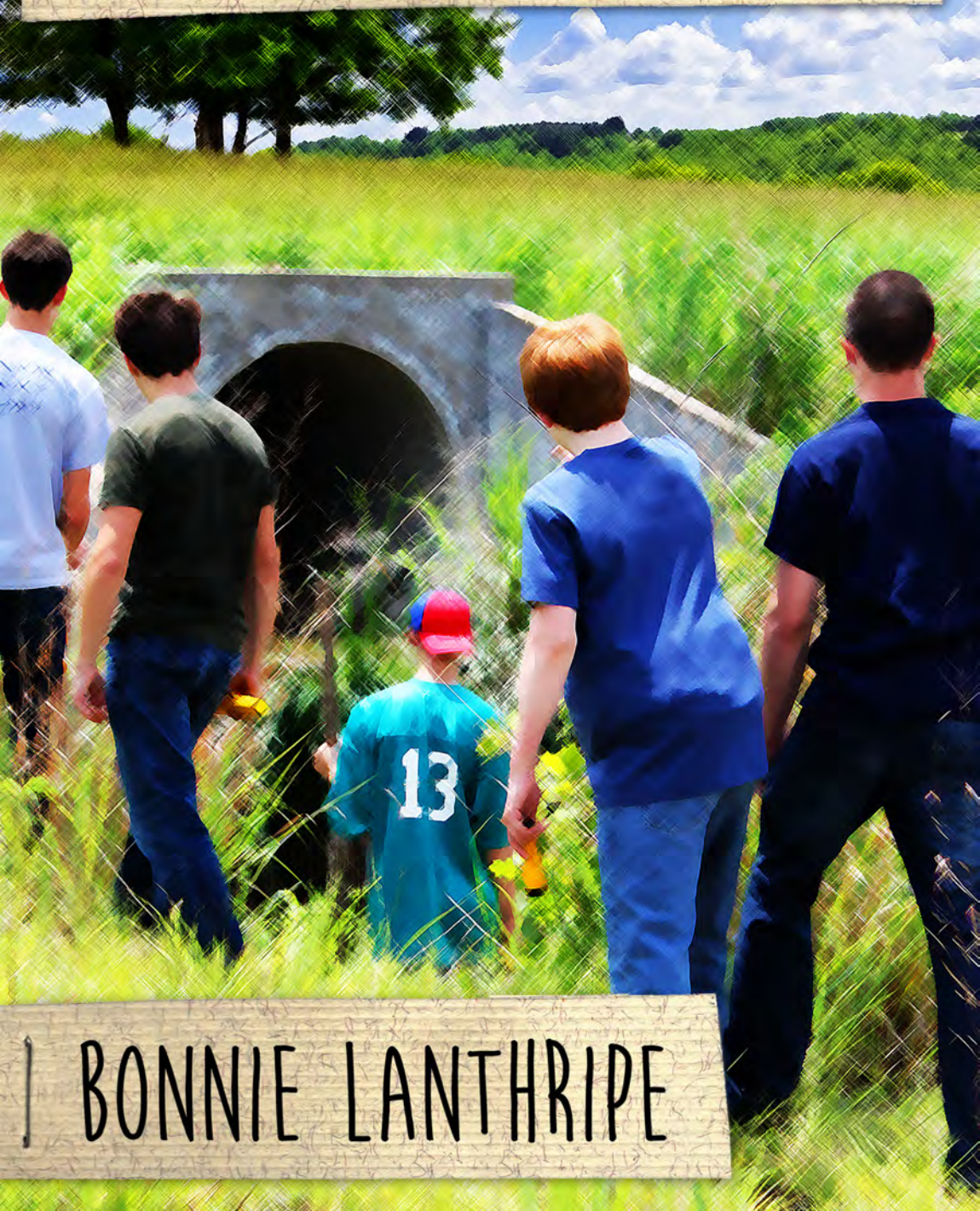


THE RINGLEADER



BONNIE LANTHRIPE

THE RINGLEADER



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The Ringleader
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To my grandson, Drake Massey.

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CHAPTER ONE

The buzzer on my alarm clock screamed in my ear. Patrick Morrison, I thought, you have got to be nuts to get up at eight in the morning when you have a Friday off from school. Most fourteen-year old guys would sleep in. But my friends and I were all about adventure, and we agreed the three-day weekend was exactly what we'd been waiting for: an extra day to explore the big drainage culvert at the dead-end two streets over.

I groaned, reached out and hit the 'Off' button. I rolled out of bed and thought about the day ahead, excited about what we might come across this time.

Over the past several months we'd checked out a lot of neighborhoods, a near-by conservation area, and the farm on the other side of the ravine across from my house. Some pretty interesting things had turned up: an old-time brick incinerator, mud pits that sucked the shoes right off your feet, and some pretty mean cows. Not to mention one mad farmer.

Interesting couldn't begin to describe the discovery I made that Friday, or the way it would change my life.

The plan was for everyone to meet early at my house. James and

Brendan lived up the street and around the corner from me. They were at my front door before I got my shoes on, and hung out while I ate breakfast. By ten o'clock we were outside, but still waiting for Max and Jeremy. Hey, I mean, I got it. Growing boys need their sleep. I sure could have done with a few more zzzzs. I had hardly slept thinking about what we might come across inside that culvert.

I pulled out my cell phone, wondering what could be taking them so long. Max was on speed-dial. He answered just before it went to voice mail. He sounded groggy, like he was just waking up. I knew it! He wasn't even out of bed yet. "Hey, dude, where are you guys?" I said.

"Morrison?"

"Yeah, it's me. I'm on my porch with James and Brendan. We're waiting for you."

He mumbled something about putting his shoes on and ready to go out the door. Yeah, right. Same phoney-baloney I would have given.

"Okay. Just meet us at the culvert. Later." I disconnected and dialed Jeremy's house. The only one of the five of us who didn't have his own cell, Jeremy's mother was also the only one of our moms who didn't work.

His mom answered. "Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Wilson. This is Patrick Morrison. May I speak to Jeremy?"

"Why, good morning, Patrick, dear. How are you this morning?"

From past experience, I knew I wasn't going to get off the phone and get Jeremy on without telling Mrs. Wilson I was fine; my mother, father, brother and sister were fine; the dog, the cat, the goldfish and the canary—if we had a canary—were all fine. She really was a nice lady, but geesh, it was the same routine every time.

When she finally seemed satisfied that the entire Morrison household was in tip-top shape, I heard her call, "Jeremy, dear, one of your little friends is on the phone."

She never even bothered to put her hand over the phone. She'll probably still be calling us Jeremy's little friends when we graduate from high school, maybe college even.

In the background I heard the pounding sound of feet rushing down stairs.

"Okay, mom," good old Jeremy yelled as he went out the door. "Tell them I'll meet them at the cul . . . uh . . . at the cul-de-sac."

I said, "Thank you, Mrs. Wilson, I heard," and touched the 'Off' button. Not exactly polite, but Mrs. Wilson already knew my whole family was fine. If I went through all that again Jeremy would be at the culvert before I even got off the phone.

I put my phone in my pocket, looked at James and Brendan, and said, "So, I guess you figured out where the rest of the team is."

They nodded.

I picked up my back pack and slung it over my shoulder.

"Okay, guys," I said to them, "let's head out."

It didn't take long for us to get from my house to the dead-end. While we waited for Max and Jeremy, we checked our gear—flashlights, extra batteries and bottled water. We could be in the culvert a long time, we had no idea right then. It all depended on what we found. But, we'd want plenty of light to see our way around and we might get thirsty. I'd also thrown in a few Oreos, just in case.

Max and Jeremy both lived in another housing development not far away, just one major street over. They made it in record time, huffing and puffing from their bike ride.

"You guys need a couple minutes to catch your breath?" I said, not really feeling a lot of sympathy for either of them right at the moment.

"Uh-huh," Max wheezed.

After a few minutes, I asked, "Are you ready?" We were burning daylight and I was ready to get the show on the road.

Max nodded.

"Ready," Jeremy said, moving forward.

I took the lead as we stepped around the concrete barrier that marked the end of the street, and stashed the bikes behind some tall brush. We made our way down to where the culvert emptied out, careful not to step off the narrow path.

At one time, the area was meant to be a small lake with a green belt for the housing developments on either side. But something happened to the original plans. The green belt was all wild brush and weeds, and the lake became a pond of mostly stagnant water that overflowed into the ravine during heavy rains. The pond was surrounded by really smelly, nasty black mud. When we were little, my sister, Taylor, got stuck in the icky goo once and my dad had to come pull her out. Her shoes and socks are still somewhere in that muck.

Once inside the big round mouth of the culvert, my friends and I stood tight together. I figure someday I'll make it to well over six feet tall, like my dad, but at the time I was about a foot shy of that. I made the opening to be around four and a half feet because I had to duck as I went in.

I looked over my shoulder at my friends. James, Max and I were about the same height so they had to scrunch down, too. Jeremy was so short the top of his crazy-wild, curly black hair barely grazed the upper side of the pipe. Brendan topped us all by several inches and he had to really hunch over to make his way through.

"Okay, guys, here we go," I said, my heart beating faster. I clicked on my flashlight and shined it into the darkness. Four light beams joined mine as I took a deep breath and walked into unknown territory.

After a few yards, I stopped. "Hey, isn't this supposed to be a drain? Like for run-off into the pond, or ravine?"

"Yeah, I think so," James said. "Why?"

"Well, you'd think there would be some water or mud," I said, shining my flashlight around on the floor. "But there's not even a puddle in here, not a drop of water anywhere. Even the leaves that blew in are dry."

"It looks like water came through here at one time, though," he said. He pointed the beam of his flashlight a few feet in front of us. "See. There's a pile of leaves and trash that look like they washed through here sometime."

"But it's dry as a bone now," I said.

Things weren't living up to what I'd imagined. I'd pictured us sloshing through water, at least maybe a puddle or two. Maybe come upon the skeleton of a baby crocodile or some exotic pet that had been dumped in the drain and died because it wasn't able to survive in the wild.

"Hey, guys," Max said, "have you noticed how our voices bounce off the walls?" He made a noise that sounded like he was trying to yodel. "Listen!"

