. Too dangerous to give you a toss up that far.”

“But I don't know if I—”

“Yes, you can. If you slip I'll catch you.”

“Hurry up! I can hear engines, already!” Boone stretched himself flat at the edge of the tunnel then reached as far back down as he could.

“Go—go!” I moved one of my legs to the first foothold and she stepped up onto my knee to climb up and over as I steadied her with one hand and held tight to a handhold with the other.

Boone grabbed both of her wrists when she slid her arms up the rock and in a few seconds she was in. I threw the rest of the sleeping bags up and by the time a headlight beam bounced off the edges of rattlesnake territory we were all laying flat in the opening, safe but

squished in the dark shadow of the tunnel when the first vehicle came into view. A Jeep with the card with one star in the window.

“Hey—that’s General Philby,” I said.

“Heads down!” Boone sounded about to panic. “And nobody move.”

It was probably just the Engineers but we couldn’t take chances of any light bouncing off our faces. It would mean curtains for the orphans no matter which side discovered us. So, we waited. And waited. It sounded like a bunch of tanks but was probably just heavy equipment passing by, headed out to the farthest border area to work on the fence. Were they all leaving? If they knew what was happening at the hospital right now they wouldn’t be deserting the whole the town like this.

But we knew.

All of a sudden the thought popped into my head how it was our duty to tell them. How trying to save a few orphans—or even ourselves—wasn’t as important as having our whole military caught off guard in a time of war. How many times had I read about stuff like this that could actually change the way things were headed? I even started to feel the creep of a coward coming on and wanted nothing to do with it. So, I took a slow peek over the top of my hands...

And caught Boone with his head up and looking, too. Probably thinking the same thing.

By that time, the line stretched out as far as we could see in front of us, which was practically to the Mexican foothills. The end of the convoy had to be coming up any minute. I mean, how long could it be? If we hurried we could at least flag somebody down. Even if it was the last vehicle.

“What do you think?” I whispered.

“I say we...” He took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a second. “Stay put. There’s...” He opened his eyes and stared hard over the long column, again. “...something not right about it. I don’t know. Something. I say we stay.”

About the time I was going to bring up the other side of the coin—like maybe we could be taken for traitors for holding back vital information—a long white van pulled into view with a couple of big black letters stamped on the side. U.N. There were about six soldiers sitting on the top with machine guns, and a couple hanging off the back that looked just like Emmy described the guy in the hospital window. Who knew how many more were inside.

I ducked my head down, again. Pure reaction that time. So, much for keeping my cool and staying still like Sir Robert said to do in this kind of situation. Something I am way not proud of no matter what I was thinking three seconds before about not being a coward. Like my survival instinct must have kicked in, or something. For about two more minutes the vehicles kept moving past. So, I went for another prayer.

Jones pulled at my sleeve like she was about to say something but I squeezed her hand tight, hoping she’d get the message to stay quiet. At least till they were gone. Sounds carried in the desert, and who knew if kids voices in a place they didn’t belong wouldn’t bounce off somebody’s mind enough to come take a look.

It seemed a long time before the engine noise finally faded but probably wasn’t. Then we all lifted our heads slow and just watched for a few minutes as the long line



snaked its way off into the distance. It was full sunrise, now, with a sliver of brilliant sun getting bigger and bigger as it rose up over the top of Padre Gordo. The cry of a desert falcon somewhere made me look up in time to catch sight of one leaving its nest in the mesa and drop into the tangle of rocks and tumbleweed below to snatch up a lizard that wasn't warm enough to move, yet.

"They're either in on it, or taken already," Boone said.

"But General Philby was at the front," I reminded him.

"How do we know it was him in there? All we saw was the star."

Jones sat up, brushed dirt off the knees of her jeans, and asked, "So, how long before our parents get here?"

Boone looked over the top of her head at me. "Better take her and these sleeping bags down with the rest of them. There weren't enough to go around and it's freezing in there. Anybody that's not tired enough to sleep a couple hours can eat cold stuff if they want, but no fires. Might be more soldiers passing by. So, keep it quiet." He moved over to the farthest corner of the opening where he could see the most road. "I'll take the first watch."

"Come on, Jones." I got up and started chucking sleeping bags farther down into the tunnel. "Good time to catch up on some sleep."

"I want to check on Savy, first. Here." She pulled a couple of crumpled papers from her pocket and handed one to each of us. "Keep them for later, when you really need one."

"What is it?" Boone asked.

"I'll tell you when I get back in a minute," I said.

We were all the way through the tunnel and halfway across the ledge before we even heard a peep from anyone below. Everyone but the adults were asleep. Mrs. Dumfries and Uncle Ding were talking quiet, sitting on a couple of wooden crates pulled up close to the fireplace, even though there hadn't been a fire lit in it for years. They looked up as soon as we started dropping sleeping bags over the edge and Uncle Ding came over and stacked them to one side as we climbed down the rope ladder.

"Girls on the left." He pointed to one of the Indian blankets strung up with rope that Boone and I used to make hammocks with last summer when we were with Grampy. "Boys on the right."