The sound echoed through the culvert as he kept up the noise. It got super annoying real quick.

"C'mon, Max," Jeremy said after a while. "That's enough."

"Yeah, let's go on," I said and started walking forward again. Knowing Max, he wouldn't be able to walk and yodel at the same time.

After nudging bits of trash with our toes and poking sticks through piles of junk we came across, and coming up with nothing interesting, we decided to take a break. We sat against the curved walls and pulled water bottles from our backpacks. I passed around the Oreos.

"Wonder where we are?" James said as he shined his light overhead.

We had been walking for about thirty minutes, including breaks to look at stuff. We'd taken a couple turns and back-tracked once for a short distance, then headed off a different way, so it was kind of hard to tell what direction we were going. None of us had a compass. We'd never needed one before when we explored.

We knew the culvert ran under the street that divided one housing development from another, but we had no idea if it actually

went beneath homes. I knew where we went in, my goal of this whole exploration was to learn where we might end up.

I stood up and hit my head. Hard. I pitched forward onto my hands and knees. A sharp pain spread through my skull and for a few seconds I saw stars.

"Hey, man, are you okay?" James crawled over and knelt beside me. He started checking out my head, shining his flashlight right in my face.

"Yeah, except I can't see with that thing in my eyes," I said, pushing the flashlight away. I sat up and rubbed the top of my head. I felt a goose egg but nothing sticky, so I figured at least I wasn't bleeding. "I'm fine," I said and shook it off. I stood up, being sure to stay hunched forward, and said, "Let's keep going."

A little further on, the guys started poking at a big pile of junk with their sticks. Max and Jeremy got all excited when they found some glass marbles and started digging deeper. I walked on a few feet and stopped dead in my tracks.

"Crap! Crap!"

My heart hit the roof of my mouth beating at cyber-speed. My breath caught in my throat, I couldn't breathe. I cannot be seeing what I think I'm seeing! No way, I thought. Maybe I got a concussion after all when I bonked my head. I inched forward a step for a closer look. That was all I needed. I was sure. My knees shook and I took a step backward, then another.

When Brendan heard me yelling, he turned his light toward me. When I looked around at them, it was right in my eyes, blinding me. Enough with the light in my eyes, already.

"What's up?" he called. "You hit your head again?"

The others stood up and shined their lights directly at me. This time, I put my hand up to shield my eyes and hurried toward them.

"We need to go, guys," I said.

Their mouths hung open as I pushed them aside and plowed a path straight through them.

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Someone said, "What do you mean? We—"

"We have to go. Now!" I said and kept going. I didn't want to leave one of them behind, but I wasn't going to wait to see if they were following me. I just hoped they were. I went as fast as I could, trying not to panic and break into a run.

"Patrick! Slow down," they yelled. "Hey, man, wait up!"

When I heard them hurrying, hustling to catch up with me, I went faster. I made it out of the drain in a lot less time than we'd spent in there. I sucked in fresh air as I cleared the entry. Scrambling up the small incline, I kept on going, and didn't stop until I made it all the way home. I plopped down on the grass when I reached my front yard, and pulled off my backpack.

"What is up with you, dude?" James demanded as he sat down beside me. "What is your problem?"

One by one, and out of breath, the others plunked down on the ground with us.

I looked around at each of them. Slowly, quietly, I said, "Crap."

"Yeah, we heard what you said," Max said, looking around at the others. "Before you tore out of there like you'd been shot out of a cannon." He shook his head.

"Yeah, that was weird, man," Jeremy said. "What's the deal?"

"Right. Weird," Max agreed. "But what happened, Patrick? Crap . . . what?"

"Crap." I said again, very clearly. "A huge pile of it. I'm telling you guys, there was the biggest pile of crap I've ever seen. And I wasn't waiting around to see what dumped it there."

They stared at me, their mouths wide open.

All I could think was there was no way I would be satisfied until I found out where that mess came from.

CHAPTER TWO

"What do you mean?" Max asked. "What are you talking about?"

My heart was still thumping fast and I was still shaky and out of breath. "You guys didn't see that? You couldn't smell it!"

How could they have missed that? The stink had just about knocked me over. That's when I knew without a doubt what it was. It looked like an over-sized dump, but, to be sure, I took one more step, and the smell hit me. As I stood there looking at the pile, my imagination went into overdrive. With all the wild things ripping through my mind, I'd decided it was time to bail.

"But I didn't think that pipe was a sewer line," Jeremy said, looking around at the others. "I don't know about you guys, but I wouldn't have gone in there if I'd known it was."

"It's not. I'm sure of it." James said. "Sewers empty into waste stations." He looked at the other guys. "Don't they?"

Brendan said, "I am positive it is not a sewer line."

"Peuew!" Max said, ignoring what Brendan had just said. "You mean somebody's been using that drain as a toilet? Yuck! That's just gross."

"That's not what he said," James said.

"No, Max," I said. "That's not it."

"But you just said—."

"Well, I'm telling you, what I saw was not . . . uh . . . human."

James sat on the grass closest to me. "So you think someone's been using the culvert to get rid of their pet's poop, and now there's a big pile of it?"

"No, James, it wasn't like that."

"Come on, Patrick," he said. "Maybe your eyes were playing tricks on you." He nudged me with his elbow and chuckled. "Maybe you hit your head harder than you thought."

That stung. I figured if anyone believed me, it would be James. We had been friends longer than the rest. We looked and acted so much alike—same size, same dark hair, blue eyes, crazy sense of humor—that sometimes people thought we were brothers. The five of us started kindergarten together, but James and I went back farther than that. Our mothers had been friends, like, forever, and he and I started out on play-dates as toddlers.

"It was probably just some dead animal," Jeremy said, like he was all of a sudden some kind of authority. "That stinks pretty bad."

The other guys joined in then with more explanations. "Yeah, it was pretty dark in there," one of them said.

"Maybe it was just a sack of trash."

Everybody seemed to have an idea about what I saw. And every solution they came up with got worse.

"Oh, I know, I know," Max said, acting all excited and laughing really weird. "Maybe it was a giant hairball!" He hacked and coughed, making a big deal out of it. He rolled in the grass and howled like he was some kind of schizoid cat. Max thinks he is so funny.

"I'm telling you guys! I know what I saw!" I'd had just about all I could take of these nitwits.

Brendan sat next to me. Grinning, he poked me in the ribs. "C'mon, Rick."

Rick. When we first started exploring, the guys, mostly Brendan,

shortened my name and started calling me Rick sometimes. I liked it. Rick sounded sort of bold, kind of adventurous. A real risk-taker, like Indiana Jones or something. I wasn't feeling very much like good old Indie right at the moment, though.

They didn't see what I saw, how could I expect them to believe me? I tucked up my knees, my elbows resting on them. I buried my face in my arms to hide my face and gripped my elbows to keep my hands from shaking.

"All right, you guys. That's enough," James said when he finally saw that I was seriously, for real, shook up. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Hey, man. Whatever. If you say you saw it, I'm with you. Right, guys?"

I mumbled "Okay" into my arm and wiped my nose on my sleeve before I lifted my head. Snot had run into my nose while I was bent over, that was all. I didn't want any of them to think I was crying or anything. I looked around at them but, from what I saw in their eyes, maybe James didn't speak for everyone after all.

"And you're sure it wasn't a dead animal?" Max asked.

Jeremy said, "He said it wasn't, Max."

"Oh, my gosh!" Max screeched suddenly, looking wild-eyed and grabbing Jeremy's arm. "What if it was a dead body?"

Max could be pretty dense sometimes and he always went way overboard with his wild imagination, dreaming up all kinds of crazy things.

"Don't you think Rick could tell the difference between a body and a pile of crap, Dipwad?" Brendan said. "He would have been yelling 'Dead body!' instead of 'Crap!'"

"But, what if it was?" Max said, his voice high and squeaky.

"Oooh, well, it would be really scary then, wouldn't it?" Jeremy said, making his voice sound all spooky, just to watch Max's eyes grow bigger than they already were.

Guys! Guys!" James cut them off before they could get any more ridiculous. "Patrick said it was not a dead anything. So just drop it."

"So, then what's the big deal?" Jeremy asked. "I mean, what's so scary about a big pile of . . . ?"

"CRAP!" I yelled. "Crap, okay? Like in feces, poop, dung, ca-ca, doo-doo. Ex-cre-ment! Get the picture? And the big deal is something big had to do it!"

"Patrick, it's okay," James said quietly. He squeezed my shoulder, giving me a second to calm down.

After a little while, he asked me, "Could it have been coyotes?"

He was just trying to help, I knew that. And I got where he was coming from. It wasn't unusual to see coyotes where we lived. You might see one running in front of your car as you drove down the road. More often there would be one dead at the side of the road where some vehicle had hit it. Lots of times I'd seen a couple of them roaming the open field on the other side of the ravine across from my house. It wasn't a dumb question, it just didn't fit the answer.

"No, James. I'm sure it wasn't coyotes," I told him. It would have taken a whole pack of them from what I saw. And then, for some reason, I didn't think it would look the same.

"What if someone let a baby alligator loose?" Max said. "And it grew up and it's roaming around in the sewer and"

"The culvert isn't a sewer, dude," Brendan said.

"But what if"

Max didn't get a chance to finish, Brendan cut him off again. "Look, Max," Brendan said, tired of Max's crazy ideas. "There are no what-ifs. Dumping baby alligators in the sewers happens in big cities. Places like New York City, not around Dallas, Texas."

Max shrugged his shoulders with an expression as if to say, "I'm just saying," but he kept his mouth shut. He had always been a little intimidated by Brendan.

What they didn't know was that the alligator angle wasn't all that wild an idea. It had actually crossed my mind. After all, I'd sort of hoped we'd find some trace of something while we were in there. A skeleton, some shed skin, something like that. Only small. Logically,

I knew baby alligators couldn't survive in that environment, at least I didn't think they could. But the vision of a giant reptile, jaws snapping, slithering after me My own imagination had gone crazy which was exactly why I picked up extra speed when I ran from the drainage pipe. I said, "I am almost positive it was not an alligator, Max. I am positive."

"Or the cat?" James asked, throwing out another idea he thought might be a likely possibility.

It was a real stretch.

Still, even though I didn't believe what James was pitching was the answer, I felt a cold chill run up my back. I looked around at the others. We all knew the stories.

Some months before, someone said they'd seen a large wildcat around our neighborhood. When cats, some little dogs and other small animals began to disappear, people started shutting up their undersized pets. It may have just been a rumor, but it sort of went with the territory.

We lived in one of those developments that sprang up around small towns in rural areas outside of Dallas. Local wildlife forced from their natural habitat retreated to the woods and open fields around us. Sometimes they came out.

At mention of the wildcat, my friends looked like they might be starting to take me seriously. We'd been warned to keep an eye out for wildcats. Any wild animal, especially a good-sized cat, could do some serious damage to anybody, including teen-age boys. We were kids looking for adventure, but we weren't stupid.

"Oh my gosh!" Max shrieked. He looked like he might get up and run away. His bright red hair stood out in all directions—well, actually, it always looked that way—and he turned white as a ghost, his freckles sticking out more than ever.

"Did you see it, Patrick? Were his eyes glowing in the dark? Could you feel his hot breath hissing at you?" Max was really on a

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roll now, convinced I had actually seen a wild cat. His eyes bugged out like big blue saucers, his voice high and squeaky. "Is that why you ran out of there?"

Like I said, Max always went way overboard. It was like he hadn't listened to a word I'd said.

"No, Max. I didn't see a wildcat."

"But do you think that's what . . . you know, where the . . . uh . . ."

"Crap?"

"Uh. Yeah."

"No."

"But how do you know!"

I looked at each of the fellows. "It wasn't a wildcat," I said, looking straight into James's eyes. "I'm telling you, it would have taken something bigger than a pack of prehistoric Saber Tooth Tigers to have made that pile."

CHAPTER THREE

They all looked a little pale at that point. And everyone suddenly had a theory. Ideas flew around my yard like a dust storm.

"Guys, guys," I said, raising my voice to be heard over all the noise, but trying to quiet them down. "We can talk about this the rest of the day and still be nowhere closer to knowing where the stuff came from."

Personally, I'd just as soon have kept some distance from the culvert at the moment. I definitely would get back to trying to figure it out, no doubt in my mind. I wanted to know what it was I saw, but I wanted to take some time, and space, to think about it first.

"Let's take a break," I said. "Do something else for a while? What do you say?"

No one argued about that. We all seemed to think we needed a breather to get our minds on something different. But no one had any ideas what to do.

I felt disappointed that our day off from school hadn't gone like we planned. Here we were, all together, at my house, and I wasn't ready for the guys to go home. I didn't want to break up the party. But there was a bit of a problem with us doing something inside.

My mom had a rule that no more than one friend, maybe two, at

a time be in the house while she was at work. Two of us might get a little loud playing video games, but put all of us together we could get out-and-out rowdy. We'd broken her favorite lamp last time we all played. Of course, we didn't mean to, it just happened. But, that's when she made the rule.

And I got grounded for a week.

"Think we can play some games without breaking anything?" I asked, deciding to take the risk.

"What about your grandmother?" Brendan asked.

Another reason for the rule. My grandmother, my dad's mom, lived with us. Before she moved in, my brother Brett, my sister Taylor and I had our own rooms. Our house wasn't all that big so Brett moved in with me until he joined the Air Force right after he graduated high school and went to boot camp. I hated seeing my brother leave, but I was really glad to get my room back. Grammy is great, really sweet, but, well, she was old. A bunch of teenage boys all at once could sometimes be a little too much for her. When we broke the lamp, she went to bed with a sick headache that night.

I felt really bad about it, but she said it wasn't my fault. She was right about that. I had lots of help from my friends. I believe she was just trying to make me feel better.

"I think it'll be all right," I said. "If we promise to keep it down, she should be okay."

"Look, Patrick," James-the-voice-of-reason said, "you know she won't say anything, but"

"I know, but listen. Maybe if we ask her to fix us something to eat."

"Are you crazy!" James looked at me like I really did have a concussion. "Of course she'll fix food for us." James was around a lot. He knew Grammy well. "That's not the point."

"I don't mean actually fix something for us. We'll actually do it, but ask for her help, like advice and stuff. That'll keep her busy,

give her something to do. But we will do it," I said. I didn't want them to leave, but I really wanted something to eat. "Aren't you guys hungry?"

Stupid question. Teenage boys are always hungry.

All heads nodded.

"Okay, then. But we clean up after ourselves," I said, making a point to look each one of them straight in the eye, to be sure they understood. "And be polite and say please and thank you. Right?" I knew I'd have to remind them. Heck, I'd have to remember myself. Grammy would appreciate it. "And like I said, we keep things down and don't break anything. Agreed?"

"Patrick," James said. "What about your mom?" He remembered when mom had made the rule and that I'd been grounded.

My mom did make rules now and then, but she had always been super cool. She made sure we had lots of games, even Foosball and air hockey, in our house. The guys came over all the time, when my parents were home. But James knew I wouldn't lie to my mom about everyone being in the house. Even if it meant being grounded.

Besides, she would find out anyway. She was a direct descendant of the first mother who said, "I've got eyes in the back of my head."

James buried his chin in his shoulder so the others couldn't hear him and muttered, "You sure about this?"

"I'll work it out," I said. "Don't worry. It'll be okay."

Although, I really wasn't all that sure. I just knew I wanted my friends around for a while longer. It felt like we'd been robbed of our weekend exploring adventure. On top of that, my insides were still shaking from the memory of what I'd seen in the culvert.

My biggest problem was all the wild things running through my brain, wondering where it might have come from. The truth was, most of the things Max had asked about, nearly everything he had dreamed up, I had thought of. And more—lots more. Max wasn't the only one with a vivid imagination. And mine scared me.

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At that moment, I just wanted to be inside my house, with my friends; feel the safety of four familiar walls around me. Eat some Grammy comfort food.



Mac and Cheese. The perfect food to make a guy feel like a human being, proof that everything in his world is okay. Grammy hung around the kitchen just like I thought she would, but we actually put it together ourselves. You didn't get to be our age without learning the basics of Mac and Cheese.

My mom buys the kind in the box and keeps a stock on hand. After we devoured about a box apiece, plus a whole pack of Oreos and a gallon of milk, we cleared the table and put our things in the dishwasher. We got everything cleared away before Grammy could even start. We thanked her for her help then we went to play some games.

I called my mom and told her all the guys were there. Yeah, yeah. I knew. I should have called before we all got in the house. But I was hungry and spooked and I just got a little ahead of myself.

"Patrick," she said. She didn't seem to mind that we'd gone in the house to eat, she was more concerned about us still being in there. "You know the rule."

"I know, I know," I said. "But, Mom, I promise we'll be careful and it'll only be for a little while."

"You do remember what happened the last time?"

"I promise we'll be extra careful. I asked Grammy and she said it would be okay with her. Please?"

"You know I am very disappointed that you waited until after the fact."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Did you boy's clean up after yourselves?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You're sure? You didn't leave a mess for Grammy to clean up? Or me?"

"Not a bit, Mom."

There was a long pause then she said, "Thirty minutes, young man."

Whew. "Thirty minutes. Thanks, Mom. You're the greatest."

I hung up the phone and went into the living room where my friends were. When we moved into our house, instead of using the formal living room like people usually do, my parents decided that, with three kids at home, the space would be better used as a game area for me, my brother and sister, and our friends. A separate family room was at the opposite end of the house, off the kitchen, so formality went right out the back door. The Foosball, an air hockey table, a TV for playing games and videos, and a couple sofas and chairs filled the living room. Sort of like our own little arcade. Our friends loved it! So did their parents because they always knew where their kids were, and that someone was keeping an eye on them.

Even though my older brother, Brett, joined the Air Force after high school, got married and moved out, some of his friends still came over to play and hang out. It was cool.

My sister and her friends mostly used the space to watch chick-flicks. They had lots of sleepovers in there, too. I tried to stay at one of my friends' when that happened.

After our experience that morning, we just weren't that much into the games we played. Ever since we'd started exploring, we had more fun outside, looking for something interesting to do. Looking for an adventure.

I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't get the culvert out of my mind, and I was sure my friends were thinking about it, too. After a while, James, Brendan and I gave up and stopped playing and just watched Max and Jeremy as they played. They weren't very good so after a while even they lost interest too and put down their controls.

We drifted back outside and kicked a soccer ball around the cul-de-sac. Jeremy booted it my way and went to pick up his bike. "I

guess I'd better get home," he said. "My mom is probably expecting me for dinner soon."

"Yeah, mine too," Max said, walking toward his bike.

Now, we all knew Max and Jeremy never left until the sun was going down. Usually, their parents had to call and remind them it was time to come home. I suspected they both wanted to beat sundown that day.

"Okay," I said. They hopped on their bikes. "See you in the morning?"

Max put both feet on the ground, skidding to a stop. "You mean we're still on for tomorrow?"

"Sure. We can't let a three day weekend go to waste, now can we?" Or a big pile of crap stop us, I thought. I stuck out my fist.

A big grin spread across Max's face and he gave me a fist bump. "All right!" he said then stopped. I could see something going on in his head. "But... what are we going to do?"

The culvert and finding where it came out on the other end had been our goal for the weekend. We figured we'd decide what we were going to do after that. Our next move mostly depended on if it was interesting and fun enough, and what we might find in there. Finding a humongous pile of crap from who knew where most definitely had not been in my plans.

I knew Max wanted to know if we were going to go back to the culvert. I looked around at the others. Funny how they were now all looking anywhere but at me. They were wondering too. If I said we were going to retrace our steps from today, I was pretty sure they would follow me. The thing was, I didn't want to repeat any of it.

"I don't know about you guys," I said, hoping they'd go along with me. "But I'd really like to get the camera out again. See if we can finish that thing we started a few weeks back."

James got a Flip video camera for Christmas the year before, and we'd tried it out a few times. We started out just ad-libbing through

some stuff. After a while we began working on a basic outline, a loose script—very loose—and then we'd go out in the woods or some other place and act it out while James filmed.