"We're gonna keep a watch in case anymore convoys pass by," I told him. "Boone's got the first, I'm taking the second, and Looney's up third. So, if he isn't awake by eleven, will you send him up?"

"I'll see to it, my boy. Don't you worry."

"Oh, yeah, and no fires until we're sure it's safe. Have to eat cold food and keep everybody inside. That convoy was..."

He was looking at me with the same kind of expression Dad gets when he's proud of me for something, and I realized he didn't know anything about the situation but the orphan part. Mrs. Dumfries couldn't have heard much at the adult meeting before Looney hauled her off, either. So, I figured it was up to me to break the news, again. Only I couldn't handle it the same as telling Jones on account of the man was way bigger than me.

"Uncle Ding—mind if I call you that?"

"Everybody else does." He gave a sort of half-laugh and pulled on one of his ears for a second, like he was trying to think. "Been called that for years."

"Well, sir, I don't know how much you know about all this but..." I borrowed Looney's phrase, "We're in a bad spot, here."

"It's a brave thing, what you boys have done for these children. However it turns out."

"Oh, it's gonna turn out all right, once we get them up to Padre Gordo. Plenty of room up there for everybody. Might take longer with a war on, but—"

"A what?" He flashed a look back at Mrs. Dumfries still sitting over by the fireplace, but she had pulled her crate up close to the wall and was leaned back, bundled up in the huge blue coat with the hat and wig pulled down low, dozing.

I lowered my voice. "We haven't heard anything official but so far we've caught a close look at a lot of foreign soldiers. Some back at the hospital and more in the convoy that went by."

"Probably the Engineers. They're coming in today to work on the border fence."

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"No official uniforms for one thing. And..." The rest of the sentence caught in my throat like a vitamin that wouldn't go down and I had to swallow just to get it out. "They carry their guns different."

For a minute he didn't say a word and—all of a sudden—I couldn't think up one more explanation or idea about anything. I felt about as squeezed out as a sponge and all I wanted to do was head back up into the

tunnel and sleep until my turn at the watch came up.

“Wait just a minute.” He put a hand up like he forgot something and went to get it out of a box by the fireplace. He was back a few seconds later and handed over a package of hot dogs and a bag of marshmallows. “Take these with you. Things always look better after you eat something. Whatever is going on out there, you boys have managed to get this little group into the safest possible spot in the whole town, even if it busts into world war three any minute.”

“Thanks, Uncle Ding.”

He patted me on the back. “Now, go get some rest. Take a couple of the sleeping bags. We doubled the smaller children up and have plenty.”

By the time I was halfway back through the tunnel, I could hear engine noise, again. Except this time it wasn't big trucks and heavy equipment. It was a sound that stopped me in my tracks for a few seconds before I dropped everything and hurried—half bent over—to make it under the low spots. Boone was squeezed way back into the shadows but still watching. I couldn't see out from this far back but I didn't have to.

It was the Border Patrol and they were moving in low...right over the top of us.

I slid up next to Boone and felt the pounding of the rotors in my chest as it passed by before moving off into the distance. “You think they're looking for us, already?” I asked.

“Man, I don't know why they'd even care after they spotted that column up ahead. But I can't think of any other reason they would circle over Little Heely. Nobody like that would know about this place. They might have

spotted one of our vehicles, though, so maybe they're looking harder."

"Maybe it wasn't really the Border Patrol."

"With all this stuff going on, the sooner we get away from here the better. But we sure can't head out in the broad daylight. You can see for miles out on the flat. Especially if the helicopters are up on patrol."

"Have to wait till dark then. Where's the first place we should head for?"

"The river, I guess. Easier to hide along the edges there."

We talked and planned a while longer, speculating on if the families got away in time, or not. Boone said he wasn't too worried on account of his mom knew a dozen roads through the desert they could at least get out of town on. If they went right away. If they were waiting till daylight, they were still probably at his place. Waiting it out. Same as us.

I went back and got the food and sleeping bags and somewhere between my third hotdog and tenth marshmallow, I fell asleep. I don't know for how long. All I know is I woke up all of a sudden with engines roaring in my ears, way louder than last time. It sounded like hundreds and they were all around us. We could hear voices—men shouting to each other—and it wasn't in English.

"Back up—back up!" Boone's voice was low and frantic as he climbed over the top of me before I could even get out of the sleeping bag. "I gotta shut down the lights in case somebody finds the way in!"

## Chapter Thirty-Three

### CAUGHT

*“It was too late to avoid him, and the  
moment he saw me he...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

As he hurried along to the top entrance, I went back down to the bottom level and let Uncle Ding know what was happening so nobody would panic and make enough noise to give us away. Especially if anyone got brave enough to come this far inside. We could hear engine noise from here but you had to be standing close to one of the entrances or on top of the mesa to hear voices. I was pretty sure of that except we never tested it out, so it was just a theory.