One day Max and Jeremy went with us. Brendan, the only sport jock among us, had soccer practice that day. James was going to film while I pretended I was being chased by these creatures—vampire zombie space aliens, played by Max and Jeremy.

To make them look really super gross, we got some old shirts and stuff from the rag bag in our garage and shredded them even more. Then we mixed up some stuff to make it look like blood and smeared it all over them. I put some on my head so it looked like I was injured.

We put on some old sweat shirts and pulled the hoods up to hide how grisly we looked, just in case anybody saw us. We went through the ravine, cut across the pasture to the open field by the woods and stopped before we reached the trees.

While we took off our sweat shirts, James got the camera ready. When we were in place, he called, "Action." Just like a real movie director.

I started running through the brush with Max and Jeremy chasing me.

We didn't get to finish the scene because the battery on the Flip died. I was pretty bummed that we'd gone to all the trouble, and not much to show for it. But the fake blood was beginning to make me itch, and Max and Jeremy were complaining about it too. We hadn't really thought that much about what we were going to do past filming, but we'd have to figure that out later. We were ready to get the gunk off our faces and hurried back to my house. It didn't come off as easy as it went on, and it sure wasn't as much fun. I think I still had some of it in my hair when we went back to school.

Right then, after what had happened that morning, we needed a change of pace, something to take our minds off the culvert. I asked, "James, is the Flip charged?"

The Ringleader

"Charged and ready to shoot."

"We could all meet over here and plan what we want to do next with the video," I said.

"Sounds good to me," James said.

"Can you guys get here earlier tomorrow?" I asked Max and Jeremy.

"Yeah, I can get here," Max said. "We need to get started early on our make-up" His face turned as red as his hair. "Uh, I mean . . . uh, you know what I mean."

"Special effects," James said, putting quotes around the words, helping dig Max out.

None of us would be caught dead wearing make-up. But we could get made up; there was a difference. A big one.

"You guys get here so we can get you into costume and apply your special effects." James told Max and Jeremy.

"You got it," Max said, letting out a big sigh.

"Jeremy," I asked, "how about you?"

"How early is early?"

We all groaned.

"Well, you know how my mom makes this big family breakfast on Saturday," he said. "Sometimes it's hard to get out of there."

"Hey, maybe we should go over to Jeremy's house for breakfast," I said, poking James with my elbow. Like I said, Mrs. Wilson was a nice lady, but we'd all been caught in one of her Saturday morning breakfasts. We understood perfectly what Jeremy was talking about. There was no telling when he'd get away.

"No problem," Max said. "I'll swing by and get him. Tell his mom we've got a special project and you all are waiting for us. What time you want us here?"

Max can be pretty cool sometimes.

"Nine okay with you?" I asked, looking at each of them. "Think that'll work, Jer?"

"Sure," Jeremy agreed. All smiles now, his dark brown eyes lit up. He just needed someone to back him up, and Max was pretty good at getting around Mrs. Wilson's hospitality. He was over there a lot and had more practice than the rest of us.

James, Brendan and I stood on the sidewalk and watched them peddle away down the street. They were really pumping it. If they kept up that pace, they'd be home way before it got dark. I would have bet on it.

The wind picked up and I felt a draft blow down my back, spreading chills along my spine. I shoved my hands in my pockets and asked James and Brendan, "You guys want to sleep over?"

James looked at Brendan and raised his eyebrows with a question. He shrugged and said, "We'd be on time."

Brendan nodded.

We turned, walked to the front door and went into the house together.

CHAPTER FOUR

After checking with my parents and their parents to make sure it was okay for them to spend the night at my house, James, Brendan and I played some games until time for supper. Afterward, we stayed up as late as we could keep our eyes open, watching sci-fi movies. Without actually coming right and saying so, it was like we agreed to stay away from any mention about the culvert.

Space monsters and aliens, while our favorites, were maybe not the best choice of movies for the evening. They only fueled our already over-active imaginations. I had nightmares that giant slithery lizards chased me through marshy underground tunnels.



Normally, everyone in my family slept late on Saturday mornings. That is, everyone except my dad. He is what is called an early riser, which was a good thing since he sort of acted as our alarm during the week. On the weekend though, we just sort of tuned him out as he pattered around the house.

It was a good thing my sister, Taylor, had to get up early for a baby-sitting job. The noise she made getting ready woke us up as she hurried out of the house.

Dad had pancake batter ready and the griddle hot. We were able to put away a half dozen each before Max and Jeremy rang the doorbell. I let them in and told them my dad was cooking pancakes. They headed straight for the kitchen.

"You boys want pancakes?" my dad asked when Max pulled up a stool and sat at the breakfast bar.

"No, thank you," Jeremy said. "We already ate breakfast."

Of course Jeremy's mom had already made breakfast for them, but Max would eat any food offered, no matter how much he'd already eaten.

"I wouldn't mind some of your pancakes, Mr. Morrison," Max said, ignoring the look on Jeremy's face. No doubt this would be the third breakfast of the day for Max.

My dad poured batter on the griddle.

James, Brendan and I had fallen asleep in our clothes, so why change? We would be dirty in a little while anyway. We brushed our teeth, and put on our shoes while Max finished off the last of the pancakes.

"Thanks, Mr. Morrison," my friends said before we headed outside.

"Later, Dad," I said as I followed the guys.

Before the door had even closed behind us, Max started asking questions. "Did you come up with any more ideas about what made the—"

"Shh!" We sounded like a bunch of snakes hissing as we tried to shut him up and hustled him down the sidewalk.

"What?" he demanded, shaking us off before we'd gone even a few feet. "What is the problem!"

"You didn't tell anyone, did you?" Brendan said, gripping Max's arm. He turned to ask Jeremy the same thing, took one look at him, and decided against it.

Jeremy would never have told his parents he was in the culvert, much less discussed poop with them. They knew about our exploring

and stuff, we'd spent plenty of times listening about the dangers a boy's curiosity can lead to. His parents just never asked where we went or what we did, so he didn't offer information.

Max jerked his sleeve out of Brendan's grasp. "No, I didn't say anything to anyone. My parents had dinner with friends last night and I was in bed when they got home. But what if I had?" he sputtered. "Why aren't we supposed to talk about . . . it?"

"Because, Nutcase," Brendan growled lowly, right in Max's face, "we don't want to start a panic."

I thought that panic might be going a little overboard. Who was in a panic? Maybe Brendan was a little more creeped out than I thought he was.

It wouldn't take much for Max to kick it up a notch, though. And, Brendan did seem to get his attention. "Oh," he said, barely loud enough for us to hear.

We huddled up and I looked into each of their faces. "Look, guys," I said, "I'm sure that whole thing yesterday was on everybody's minds last night. I know I had a hard time shaking it."

I didn't mention my nightmares.

By the looks on all their faces I could tell a good amount of time had been spent thinking about the culvert crap.

Unbelievable, I thought, as the realization hit me that this thing had taken on a name of its own. It was now known as The Culvert Crap. The big CC, for crying out loud.

"But don't you think we should investigate? Check it out and see what it really was?"

We all turned, surprised the idea came from Jeremy. Not only was he the smallest of us, short and hardly a hundred pounds soaking wet, he was pretty timid and never said much. He more or less just went along with whatever we said or did. A pretty laid-back kind of guy. But we knew if push came to shove, it wouldn't be smart for anyone to mess with any of us. He would take on the biggest bully in school for any one of us. He was small, and quiet, but fearless.

It surprised me, though, that he was ready to go back in the culvert. Right then.

I wasn't.

"Maybe if we all get a look at what you saw, we can figure out what it is," he said. "You know, where it came from."

"Hah!" Max blurted out. "Where it came from? Are you kidding? I think we've all got a pretty good idea where it came from."

Brendan scowled at Max, and made a noise in his throat. Max shut up.

"I thought we were going to do some filming today," I said, hoping to get them back on track.

"Yeah, but don't you want to know?" Jeremy wasn't going to let it go. Small, quiet, fearless and stubborn.

"I'm not sure taking another look will solve anything," I said. "But if that's what you all want to do, then I guess we can." I shrugged like it didn't really matter to me one way or the other. I honestly didn't like the idea, but I was willing if that's what they wanted to do.

They looked at one another to see what the next one thought. No surprise, if one of us was willing, then we were all in.

"I think we should do it," Jeremy said. "Before something happens, you know. If we wait too long it could disappear or something."

I was more worried there might be more of it. Or, worse yet, that we'd run into what had left it there.

Brendan spoke up. "Okay, if we're going to do this, then we need to take some precautions."

"What do you mean . . . precautions?" Max swallowed so loud we could all hear him.

"You know, be careful," Jeremy explained. "In case there is some animal in there. Like, something dangerous."

Exactly. It was like he'd read my mind, but he wasn't changing his. Max turned white. For once, he didn't have anything to say.

"I say we grab anything that we can make noise with," Brendan

said, looking at me and nodding around at the others. "Not heavy, but noisy."

"Oh!" Max said, suddenly finding his voice. "You mean like in jungle movies where those guys beat and bang drums or knock sticks together to scare the animals?" He watched a lot of old jungle movies and discovery channels with safaris and stuff like that on TV.

"Exactly," Brendan said.

So it looked like we were going to the culvert. I went back into the house, through the laundry room, into the garage and raised the garage door for my friends. We dug around in some boxes. It didn't take us long to find some Pep Club noise-makers mixed in with some old sports equipment left over from when Brett played soccer and football. My mom kept everything.

Light reflected off a couple of aluminum roasting pans I spotted on a shelf. When I picked them up they made a loud crinkly-clanking sound.

"Hey, guys, what do you think?" I said, waving one of the pans around. "James, shine your flashlight over here."

James flicked on his light and pointed it at the pan. The light bounced off the aluminum. "Take them both."

I took one in each hand and shook them hard.

"Sshh!" Brendan hissed. "You want your folks to hear?"

I stopped moving the pans but decided to take them with me. They made plenty of noise, and maybe whatever made the culvert crap wouldn't appreciate light shining in its eyes any more than I did.

Armed with what we hoped would scare off any threatening animal, or thing, we headed back to the culvert. The crunch of gravel and brush under our feet, and a few clanks from the pans, was the only sound we made.

CHAPTER FIVE

We marched to the drainage pipe armed with our weapons: a big blue plastic horn, green plastic clappers, a couple of shiny aluminum roasting pans and our flashlights. At the entrance, we stopped, looked at each other and nodded.

They waited until I took the first step inside then they came in after me. James followed close behind me, then Jeremy and Max. Brendan brought up the rear. Our usual formation.

I stopped a few feet inside and picked up a stick and put it through my belt. Just in case. Farther on, when we stopped at the fork we'd taken before, I noticed everyone had a stick.

I recognized it as the place where more debris had piled up along the way. We'd stopped before to take a closer look at the stuff. No using our sticks for poking around this time. My aim now was to get in, observe, and get out.

And hoping we didn't meet anything in there.

"Okay, remember," I said, "no stopping to check out anything until we get there."

They nodded without a sound and we trudged on until I spotted what we were looking for in the beam of my flashlight. "Over there," I said, coming to a stop and pointing to a spot ahead of us. "James, shine your light there."

Everyone crowded closer, trying to get a look at what I was talking about.

"That's a rock, Rick," James said, his beam coming to rest on a large rock.

"No, not there," I said. I moved my flashlight around in small circles, pointing out where he should shine his light. "There, more to the left." When he zeroed in on it, I raised my flashlight and walked toward it, beating the aluminum pans.

The sudden noise startled Max and Jeremy. I heard them yelp like they'd been hit by something and when I looked around they were sprawled on the floor in the dirt. A couple of real stooges. Larry and Curly. I wondered if that made me Moe.

"There it is," James whispered loudly. "I see it!"

"Well, what are you whispering about?" I yelled, banging harder on the pan and taking a step forward. "Let's make some noise."

Max and Jeremy scrambled to their feet. Max blew the plastic horn, the sound deafening as it echoed off the walls. Jeremy and Brendan waved the clappers like crazy. It was hard to make noise and move forward while keeping our footing all at the same time, but we eventually stood by the moldering heap of dreadful dung.

"Peuew!"

"Ugh!"

"Gross!"

"Yuk!"

"I told you," I said, pulling my shirt up over my mouth and nose to filter the smell.

"Well, you were right, Patrick," Jeremy said, following my example. "That is one huge pile of foul smelling crap! Really rank."

We all shined our flashlights on the pile and I had a chance to get a really good look at it. There it was, a big mound of disgusting gunk, which was bad enough. But what stood out, what had specifically got my attention the first time was the three big globs not quite the size

of bowling balls sitting right in the middle. They were sort of squared off, solid stinking chunks of crap. No doubt about it in this light.

The whole thing made me think about scenes I'd seen in movies where detectives in a squad-room are questioning the bad guy. We stood there looking at the stuff and shining our flashlights on it like we thought we might sweat some answers out of it. Get it to give us some clues as to what it was and how it got here. We got nothing. Which was probably a good thing, considering.

"Well, you were right about one thing, Patrick," James said. "You sure know your—"

All at once, a loud rumbling noise echoed through the pipe. We took one look at each other and ran. It didn't take us long to make it out. James clutched my arm when we were in the open and we ran like crazy, the others right behind us.

We made it up the incline onto the street and slowed to a walk. Brendan grabbed Max's shirt-tail to slow him down, stopping him from breaking into a run. "Just act normal, guys," he said, walking at a steady pace.

Funny, how we each took a quick look behind us to see if something had followed us out of the culvert. And kept right on walking.

We forced ourselves to act as normal as possible as we walked back to my house. Our sticks had been thrown in the brush along the way and now we carried only what we'd taken with us.

Except for my mom's aluminum pans. I don't think she'd want to use them again anyway. I'd dropped them inside the culvert when we heard the noise. If we were to make a map there would be a big red X where the pans now marked the location of The Culvert Crap.

CHAPTER SIX

After we put our gear in the garage, taking our time like it was business as usual, we sat down on the grass out front and took a few minutes to catch our breath.

We weren't doing much talking. Every few seconds one of us would look at one of the others and shake his head. Then someone would let out a big puff of air, like they'd just remembered to breathe, and mutter, "Wow."

After several minutes, Jeremy cleared his throat and said, "What was that?"

We all turned and looked at him. Was he kidding?

"Crap." We all said it together.

"Okay, okay. I know that," he said. "I'm talking about the noise."

I looked around at the others, but no one seemed to have any ideas. I shook my head. "I don't know."

"Well, whatever it was," Brendan said, his voice sounding a little shaky, "it was spooky."

I think Brendan being shaken bothered the rest of us as much as anything else. Normally, not much bothered Brendan. He was older than the rest of us—by a few months; bigger than us—by several inches and many pounds, and he didn't let much of anything intimidate him. But at the moment, it was clear he was spooked.

He was also a man of action and faced things head on, so we weren't surprised when after a little while he stood up, brushed off the seat of his pants and said, "Well, I don't know about you guys, but I for one am pretty tired of this—"

Together: "Crap!"

We laughed nervously then, the tension broken.

"Exactly," he said, a big grin on his face. Then he acted serious. "I say let's get back to the original plan," he said, pacing back and forth in front of us like he was a soccer coach or something. "James goes home gets the Flip, and the rest of us get ready to do some filming."

We were all on our feet before Coach Brendan finished his pep talk. James headed to his house down the street. By the time he got back, Max and Jeremy were in costume and makeup. Since Brendan had missed filming on this particular video when we worked on it before, it was decided he would be an alien too. They got him made up and decked out, ready for action. A complete transformation from coach to alien in just a few minutes.

With the hoods on our sweatshirts pulled over our heads, we took off for the woods. In the complete opposite direction from the culvert.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I brought along the bow and arrows my parents had given me for Christmas a couple years before. I practiced a lot and was a pretty good shot. Not that I planned to shoot anything that day, the bow and arrows were just props that went with the movie's plot.

According to our story line, zombie-like alien vampires had invaded my town. The only thing that would kill them was silver-tipped arrows.

Before we got close to the tree line, James stopped and set the camera to where we left off filming before. The rest of us went a little farther.

Max, Jeremy and Brendan were a few yards away from me. When James yelled, "Action," I started running. The guys chased after me. Since they were aliens and zombies, it was more like they stumbled and staggered after me.

James called, "Cut!"

Since the story was mostly my idea, I knew what the next part was. Without any direction I went over and got about ten feet from a clump of small trees. When James called "Action," I moved toward the trees. I looked around, breathing hard like I'd been running for a long time.

James moved in closer.

"I think I may have lost them for now," I said, keeping my voice low. I looked all around me and said, "Yes, I don't see them anywhere."

"Cut!"

I stopped. "What do you mean, 'Cut?'" I yelled to James, "What's the matter?"

"What happened to the accent?"

I'd forgotten about that. When we filmed before, we decided I would use an Australian accent. Like some Aussie crocodile hunter. I was quite good at it and the guys thought it would be cool for me to talk that way.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," I said in full character, accent and all. "Okay," I said. "Let's do it again."

I went back about ten feet and waited for James to call for action. When he did, I repeated the scene, stumbling inside the group of scrawny tree trunks.

I peered around, scanning my surroundings. "They seem to have gone a different direction for now," I said and sat on the ground. I began pulling leaves and grass up around me, ad-libbing as I went along. "Might as well make camp here for the night." I covered my legs and lower body and started to lie down. "I'll just urinate myself and—"

Shrieks of laughter broke out.

"Cut! Cut! Cut!"

James turned off the camera and whirled around, glaring at Max, Jeremy and Brendan who were laughing like hyenas. There was no way he could continue filming with the racket they made.

"Urinate?" Max squawked, and soon they were rolling around on the ground, laughing their heads off. They'd start to quiet down, someone would yell "Urinate," and off they'd go again.

James shrugged his shoulders and sat down. I lay back on the leaves. Might as well wait until they stopped.

After several minutes, they sat up and swiped at their eyes, smearing the red goop all over their faces. Brendan rubbed his chin and said, "Hey, buddy, sorry about that, it's just when you said—"

"Urinate," Max cried, setting them off again.

When they were quiet once more, I said, "Are you all finished?"

Brendan swallowed and looked at the others. Their faces were screwed up trying their best to keep from laughing, but at least they were quiet.

James said, all director-like, "All right. Now, guys, you can't be making noise like that. Rick simply got his wording a little mixed up."

"No I didn't."

"Well, yeah, you did," James said, turning toward me.

"No, I didn't."

"Look, Rick," James said, really getting into the director thing now. "I understand we only have a bare-bones script. Like, we agreed that you would ad-lib as we go."

"That's right."

"So, that's cool. But when you make camp for the night and begin covering yourself, you are going to insulate yourself. Right? Protect yourself from the elements?"

"No. I'm going to urinate."

James cocked his head and squinted at me. We'd both worked out this scene together and he knew me well enough to know I wouldn't argue the point if I wasn't sure of what I was doing. It only took a couple of beats and I saw the light go on in his eyes. The others were too busy snorting and jabbing each other in the ribs to pay attention.

"Max, you should understand this scene better than anyone," I said, turning to look at him. I was ready to pounce if I heard even the slightest snicker from him or the others. "First of all, we have a bunch of aliens after me, like a pack of wild animals. Right? So, I hide from them. I cover myself with leaves and brush. And then . . ."

"You pee!" Max cried. He wasn't laughing this time.

"That's right. I mark my territory!"

"You pee!" Max turned to the others and yelled, "He urinates. He pees!"

"Yes, I pee," I said. "To protect myself from predators. Like I was an animal in the wild." I looked around, pointing out my surroundings. "Well, I can't exactly go around right now and actually pee on everything, now can I? Or on myself. But I can say I am, you know. I can act like I am camouflaging the area."

James picked up the line of the plot, and added, "The aliens can only be killed by silver-tipped arrows"

"And are repelled by the scent of human urine," Brendan finished. "Hey, man, our bad," he said, looking around at the other hyenas.

There wasn't a straight face among any of them.

"Okay, I get it, it was funny—if I really had got my words mixed up." I smiled back at them. I would have reacted the very same way, and they all knew it.