“Uncle Ding!” I called him over with a loud whisper. “Everybody’s gotta hide like mice, huddle together, and keep quiet till we give the all clear. Boone and I will watch the entrances, and—if anybody gets caught—the rest stay put so they think we’re the only ones.”

“Oh, you dear boys, you—you dear boys!”

“We’re surrounded.” I had to tell him the whole truth in case we maybe didn’t come back. “I don’t know for how long but there’s a lot of vehicles pulling over out

there.”

“I figured as much.” He let out a heavy sigh and just at the same second—like he was blowing out a candle—the whole place went blacker than the gorilla tent when the lights go out.

With about the same sense of panic I felt back then knowing the gorilla was on the loose. Except this was real. If I didn't still have my hand on the rope ladder, I wouldn't have known which way to get back to it. I had unclipped my flashlight and stashed it in my backpack before crawling into the sleeping bag. Now, my sense of direction was going crazy all of a sudden.

“It's in the Lord's hands, now,” he said.

“You can say that, again. Okay. If anything happens to Boone or me, Looney can get you to Padre Gordo.”

“What?”

“You can trust him. He rode the trail with us all the way down, yesterday, and he can hide like a wild thing. Besides that, he's third in command.”

“He is?”

I couldn't see his expression but I could tell by the rustling of his jacket sleeve he was pulling on his ear, again, thinking about that. “Well, how did he—”

“He earned it, that 's how. Believe me.”

I didn't have time to wait for an answer, so I didn't. Instead, I grabbed onto the rope ladder with both hands and climbed up blind. At the top I moved along the back wall to the left, keeping my hand on it all the time, so I wouldn't lose my sense of direction again and fall off the narrow ledge. It had to be full-on daylight outside, now, because I caught sight of a long shaft of light coming from the main entrance near the top of the ceiling that

stood out like a sign post in all this dark.

Not bright enough to shine into the dark below but it would show us a silhouette if someone came in that way. The actual entrance only became obvious if you were on direct level with it and at the right angle to the mesa to recognize the small steps for what they were. The ones that didn't even start until about fifteen feet above the ground.

And since we could see that light shaft coming from the entrance, we could sit at the mouth of the little tunnel and watch both ways out from the same place. Later on—if we were careful—we might even be able to spy on what was going on outside. But I had to head about ten feet into the tunnel to catch the glow from both ends at the same time, and that's where I ran into Boone. Literally. He was on his knees and breathing heavy—like he had just come up from underwater—and was trying to catch his breath before going back down, again. It took me a second to figure out what was happening.

He was trying to choke back the terror. “Oh, God—God! Hud, I made the wrong decision! We should've hid out down at the river—now we're—trapped in here!”

“Boone, there's no way you could have known that!” I whispered with all the force I could get into it without using my whole voice. “Nobody could!”

“I maybe got us killed!”

“Don't even say it!” I grabbed his shoulder like I could keep him from losing his grip. “Uncle Ding says this is the safest spot to be even if World War Three breaks out up there. Hear me? You gotta quit thinking that stuff—this is it—everybody's counting on you!”

“I can't—I—made—the—wrong—decision!”



“You have to! But unless you want to bust a gut and die over it right this minute, you better fall back on the promises and let somebody stronger take over.”

“You do it, then—you're the one with all the brains—think something up!”

“Think something up—are you kidding me?”

“You promised Grampy! When the time came you'd help me—if I have to stick with the promises, so do, you!”

“I was talking about the God promises, not Grampy's. Sheesh—what do you think he made us swear on the Bible for? It's because it's got power in it, that's why. God's power, not people power.”

“I don't know any of those promises.”

“Then what are you carrying that Bible around for if you don't even know what's in it?”

“Because Grampy told me to.”

I didn't have a clue what to say about that. What could I say? If he didn't know any, he didn't even know what his options were. Much less, how to use one.

“Just tell me what to say. Tell me the right thing and I'll swear to it.”

“Boone, that's like asking somebody to give your dad a message when he's sitting right next to you, already. You gotta speak for yourself, man. That's all praying is. It's just talking things over with God, or asking for help, and then getting an idea you never had before. Or things just get better all of a sudden. Simple as that. But it makes you feel better all of a sudden, too.”

“There's no way out!”

“Then ask for a miracle. That's what they say in church. It's when God gets you out no matter what it

takes. Like a credit card with no limit.”

He was quiet for a second trying to picture it. “Are there any rules about what you can use it for? The miracle card?”

“I don't think so. Has to be something good though—he doesn't do evil. Because there's no evil in him. Not even a shadow of it.”

He went quiet, again, but it was so dark I couldn't read his expression or get any kind of a clue what he was thinking.

“Why don't you ask for some peace?” I suggested. “Enough to settle down and think straight. Seriously, Boone. You gotta get a grip any way you know how.”

“I only got one thing in my mind to say to him.”

“Go ahead and say it then.”

“God, I—I wish my—I wish my dad was here!” That was all Jefferson Boone Junior said before he totally lost it. I mean totally.

Which had a boomerang effect on me because I had no idea that was going to pop out of his mouth. It was the only thing I couldn't believe anymore, on account of I had known him for over a year and never seen or heard any proof that he even had a dad. Except for a couple of pictures in an old photo album at Grampy's place where Boone was sitting on some soldier's lap and only looked about three years old. Even his mom didn't talk much about him anymore. And Miz Lucinda sure didn't believe it, or she wouldn't be treating us so mean all the time.

Of course I know there's a lot of people in this world who have to tough things out without a dad. It isn't easy. I can't even imagine not having my dad around because just standing next to him makes me feel like everything's

gonna be okay—no matter what's going on. I was feeling horrible a few days ago when I couldn't find him anywhere even though I know absolutely—no doubt—that he would never just up and disappear on me. So, hearing Boone go all to pieces wanting his dad back made me feel like bawling, too.

Most of the time he's like a rock. The kind that can take more, put up with more, and hold on stronger than anybody else I know. He's the best there is. Which is why anything that breaks him hits me the same way, even if it doesn't make sense. I only saw him like this once before. That was back last summer, when Grampy had a talk with him just before he died, and tried to tell him the way things would have to be if his dad didn't come home. Like he maybe had a premonition or something.

But Boone wasn't having any of it. Not then or ever since. He just kept saying he was on his way home—he was on his way home—no matter how much time went by. Or the fact he never showed up. Then he went to making up messages he said he got from him now and then. I can't say he was lying, though, because I actually think he believed it, himself.

All that to say there isn't a thing that gets me in the gut so much as when my best friend—the kind that's closer than a brother—gets so busted up there's nothing I can do about it. So, I just sat there and bawled right along with him, same as last summer. Practically smothering myself to be as quiet as I could because I didn't want to cause a chain reaction down below and ignite the howl of the century if any of the rest of them started up, too. Maybe even pop the top of this mesa off like a volcano—that's what I felt like inside, a volcano—

and ruin any chance that was left in this world for the orphan kids.

Somebody had to stand up for them.

But there wasn't anyone around to do it but us. We were their last hope. Their only hope. I've never been anyone's only hope before. Then all of a sudden—right when I was thinking about that—I felt some of the peace I was trying to pray down on Boone wrap slow and easy all around me like a warm blanket. And right about the time I was praying he could feel some of that, too, I heard him catch his breath, again. But this time it was like he just saw something. So, I looked toward the tunnel entrance to see what it was.

Somebody was standing there.

I might have thought it was Jesus, himself, except I was pretty sure he wouldn't be walking in with a machine gun slung over his shoulder. I couldn't say another word—not even a whisper. Just reached for Boone's shoulder to get him to back up slow. I couldn't budge him. It was like he had turned into a statue and was froze there. Then he said, “Hey...” without even bothering to whisper as he got to his feet. “Hey...”

Next thing I knew Boone was moving fast—heading straight toward him—like some crazy hero. He was going to plow into the guy the minute he ducked into the tunnel. Aiming to hit head on and knock him back down into rattlesnake territory even if they both went sailing out there.

Which I could not let him do.

Because I promised Grampy I would look out for Boone like my own brother when the time came—and this was it. Being adopted into the family it was my duty

to take care of the whole bunch from now on. Right alongside Boone. I had sworn on the Bible to do that. So, I launched into the mid-air, stretching out as far as I could for a tackle to keep him from killing himself...

And missed.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

### BELIEVE IT

*“This was done in the time of peace, and  
therefore had to be done secretly...”*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

I will never forget the next thing that happened—even if I live to be a hundred—I will remember the feeling of it the rest of my life. The guy made the entrance and stood up to his full height just before Boone crashed into him. But then a strange thing happened. He diverted the impact by catching him up instead of tossing him off, then holding him tight up against him. Really tight.

Now, I know for a fact nothing gets to Boone worse than getting caught or feeling trapped. There's no faster way to get him kicking or throwing punches. Doesn't matter how much bigger the person is, either. Like when he slammed Rand Hamilton with the makings of a black eye before realizing it was him in the gorilla suit. Get too close to him when he's like that and—boy howdy—you gotta prepare to defend yourself. But he didn't do any of that just then.

Instead, he just leaned his forehead against that guy, laughing and crying at the same time, hugging him around the neck, saying, “Dad—Dad! I knew by your

shadow—I knew it was you!”

And there he was. Right in front of our eyes.

He was just like the pictures, too. Dark and handsome, with a smile that shined like daylight even though it looked like he was crying a little, too—he was that happy to get hold of his own boy. He was big and strong and rugged, just like Boone said he was. You could tell he was a soldier even in the faded jeans and black t-shirt he was wearing. I guess it was something in the way he moved.

The grey and black band tied around his forehead threw me off a little—was he working with the U.N. guys, or something? But even though his gun was slung like theirs, there was no doubt in my mind this was definitely Boone's dad—he was home—and he had found us! Right at the exact minute Boone chose the miracle card. I could hardly believe it.

He let Boone down and looked over at me. “You must be Hud.” He had the same voice as Grampy, and just like Grampy he pulled me into a group hug with the two of them and said, “Welcome to the family, boy!”