James stood up and began to re-set the camera. He looked up at the sky. Dark gray clouds rolled overhead, blotting out the sun. "Those clouds will make things look more real, like it's really getting dark, so let's get going."

We all took our places: James in position with the camera; Max, Jeremy and Brendan yards away chasing after me. We repeated the scene as before. Me covering myself, then I urinate myself—pretend to urinate—without the laughing hyenas this time and ending with me completely hidden beneath the leaves and brush.

And, "Cut!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

We all huddled in the middle of the trees. They were more like thick twigs poking up out of the ground than trees, and they gave us no protection from the cold wind that had come up. Crouching together, we looked at what we had filmed. No use leaving the location before we knew if we were going to have to re-shoot some footage.

"Looks good to me," James said. "What do you guys think?"

Everyone agreed. The wind blew harder and colder, and we were all shivering. We put our sweatshirts back on just as large drops of rain began to fall. That cinched it. James stuffed the camera inside his shirt, I picked up my bow and arrows and we ran for home.

By the time we reached my house, our sweatshirts were drenched, beginning to soak through to our shirts underneath. We went through the garage, peeled off the soggy sweatshirts, kicked off our shoes then entered the house through the laundry room. Our pants were only a little damp in front.

"Take your shirts off," I told them as we crowded into the laundry room. "I'll throw them in the dryer and get some dry ones for you when we get to my room."

I dug through my drawers and came up with dry shirts for all of them. Except Brendan. Like I said, he was big for his age.

I threw Brendan a blanket. "Here wrap up in this," I told him. "Be right back," I said. I left them in my room and went looking for my mom. She was puttering around in the kitchen.

"Hey," I said. I took a grape from a bowl of fruit sitting on the counter and popped it in my mouth.

"Hey, yourself. Where have you been?"

"With the guys. Getting some more footage for our video."

"Get some good shots? Before the rain?"

"Yeah, pretty productive day."

She took some meat from the freezer and set it in the sink. Looked like we were having pot roast for Sunday lunch. "Patrick," she said, taking a crock-pot from the lower cabinet and placing it on the counter, "did I hear the boys come in with you?"

"Yeah, that's what I was coming to tell you."

She stopped what she was doing and turned her full attention on me. "Patrick, it's going to be time for supper soon, but—"

"Yeah, Mom, I know. Don't worry, no one's planning to stay. But we got wet and"

She looked at my shirt which had just come from my drawer and was totally dry. Her eyes dropped and she could see that my pants were sort of wet in the front. Then she looked at my feet, obviously checking to see if we'd tracked mud into the house.

"We left our shoes in the garage. Our pants aren't all that wet," I said patting my thighs. "But our shirts were soaked so I put them in the dryer. I got some of mine for the guys to wear until they're dry. Except Brendan," I told her. "Is it all right if I get one of Dad's shirts until all the shirts are dry?"

"Of course, Patrick. You didn't leave him in a wet shirt, did you? What is he wearing?"

"A blanket," I said, heading into my parents' bedroom which is just off the kitchen. I rummaged through my dad's T-shirt drawer and found one with a real weird logo that some radio station had

been handing out for free at the mall. My dad didn't even listen to that station. I didn't think he'd mind Brendan wearing it for a while.

My mom stood in the doorway drying her hands on a dish towel.

I held up the shirt. "Is this one okay?"

She said, "That one will be fine," and turned back to the kitchen.

I went back to my room. When I handed Brendan the shirt, he pulled it over his head then pulled the blanket back around his shoulders, acting like he was still cold. We gathered around my bed to review the video we'd taken, again. It looked like we'd done all we could for that particular segment, and I went to check on their shirts.

I looked outside, the rain was still coming down steady. I took my friends' shirts from the dryer and hustled back to my bedroom with them. Clothes straight from the dryer—just the ticket. It was hard not to sigh when I pulled the warm T-shirt over my head.

We moved into the living room and played a couple of games. The day was winding down. It would soon be time for everyone to go home, and the rain was still coming down pretty heavy. Not good conditions for the guys to go out in.

Jeremy was the first to ask to use the phone. "We have this family thing going on tonight," he said. "I'd better call my folks to come get me." Just as he started to dial his number, my dad came in from the garage.

"Any of you boys need a ride home?" he asked. "It's coming down pretty hard out there."

Jeremy handed my phone back and said, "Yes, sir, I do. Thanks, Mr. Morrison."

"Max, how about you?" My dad knew where each of my friends lived; he'd picked up and taken home lots of times.

"Yes, sir," Max answered.

Dad motioned to Brendan and James. "Come on, you two, might as well come with us. If you go out in this, you'll be soaked by the time you get home, even if you run."

Bonnie Lanthripe

I walked through the laundry room to the garage with them and told them goodbye as they climbed into my mom's SUV. I watched my dad back down the driveway into the pouring rain, until the car went around the curve and out of sight.

I put the garage door down and went into the house. The video took a swift trip to the back shelf in my brain. I was wondering where I could do some research to learn about the bowel processes of very large animals.

CHAPTER NINE

All my family was home for the evening and my mom ordered pizza for supper. Usually, when that happened, we would watch a movie together. My sister and I would stay up after my folks went to bed and watch reruns of old shows, stuff like what my parents watched when they were kids. The shows were pretty lame but we had lots of laughs watching them. I remembered I had a reading assignment for English due on Monday and went to my room.

I had a hard time concentrating on what I was reading. Images of The Culvert Crap kept popping into my mind. It was like the whole experience had taken over my brain. It was crazy. Why was I letting this thing get to me so much?

Because it just about scared the poop out of me, that's why. A cold chill ran down my spine as my imagination kicked into high gear again. Terrified would be a better description.

Everything up to that point—exploring, finding unusual stuff, trying something new—had been an adventure, daring and exciting. Even the angry cow hadn't scared me that much. Besides, we'd gone into the culvert before and I'd never been afraid. So what was different? It was because we'd never gone that far before. The farthest we'd been inside was a few feet. And I'd never seen anything

to make me think there might be something other than us in there. Something that might harm us.

My focus was completely out the window at that point. I decided I might as well put my book aside for the night and turned out the light. I lay in the dark trying to come up with some answers. I woke in the morning, thankful I'd had no nightmares.



My mom put the roast in a crock-pot to cook before we left for church. When we came home, my mouth watered at the smells coming from the kitchen. Mom's roast, Grammy's mashed potatoes, hot yeast rolls. It just didn't get better than that. Unless... maybe if my mom made her chocolate pie. No such luck that day. I'd have to wait until another time.

Most Sundays, my friends more or less spent their time the same as I did. We didn't get out and explore. Mostly it was family time, unwinding from the week, gearing up for the coming one. I still had not finished my assignment and spent the rest of the day reading. Trying to read. With no luck.



My parents went to some friends' home that evening. Grammy was watching a game on the flat-screen in her room. I couldn't get into the weekly show Taylor and I sometimes watched together when we were both home at the same time. I went into the living room to the computer. My sister followed me.

Taylor was almost eighteen and getting ready to graduate from high school in a few months. She usually didn't just hang out with me. She must be really bored, I thought, or she was up to something.

"Hey, Patrick, what's going on?"

"Just going to check out some stuff."

"Like what?" She pulled up a chair and sat right next to me,

looking at the floating bubbles screen saver on the computer. “Okay, little brother. What’s going on with you?”

Taylor was . . . well, for a sister, she could be cool. Most of the time. From stories I’d heard from other guys, she was beyond cool. Rare. Sure, we argued and fought sometimes, but I always knew she had my back and would always be there for me. If she didn’t drive me nuts first.

She would never let me get away with things our parents didn’t approve of though. She’d rat me out in a heartbeat. Other stuff, she’d mostly let slide. I figured she did it mostly to rack up points so I’d owe her.

I thought a minute before telling her what was really on my mind, then I said, “I’ve got this, uh, situation.”

Did I mention my sister is three years older than me, was taller than me and that she hits like a guy? She whacked me on the shoulder so hard I had to grab the desk to keep from falling out of my chair. My shoulder felt like it had been dislocated, like I might never use it again.

“What have you done, Patrick Michael Morrison!”

“OW!” I backed away from her and rubbed my arm. I wondered if it was possible to get a concussion in your shoulder. I’d have a bruise in the morning for sure. If anyone saw it, I’d have to come up with some story about how I got it. No way would I admit my sister punched me out. It was one of those times she definitely was not cool.

“Hey, that hurt!” I yelled at her, glad our parents weren’t home to hear me. If they heard us, they’d wonder why, and Taylor would be totally uncool and tell them. Then I would have to explain my situation.

Grammy’s door was closed and the volume turned up on her TV. She doesn’t hear all that well, either.

I got up from the computer and headed back to the family room.

“What situation, Patrick?” Taylor said, almost growling, following

close behind me. "Have you done something stupid?" Taylor hated stupid.

I plopped down on the couch, rubbing my arm. "Tay, that really hurt."

"Quite whining and tell me what situation you've got yourself into before I say whether I'm sorry or not." She sat on the other end of the couch. The look on her face said, "Or before I punch you again."

"I need your opinion of something."

"Okay. Let's have it."

She was acting a little calmer, at least I seemed to be in less danger. I was determined to see this through now that I was into it. With her slant on things, seeing them from a different angle, she might be able to help me figure this crap thing out.

"Well, you know how me and the guys go exploring?" I asked.

She nodded.

"So . . . we went into that big culvert over—"

Whack! She had to lean across the couch to reach me, and I was barely able to back far enough away so that the blow wasn't too hard. At least it was the other arm this time.

"Patrick, you know—"

"Will you just wait a minute?" I said, holding up my hands, just in case I had to defend myself. "I talked to Dad about it." The truth was I'd once mentioned to him that I thought the culvert looked like a really interesting place, and wondered where it went. He hadn't told me not to go in there. He hadn't said anything, actually. In fact, that had been the extent of our conversation about the culvert. I was sure he would just have said to be careful though. And we were. Sort of.

"Does Mom know? Did you ask her?"

Duh. Was she serious? She knew you 'talked' to Dad about stuff; you 'asked' Mom. Then she'd think about it. Then she would get back to you. Maybe. Or we'd need to discuss it. If I asked Mom, I'd still be sitting outside the culvert looking into a big dark hole.