Something that gave me a feeling of fitting in more than I ever felt before. Even better than when Grampy told me, except I always thought he might trick me out of it somehow, or at least work the daylights out of me just for the privilege.

“He earned it, all right,” Boone wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket. “Saved my life about three times already.”

“Did he, now.” Then he laughed a laugh that was even better than his smile and headed us over to where the tunnel got low and narrow. “They probably can't hear

us with all that noise going on outside but let's stay careful. Okay..." He unslung the gun, leaned it against the wall and got down on one knee to look in. "What happened to the lights?"

"We turned them off to hide the orphans in case somebody found us out," Boone answered. "But they work all right."

"How many you got?"

"Thirteen, counting us. All kids and two old people."

"Might have to make two trips." He unclipped a green, US Army canteen from the side of his belt and sat down to take a long drink and think things out. "It's rough out there," he said after a minute. "It'll be tricky to slip everybody out but this is the time to do it. Enough confusion happening while they set up camp for anyone to pay much attention to the back side of a falling down mesa. Only about twenty feet we'll have to be careful on and that's between the entrance and the old well, on the other side of the slab-rock."

"Not sure it's a well or a mine shaft," Boone admitted. "Never looked down into it, yet."

"It's a well. Nice pure one, too."

"Guess you've been here, then."

"Been here—boy, this is my stronghold. Had it since I was your size. I'm the one rigged up all the lights and built the fireplace. Made your grandpa promise to put in the solar back when he upgraded the rest of his work places, after I left, because I was fixing to give it to you for a Christmas present this year."

Boone's eyes lit up. "No wonder it felt like home right away. I wish you could have seen Grampy before he



went, though.” He leaned toward him with the same bright smile as his dad. “Stepped his foot into the healing waters and got restored to his former glories.”

His dad laughed, again. “Now, that I would like to see! Have to wait till we all meet up in the middle, though.” He got to his feet, again. “Right now, we got some parents back at Padre Gordo, getting pretty nervous about their kids sitting smack in the middle of an invasion.”

“Are we taken over already?” I couldn't help blurting that out. I guess there was still a part of me that was hoping this whole thing was some sort of bizarre mistake that would fade back to normal as soon it got straightened out.

“Not all the way. We still have the Border Patrols and some of our National Guard units that were out on missions when it first got started. That was about two months ago. There's a free zone in Texas and another one in Alaska.”

“Two months!” We had been at war for two months, already? I couldn't believe it. “We thought it was just the economy getting all tangled up with bad politics.”

“Two-thirds of the country thought that. It's how so much got taken over before they even made their big move.”

“When was that—this morning?” Boone kept touching things like the canteen, the gun, or patting his dad's arm now and then to remind himself he was real. His dad ruffled his tangle of black curls every once in a while for the same reason. I guess Boone's hat was still stuffed in his sleeping bag.

“Same day the President took off for that Middle

East peace summit. They've been taking over towns all over the country for the last three weeks. Only way to get this far back in, again, was to infiltrate into the convoys. Took me over a month to get here."

"That's about when we lost Internet and everything," I said.

"You got here just in time!" Boone sounded like a ton of weight and responsibility toppled off him in the last three minutes. "The witch lady had us hemmed in and outsmarted on practically every turn. She was after the gold, Dad! Had to trade her six months of food just to get away from her."

"Don't have to worry about her, anymore, son. Stopped in on her first thing before I came here."

"Before you saw Mom and me?"

"Had a package to deliver. Ran into cousin Denny in one of the convoys I was traveling with that stopped at a work camp. So, I brought him along. Boy was so fit to be home he couldn't wait a minute longer."

"Well, I sure hope you didn't believe any lies she told you about us." He got that double dare sort of look like when he knows there's a fight coming and just wants to get it over with.

"Well, it did surprise me some because it sure didn't sound like you."

We both stood there waiting for it—dead quiet—until we knew what kind of fix we were gonna have to talk ourselves out of next. I was even thinking I maybe should take some of the blame on account of his dad didn't know yet how strong he was, now, and always took whatever was coming to him, head on, without running away from it so much anymore. But I didn't get a chance

to.

“She couldn't say enough good things about you,” his dad said. “Probably because I caught her in the kitchen about three o'clock this morning, putting all that food into smaller packages so she could stash it away. She was all the way down to the cornmeal.”

“Uh-oh,” Boone started talking fast. “That was the only way I could think of to buy us some more time. Because she was—”

“She was so excited to see Denny she didn't remember for a whole ten minutes she left that pouch of gold sitting right out on the kitchen table. Then she started acting like I caught her red-handed instead of believing you gave it to her. Even offered to give it back, too. Now, that Denny was home.”

“She offered to give it back?” That was me because I couldn't believe it. Matter of fact the only reason I could think for that to happen was she was shocked halfway to the moon because Boone's dad wasn't dead or gone, and she had been as mean as a hornet to us while he was away.

“I said, No, ma'am. If he gave it to you, it's yours. Use it whatever way you need to take care of your family. And there's more where that came from.” Then he pulled Boone close against his side and said, “You got the job done, Junior. And I'm proud of you.”

Boone couldn't answer anything just then and I didn't interrupt the quiet. Which only lasted a few seconds before there was the sound of a thump and a mumble from somewhere down the tunnel.

“That's Looney Martin tripping over our sleeping bags,” Boone answered his dad's backward glance down the dark passageway. “I better turn the lights back on so

everybody can at least see a hand in front of their face.” Then he lit out to do it without even waiting for an answer.

Two seconds after that, Looney popped his still swelled-up head out and looked around. “What’s going on, guys? Hey, Mr. Boone—how did you get up here?”

“Border Patrol helicopter. Landed down by the river where you boys left the Rhino. How’s it going, Looney?”

“Pretty good. I’m third in command, now.”

Man, Uncle Ding sure didn’t waste any time spreading that news all over the place.

“Command of what?” Mr. Boone asked him.

“I don’t know. Whatever I took the swear and have to obey orders for, I guess. What’s it for, Hud?”

“For being the best spy we have in this outfit,” I told him. “And trustworthy.”

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Still need some work on that obeying orders part though.”

“Yeah, okay.”

There was a faint glow down in the tunnel as the lights came on. When Boone got back a minute later, his dad looked at all of us and said, “All right, let’s huddle up and organize this thing. How many adult-size kids to you have?”

Looney turned to head back down with the others.

“That means you, too, Looney,” Boone said. “Long as you’re third in command.”

You’d have thought he said we were passing out ice cream the way he let loose with a grin, and popped back into the circle.

“Any hurt or sick?” Mr. Boone went on.

“A couple just getting over the mumps we had to carry down but they should be better after the sleep they got.”

“Then this is what we'll do. We're going to set up four stations between here and the well. I'll stand outside on the big rock, and signal with a bird call when the way is clear. Then you boys send them out one at a time. They'll move from one station to the next each time they hear the call. Until then, they just keep low and wait. Once they get into the well house, they wait until everybody else gets there.”

He took a knife out of his belt and knelt down on one knee to draw in the dirt. “The two critical stations outside are under the overhang of the big slag-rock below the tunnel entrance. First one will be as soon as I drop them down to the ground—just have them lean in close and stay put under there. When I give another signal, they keep low and head for the well, get under the overhang at the other end the slag rock, and wait. Don't go out or around it, just keep right there.”

He looked up to make sure we were all listening, then kept talking as he drew in the rest of the stations. “Next time you hear the call, there's about ten feet of open space before you can duck into the well house. Door's open, already. Move down the tunnel about twenty feet and wait for the rest of us to get inside. Tunnel runs all the way to the river and the helicopter's waiting. The guy on that end will help everybody in. He's dressed like one of them, too, but he's a Border Patrol officer. Do whatever he tells you, no matter what he tells you. Got it?”

“Got it,” Boone answered and Looney and I nodded.

“Where's the other two stations?” I asked.

“The inside tunnel, here, and right at the entrance over there.” He pointed the tip of his knife toward where the light was coming in. “Anyone that can't get down on their own, you'll have to drop and I'll catch them.”

“Wo—wo—wait a minute!” Looney jumped to his feet like something bit him. “We can't drop Dummie off a cliff like that, she's too fat! How come we can't just let her climb down the net—same way she got up here?”

“You can see part of that entrance from the road. Who's Dummie?”

“She's the house mom for the orphans,” I explained. “But Looney's right, she's about as big as three people put together. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't even fit through the inside tunnel.”

“Then she'll have to stay here until this convoy moves on. If they don't, we'll figure out some sort of diversion so we can get her down from the other side. Could be days or weeks until we could do something like that. You got enough food and water in there, Boone?”

“Yes, sir. If all the rest of them aren't around to need it, we do.”

“Hey—we can't leave Dummie all by herself—we can't do it!” Looney looked about to bust just thinking about that.

“Uncle Ding will stay with her,” I told him. “He wouldn't even think of letting her stay by herself. I'm sure of it.”

“But he gets the melancholy sometimes,” said Looney.

“What the heck is that?” asked Boone.

“It's when he gets so tired of everything he just goes to sleep or takes off somewhere. Doesn't come back for days sometimes, and me or Rand has to go find him and bring him home before Dummie quits.”

For a minute none of us said anything, we just sat there staring at him.

“So, I'm staying,” he said.

“Wo—Looney—you can not stay here in the middle of a army post,” Boone insisted. “Not when you never stayed put anywhere for more than a couple hours in your whole life. Sneaking in and out around here could get you killed!”

“Not if you ordered me not to I wouldn't”

“Since when have you obeyed orders if you didn't feel like it?” Boone got to his feet, too, because he couldn't sit still anymore, either.

“Since I got to be third in command! Besides, somebody's gotta climb all the way to the top to turn the lights on and off if we have to. I seen how you do that, Boone, and I can do it.”