"Anyway, we've been in there before," I went on, ignoring her, side-stepping her question. "Just, this time we went farther than we've ever gone."

"Patrick, Patrick, Patrick." She drew my name out and wagged her head side to side. "Why?"

"Taylor, will you let me finish! We did it to see what's in there. You know?"

She didn't. Clueless. Was this just a Taylor thing, or were all girls like that? Don't they ever want to know what's up there? On the other side? Down the road? Just because it's there?

"I wanted to see if we could find where it goes," I said. "Okay? Where we might come out."

"Well? Did you? What happened?"

She just couldn't be quiet and let me tell the story my way. By myself. "Taylor, come on."

She put up her hands like she was surrendering then pretended to zip her lips. But one eyebrow was arched like, "I'm waiting."

"Well," I went on, "the guys were poking around in this big pile of leaves and stuff—"

"Eew!"

I glared at her. Did she have to have some comment about everything? "Anyway, the guys were poking around and I took a few steps away from them, you know, looking around with my flashlight. Then I saw this, uh . . . this pile of . . . oh-my-gosh, Tay, it was huge!"

"What?" she said. "What was huge, Patrick?"

"Crap."

"Crap."

"Yeah. Crap."

"You mean like leaves and junk and stuff like the other boys were poking around in, but bigger? More of it?"

"No. Crap."

"Crap?"

Oh, for crying out loud. Why couldn't people get this?

"Like in crap, you know? Feces, poop, dung, ca-ca, doo-doo. Ex-cre-ment!" My voice rose with each syllable of each word.

Silence. It was a miracle! My sister had nothing to say. She looked at me for a very long time, like she was trying to figure out if I was serious or jerking her around. At least she didn't laugh. Not then.

"Taylor, I'm serious." I spread my hands wide apart in front of me to demonstrate the size. "It was huge!"

Then she laughed. Shrieked, rolled-over-holding-her-sides laughing.

I flew off the couch and stomped down the hall way. I went into the bathroom and slammed the door behind me. I could still hear her laughing, but I knew she wouldn't follow me in there. That's one rule my mom made, one that I like. We abided by it, no questions. I guess I stayed in there long enough she realized I wasn't coming back. That I was really upset. I should have made her promise not to laugh before I told her. Not like that would do any good.

"Patrick?" She stood outside the bathroom and knocked on the door. "Patrick, I'm sorry."

I didn't have anything to say to her.

"Come on, Patrick," she rapped on the door again. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't realize how seriously you're taking this. Come on out?"

"On one condition."

"Promise."

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Promise."

I opened the door and looked at her. She smiled, sort of friendly, not like she was going to go off again. If she had, I swear I would have punched her. We would have ended up in an all-out fight like we did when we were little kids. Oooh, she could make me so mad. We didn't fight, like physically, so much anymore, but she could still make me mad.

Just then, Grammy opened her bedroom door, her TV remote in her hand. "Is everything all right with you children?" she asked. "I thought I heard some noise."

"Everything's fine, Grammy," Taylor said, smiling every-so-sweetly. "You know how Patrick hogs the bathroom. I just wanted something out of there."

Totally not so! I did not hog the bathroom, but I needed my time in there just like anybody else. Bad thing was, I had to share it with two females. It could drive you crazy. I grunted and came out of the bathroom, stepping around my sister.

"Well . . . as long as you're all right." Grammy smiled, and I could have sworn I almost caught her winking at Taylor. She went back into her room, closing the door behind her. We heard the volume on the TV come back on.

Taylor started down the hall like she was going back into the family room, but I turned to go to my room. I wasn't going to go back in there and let her put me down any more. I wasn't in a trusting mood right then.

When she realized I wasn't behind her, she turned around and followed me. Another rule in our house is we don't go into each other's rooms unless we're invited in.

Sometimes my mom had some good ideas with her rules.

I stopped, blocking the way with one hand on the door and one on the frame. Maybe I should have just let it go, told her I'd changed my mind, didn't want to talk to her and shut the door. But I really did want her input right then.

I gave her my most serious look. "You can come in on one condition," I said. "You have to promise not to laugh."

"I promise I won't laugh," she said and leaned away from the door. "But can we go back into the other room? It smells like a locker room full of gym socks in there."

I took a deep breath. I had to admit my room was getting pretty

ripe. After all my friends being in there following our video taping, wet jeans, and just plain boy odor, I figured it was about time to do some cleaning. I'd get on that tomorrow. Or the next day—for sure next week. Maybe. I nodded and followed her back to the family room.

After we settled into the couch, Taylor looked at me and said, "Now tell me again."

I looked at her. I wasn't one-hundred percent sure she would keep her word. But she promised she would not laugh. I explained again.

"This is the situation?" she said when I finished. "There was a load of, uh, crap in the culvert. That's the thing that's bothering you?"

"Well . . . yeah."

"But what about it? What's the problem?"

"Where did it come from? That's my problem. What dumped it in there?"

"Some homeless person, maybe?"

Did she honestly think that hadn't crossed my mind? I'd already gone through this with Max and the guys. I said, "No. That would have to be your average giant. Like in jolly green."

"Okay, then, some animal."

I covered my face with my hands, totally frustrated then looked up at her. "That's part of the problem, Taylor. If there is some animal . . . that big . . . in that culvert, then it's probably running around the woods and fields. Near our neighborhood. Don't you get it? It could be dangerous."

She started to say something, thought better of it and closed her mouth. But I could see her wheels turning. After a while, she said, "And you're saying that the—"

"Crap."

"You're saying there was a lot of it?"

"Huge."

She thought for a moment then said, "Well, maybe it's not something dangerous at all, Patrick. Maybe it was an elephant. An

elephant would make a lot of . . . crap, wouldn't it? And elephants aren't dangerous. Are they?"

I stood up and looked at her. Was she for real?

"Seriously, Taylor? An elephant?"

She nodded. Had my super-smart, perfect-grades-sister all of a sudden lost her mind?

I hunched over, like I had to do when I went into the culvert, and spread my arms as wide as they would reach. I walked around the room a couple of times like that then straightened. "Taylor, I had to bend over to get inside the place. I could almost touch the sides."

"Yeah?" she said, looking at me like I was the dummy. "So?"

I hunched over again and walked around the room again. When I stood up straight I shook my head as I looked at her. Oh, for crying out loud. From her expression, she still didn't get the picture. "Taylor, if I had to bend over, how the heck do you think an elephant could get in there?"

"Get in where?" my mom asked as she and my dad came into the room.

Startled, I swung around to look at them. I hadn't heard my parents come in from the garage. How much had they heard? I wondered.

My mom asked again, "Get in where, Patrick?"

I had nothing. I shot my sister a look, silently pleading for her to not say anything about the culvert. This would be the perfect time to get back at me for anything she thought deserved pay-back.

"Hey, did you guys have a good time at your get-together?" Taylor chimed in. My sister was a master at changing the subject. This time I was glad, she hadn't let me down.

But now I owed her. Big time.

"We had a wonderful time. You two seem to have survived each other," my mom said, taking off her jacket on the way into her bedroom. She came back a couple of minutes later. "Did you finish

your homework?" Her question might have included both of us, but she looked directly at me.

Of course Taylor didn't have any homework to finish. She never did. She just did it. That's why she got on the Honor Roll. She was so disgusting that way.

"Uh, I was just on my way to my room to finish my reading assignment," I said, and told my parents good-night. When I got to the hallway, I turned and mouthed 'Thank you' to Taylor.

I went to bed and turned out the light, but I lay awake for a long time. I still wasn't any closer to knowing what the stuff in the culvert was.

CHAPTER TEN

The following week began with a bang. I wondered if having that day off for Teacher Enrichment on Friday was worth it. The teachers must have felt extremely enriched and were all psyched up because they piled on the homework.

On top of it all, I had band practice every day to get ready for the spring concert coming up in a few weeks. There wasn't much time for anything else, but, every now and then, I came up for air and tried to do some research.

When I got a few minutes free after school one day, I had this brilliant idea and called the city zoo. I got the routine recording. Some woman telling me: Press one for this, press two for that, and so on. Press a number for anything and everything, from membership to volunteering. I pressed everything and finally got an operator.

"City Zoo. How may I direct your call?"

"Uh, my name is Patrick Morrison and I—."

"And your telephone number is . . . " She repeated my home number. It must have popped up then she asked about directing my call again.

"Well, you see . . . I'm not sure. I don't know who exactly I should talk to."

"What is the nature of your call, Sir?"

It felt weird, telling someone I wanted to talk to somebody about the culvert crap. But, I took a deep breath and dived in. "Well, I was wondering if there is someone there, at the zoo, who I could talk to about . . . uh, animal waste."

There was dead silence then a click and the line went dead.

I called back. "Hi," I said when the operator answered. "I think we were disconnected. This is Patrick Morri—."

Click.

Okay. I could understand being disconnected once. Maybe twice. But what if she thought I was trying to pull a joke and hung up on purpose? Whatever the reason, I was more determined than ever and decided to try one more time.

"Please don't hang up," I said quickly before she had a chance to hang up again.

"Listen, kid . . . " she said. She sounded pretty steamed and started to give me a piece of her mind.

"Look, I'm . . . uh . . . "I'm . . . uh . . . doing research."

"Mmm-huh." I could almost hear her thinking, "Yeah. Right. Sure you are."

"Honest, Ma'am," I said hurriedly, trying to sound as sincere as I knew how. I put a little whine in my voice. "I'm doing research for a report in, er . . . in Science." I was taking Science, just not doing a report on poop, but she didn't know that, and it looked like my saying so was the only way I was going to keep her from hanging up on me.

After a lot of begging and pleading, she finally connected me with some Director of Something-or-Other. I think it was mostly to get rid of me. I didn't care. As long as I talked to someone who might lead me in the right direction. This was my first time to actually try and get some solid information. I was hoping I'd find out what I needed to know and I could put the whole thing behind me.

The guy who answered the line told me he was Mr. Bachman. I went through much the same routine with the guy as I had with the operator. I was sure he thought I was pulling some kind of prank, too. But he didn't hang up.