“He's right, Boone,” I thought I better add my vote before he popped off with a decision he couldn't live with later. “Without the houseparents, you and me are gonna have to be responsible for all the others—at least till we get them settled into the families. Then we can help with the rescue.”

“Settled.” His dad stood up and put his knife back into the sheath on his belt. “Now, let's go talk things over with them so we can get this show on the road.”

The show went off just like we planned it.

Except for a when a couple guys got curious about

rattlesnake territory and started looking all around in it, right when we had about three kids in the well house and two in the stations waiting to slip by. But everybody followed the rules and stayed put. Boone's dad rattled something off to them that I didn't understand—but by the way they high-tailed it out of there and back to the convoy—I'm pretty sure he was mentioning how the Mojave Greens don't hibernate same as other rattlesnakes do, and how their poison goes straight to the brain if you get bit by one. Of course they're pretty reclusive and you rarely ever see one but I think he left that part out.

Then there was the minute little Jimmy would not—absolutely not—let go of Savannah even long enough for her to climb up the rope ladder. So, she tried carrying him up piggy-back, ran out of steam halfway up, and Boone had to pull them up hand-over-hand the rest of the way. By the time they made it through the stations and got safe into the well-house, that little kid still hadn't let go of her. She carried him on her back through every station, just so he wouldn't throw a full-on tantrum, or anything.

The trouble-making kid was sticking close to Tater, and on his best behavior for being allowed to carry the one-burner kitchen. There wasn't much fuel left in it, anyway, and Tater told him he could be his assistant cook when we got to Padre Gordo. As long as he did what he was told. Seemed like Tater rose to the occasion of keeping everybody in line since Rand wasn't there to do it like he usually did. Even the fifth-grade girls did their part and took care of the youngest girl.

Everybody was on the top of their game.

Right up until it came time to leave Looney. I don't



know how I could get so attached to a kid who was so hard to handle, but the thought of him getting into a fix we couldn't get him out of was sitting on my chest like a huge block of cement. So much I could hardly drag myself through the big winding tunnel that led down to the river. It was a long tunnel—lit up with battery lights—just like the hard rock mine tunnels of Padre Gordo.

The ten of us walked with Boone's dad at the front, me at the end, and Boone moving back and forth between the two of us to make sure everything was all right along the line. They all wore their backpacks with the sleeping bags tied on underneath, and there was not one complaint or argument from anybody. After a while, Jones wandered back to talk for a minute. She was carrying Jimmy piggy-back to give Savannah a break, and he seemed happy enough to let her. He was even having some fun moving her hat back and forth from his head to hers.

She fell into step, looked up at me, and smiled. "We did it, didn't we."

I'd never seen her look so happy and couldn't help smiling at the thought, myself. "We sure did."

She reached into her pocket. "I'm passing out answers to anybody that wants one."

"I'm good. I still have the one you gave me before."

Her smile faded.

"Too much going on and everything. But I'll read it, I promise."

"Well..." Jimmy plopped the hat down over her ponytail, again and she had to push her glasses back up to keep them on. "Maybe you didn't need it until now."

"Maybe. Did Boone read his?"

“Yes, and guess what he said? He said it was amazing. Amazing! But he wouldn't tell me why. I said I at least had to know which one he got—for my research, you know. But I don't have a clue why he thought it was so amazing. Especially when he read it right after we left and didn't even know what they were for, yet.”

“I guess I forgot to explain it to him.”

This time she looked disappointed.

“Too much going on and everything. It's still a great idea, Jones. You probably would have won a prize for it.”

“Well, I hope so. I've never not won a prize in a science fair. Ever. My father was a scientist.”

“I didn't know that. So, what did Boone's answer say?”

“It just said: *Try something different*. That's all. But I suppose if it meant something amazing to him, I could still mark that down as a success. Wouldn't you think?”

“Definitely.”

“Where's Savvy, Jonesie?” Jimmy's little voice went quavery all of a sudden.

“Uh-oh. Gotta go. Say, see you later, Hud...”

She started running in place and waited long enough for him to say, “See ya!” before taking off up the line, again.

*Try something different*. Considering Boone had personally talked to God—for the first time in his life—and even tried out the miracle card, I could see where he could have looked at that little answer message as something amazing. But what were the odds? Didn't matter, really. I figured it was a success just for being a way to cheer people up.

Then again, if I hadn't snapped to my senses, last

night, and taken off to the Little Heely as fast as I could, we never would have gotten there in time before the convoy came through. So maybe God really did use little things like that—anything and everything, really—to help people out when they needed it. Maybe he even cares more about the way things work out than we do.

And I guess if he could change Boone and me into something so different—so much better—than what we started out like last summer, then maybe he could do it for Looney, too. He could keep him safe even if he made some mistakes. Just like us. Then—about the time I was wondering if I could really believe it—I felt some of that warm peace start to wrap around me, again. Right there in the tunnel—as I was walking along—that heavy cement feeling dropped away.

If this kind of stuff kept happening I wouldn't be surprised if I started to believe God personally had his hand on me. That he knew my name and everything we were trying to do. That he might even make sure things worked out for all of us, no matter what was going on in the world. I could almost believe that.

Then I saw Jones stick her head out of the line up ahead and look back at me. So, I fumbled in my pocket, pulled out the little answer, and waved it at her before opening it up.

It said: *Believe it.*

*"They go from strength to strength, every one of them appears before God."*

*Psalm 84:7*

## An Honorable Spy From Real Life...

Before Sir Robert Baden-Powell became the leader of the Boy Scouts, he had a long career in the military. In his early years he was often sent on special assignments behind enemy lines, much like the “Special Forces” of our modern armies of today. Very few people have enough of the skills, self control and courage that these dangerous assignments require. Successful missions in this kind of work have changed the course of armies and sometimes even meant the difference between winning or losing a war. Because of the ability to do these things this kind of soldier is the most feared of all enemies. To be caught almost always leads to death. Which is why to be caught as a spy is considered the highest of all crimes by all countries. And they are only tolerated because of the vital information they carry.

For this reason, they are sometimes kept alive a while in order to extract important information from them. Because of this there are many accounts of amazing escapes by those who found their way out to eventually get back home, again. But not before enduring experiences that took the kind of survival skills that few people ever have to resort to in their entire lives. Things like how to get food and shelter in many different kinds of wilderness situations, or how to stay hidden for a long time until it becomes safe to move around, again.

How to find lost trails and how to recognize danger before it finds you first. Most of all how to keep all this information honorably even though you must be on your honor to keep all secrets entrusted to you as you continue to carry out your duties.

Later in his career, when Sir Robert Baden-Powell became a military leader and no longer did these kinds of missions anymore, he found himself in charge of a war in Africa that he was not winning. His army was surrounded by so many enemy troops that help could not break through to rescue them. They—along with the little town they had set up headquarters in—were under siege. Everyone expected they would either surrender soon, or die. After many months, and running dangerously low on soldiers, ammunition, and food, this clever, resourceful man did a very unexpected thing.

He trained up a group of boys to be Army Scouts. They would run messages, stand guard duty, and bring in the dead and wounded from the battlefield so that the few soldiers who were left could be free to do nothing but fight. Some would even act as spies. But not before he wrote up a special handbook in which he shared all the survival secrets he had learned and kept himself alive with over the years. History tells us that they won that war. Against all odds, and due mostly to the clever reorganization of the entire town—in which everyone lived underground rather than in the buildings—and his unusual troop of “boy scouts” who were well-trained enough to be able to carry out those vital jobs that were normally given to men.

Then something amazing happened.

Before Sir Robert Baden-Powell came home from

Africa many months later to be knighted by the King of England for his bravery, someone had smuggled out one of his boy scout handbooks. Now, boys all over England were learning the same skills. They were practicing them all by themselves, taking the pledge of honor, doing good deeds by the hundreds and acting like brave men all over the country. Because of this, Sir Robert received a new commission. One the King considered even more important than fighting. He must continue to lead and train this army of boys who were turning into the kind of men that would strengthen the country for generations. And so he did. In fact, he became so good at it, the idea grew too big for England and spread like wildfire around the entire world. All within his own lifetime.

The quotes in this book, SPIES For Life, were taken from Sir Robert Baden-Powell's book, *My Adventures As A Spy*, written in 1915, and the original Scouting For Boys which reached America in 1911. Both are in the public domain and available for free at Gutenberg.org, as well as many other places on the Internet. They still have the same power they did back then. Especially for those who believe like Sir Robert that, "*Knowledge is power.*"

## 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. 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.

Oh, yes, and if you would like, you can get in touch with Cousin Summers (the Mysterious) by visiting:

CousinSummers.com



Other books by  
**Cousin Summers**

The Young Heroics (middle grade)

Book One

**KNIGHTS of the Empire**

Book Three

**The Last HEROES**

The Young Scientifics (middle grade)

Book One

**Return to the Dinosaur Planet**

Kids On Assignment (young adult)

Book One

**The Kidnapping of Mary**

## A Note to Readers...

Thank you for reading this book. If you enjoyed it, tell someone! If you would like to read other books like this, you can find them by visiting:

[SummersIslandPress.com](http://SummersIslandPress.com)

You will also find the Wilderness Kids Club over there. It's a place to learn wilderness survival skills and meet other kids who also like to spend time in the "Great Outdoors." There is even a real Wilderness Expert on hand who can answer any questions you might have about the wilderness and how to survive in it.

## A Note to Parents...

Summers Island Press and Wilderness Kids Club are divisions of the Wilderness School Institute, a nonprofit educational organization based in Alaska. They are dedicated to giving children something better to do, and bringing more hope and heroes into their lives. For more information, or to find out how you can become involved in some of their exciting projects, please visit:

[WildernessSchoolInstitute.org](http://WildernessSchoolInstitute.org)



*"There is another kind of law which binds people just  
as much as their written laws, though this one is  
neither written nor published. This  
unwritten law is Honour."*

*Sir Robert Baden-Powell*