"Why don't you just look it up online?" he asked me after I'd talked him into hearing me out. He probably didn't even believe me.

"Well, sir, I'm not really sure exactly what . . . you know, uh, how to go about it. You know, what word to use."

I knew a lot of terms to use, actually, but wasn't comfortable using any of them with Mr. Bachman. Heck, I wasn't comfortable using them at all. I'd tried some of them when I was little and suffered some not-so-pleasant consequences.

"Why not just type in 'scat'? That is the proper term," Mr. Bachman said.

I did not know that was the proper term. I'd learned something already. But, could it actually be that simple? "You think that would work?"

"Well, you'll never know until you try. Now will you?"

"Okay, I'll try that. Thank you, Mr. Bachman. I appreciate your help."

"You're welcome . . . Uh, what did you say your name is?"

"Patrick." No use making something up. He'd have my number anyway, the operator already knew it.

"Well, Patrick," he said. "As a matter of fact, now that I think of it, I do know of one book that might be of some help." He gave me the name of some kind of guide on scat in North America and told me I could probably access it on the internet or find it at the library. He wished me well and hung up.

Now all I had to do was get online. Problem was, any time I spent on the computer, someone might be looking over my shoulder. My mom and dad took the parental control issue pretty seriously, with all kinds of blocks all over the place. So, the one Taylor and I used

was in the living room with the rest of the games and stuff. Or we mostly used a laptop at the kitchen table. Always in plain sight. I was cool with it. I didn't especially want to hide anything from my parents, they'd find out one way or another anyway. And there would be consequences.

I just wasn't ready to share the focus of my research right at the moment.

Besides, I had lots of homework to do. Any time I spent on the computer now had to be spent on that.

With my schedule, it was more than two weeks before I got a chance to get online.



I sat down and booted up the computer. Grammy and I were the only ones home. She was in her room watching one of her shows. I didn't expect to find much information, but maybe I could find something that would lead me to another link, then another. I typed in the word 'scat' and clicked on Search.

Unbelievable! What popped up blew my mind. There were thousands of entries in one form or another.

Scat. Who would have thought it? People write books about it. People go out and hunt for it. They take pictures of it. In Living Color! After scrolling through pages and pages of information, I felt sort of—well, pooped out—and decided the photos might be the best place to start. Get a visual for comparison.

First, I looked at bear scat. Bears are big animals, so maybe Maybe, I thought, to a bear, the culvert would look like a cave or something, and maybe one had gone in there to hibernate. Bears eat a lot before they hole up for the winter, so, I reasoned, maybe they have a lot to get rid of when they wake up. I didn't know if there were any bears in Central Texas, but it wouldn't hurt to look.

I knew rabbits made pellets and discovered that so did deer,

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antelope, moose—and bears. It was just a matter of size—from smaller than marbles for rabbits, to tennis ball size when it comes to bears. So what we found in the culvert definitely did not fit the picture. Okay, so it wasn't a bear. I kept looking until I finally had to shut it down and walk away.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

We all had mid-terms to prep for so the guys and I didn't have much time to work on our video. James and I had a sketchy idea of what we wanted to film, we just couldn't find a time when we could all get together and get out in the woods or fields to shoot any more scenes. Our schedules gave us hardly any spare time at all.

James was the only one I'd told about my search on the Internet. We took another quick look at the site so he could see what we were up against. But we didn't take time to expand our search. We had to study.

The weekend before mid-terms, Max, James and I were at my house studying for tests coming up the next week. We had English, Biology and Geography together.

No one had said much about the culvert for a couple of weeks. Now and then one of the guys would ask if I'd come any closer to identifying it. They were mostly satisfied if told them, "No, but I'm working on it," and didn't press for more information.

We were reviewing some Geography questions when, out of the blue, Max asked, "You guys have heard about Sasquatch, haven't you?"

James and I looked at each other, wondering where Max had come up with such a question. With Max, you never knew.

He looked from one of us to the other, then said, "You know—Big Foot?"

I began to suspect where this was taking us, and shook my head.

"Sure, Maxie, old buddy," James said, clearly irritated. "Who hasn't heard about Big Foot." He held up his text book and waved it at Max. "What I want to know is what has that got to do with Geography?"

What Max did next was totally weird. He looked around like he expected someone might be spying on us, like my room might be bugged or something. He put his index finger to his lips signaling us to be quiet.

I mean, my room wasn't all that big and with me at my desk, James sprawled on the floor and Max on my bed, with text books spread all over the place, where would anyone be hiding? Who would care what we were talking about anyway?

His next move made me think the Paranoia Police might be breaking down the door any minute. He tip-toed to the door, opened it very carefully, and stepped part way into the hall. He looked down the hallway then came back into the room, carefully pulling the door closed so it only made a clicking sound.

Max looked at us, all Mr. Know-it-all and nodding his head up and down as if he knew something we didn't. He probably did, but not anything we particularly wanted to find out about, I was sure. He said, "Maybe we have our very own Big Foot, or something like it. Eh? Eh?"

James looked at me as if to say, "Our buddy Max has lost his marbles."

I was all the more sure where Max was heading, but I waited to hear what he had to say.

Max looked at us, puffing out a huge breath, and sat on the edge of the bed. He lowered his voice and said, "You know . . . in the culvert? The, uh . . . ?"

"Crap," James and I said together. Yeah, we knew.

"Right," Max replied, and did that looking around thing again.

"Oh, come on, Max," James said. "Big Foot? You can't be serious."

"Just wait," Max said, his fingers spread, pushing palms down. "Just hear me out. Okay?"

"This better be good," James told him. "I don't have time to waste on fairytales. I have tests to study for. We all do."

Max slid from the bed to the floor next to James. I got up from the chair and sat down, cross-legged, facing James. Satisfied he had our full attention, Max began. "Well, my grandpa says there's a legend about some Indian that"

James was all over Max in a flash. "You idiot!" he spat out, holding Max by the collar, shaking him. "We all agreed to not talk to anyone about the culvert."

James's reaction took me by surprise. He'd never acted as if he was bothered by what we found. Now I was beginning to see how he really had been affected by our discovery. James is usually Mr. Calm himself. This was not the usual James.

I got between them as best I could and pushed James away from Max.

"I didn't say a word," Max choked out. "Honest."

"Then why are you telling us about some fairytale your grandpa told you?"

"It's not a fairytale!"

James went for Max again.

"Hold on. Hold on! It's just that I remembered something," Max spluttered, his hands in front of him trying to keep James away. "Grandpa used to tell us stories when we were kids, and ever since we were in the culvert I've been thinking about this particular one."

James glared at Max. I put my hands between them, pushing them away from each other. "Come on, James," I said. "Let him talk. It can't hurt."

"It can if he's been blabbing all around." James's eyes flashed angry daggers at Max. "Besides, I need to get back to the books."

I wondered if there was more to James's whole reaction than I

knew about. Could he be having trouble with grades? That wasn't usual for James, either.

"I didn't blab!" Max whispered loudly. "Would you just let me finish?"

James settled back against the bed, arms crossed over his chest.

I poked Max's leg and told him, "Okay, Max, go on."

"Well, this legend goes that an Indian tribe was chased out of their camping grounds. A lot of them were killed and—"

"Who chased them out?" James demanded.

"I don't know," Max whined at being interrupted. "Settlers, the cavalry, other Indians—I don't know! I don't remember that part of the story."

James was so irritated with Max. We should be studying. If he was going to have to listen to Max, he wanted facts and details and kept pressing him. He asked, "So, what's your point? Where was this campground?"

This time Max whirled on James. His face was red and he looked like he might hit James. "That's my point. Or part of it," he growled, his face within inches of James's. "If you'd keep quiet long and listen," he said through gritted teeth.

James didn't say another word. He settled back against the bed and waited for Max to go on.

Satisfied he would not be interrupted again, Max continued. "As I was saying, there used to be this Indian tribe that lived . . ." Max paused and looked pointedly at James, "around here. One of them had a wife, who had been kidnapped from white settlers when she was a little girl. You know . . . she wasn't an Indian . . . her parents were white. She was white. But the Indians raised her like she was one of their tribe."

"We get it, Max," James said. "We've heard those stories lots of times."

Max glared at James then went on. "Well, they—the Indian and

his wife, the one who was kidnapped—had a couple of kids. When the village was attacked, the wife and the kids just disappeared.”

“What do you mean, they disappeared? Is that important to the story?” I asked. “Who attacked the village?”

“They thought maybe it was settlers and that they had kidnapped her back, with the kids, but no one knew where they were. They asked everybody for miles around. Both sides looked for them, the Indians and the settlers, but no one found them. All of the tribes, and the settlers, swore they didn’t know anything about it.

“The Indian searched and searched for his family, but when he couldn’t find them, he eventually just went nuts. He wanted revenge. He started killing everybody and everything he could. When someone died mysteriously, or cattle were slaughtered with no explanation, or horses or any kind of stock vanished, the Indian got blamed. But no one ever caught him.”

Max definitely had our attention now. I had never heard this story, and from the look on James’ face, neither had he. It was kind of spooky and interesting. We waited.

“No one ever found him, never knew what happened to him.” Max stopped and looked from me to James. “And get this . . . they say his ghost still roams around looking for revenge.” He paused for a moment, swallowed loudly and let out a huge puff of air. “Maybe it’s the Indian’s ghost in the culvert.”

I didn’t know whether to believe if Max was serious, or what. Was he pulling our leg? I expected him to start laughing any minute. But by the look on his face, it was clear that he was totally serious.

“There’s more,” Max said. He was really getting into the story now. “They said this guy was huge, like a giant. And, listen to this—they gave him a name.”

The story just got better by the minute. I even felt chills run up my spine, felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

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James was looking hard at Max. His lips were a straight line, his eyebrows drawn together in a scowl. "Oh, yeah? What?" he asked.

"Fury."

Bang, bang, bang!

At the very instant the name came out of Max's mouth, my stupid sister hammered on my bedroom door. I nearly jumped out of my skin. James gripped my arm. Max made a high squeaking noise, threw his arms over his head and ducked.

Wham! Another loud knock. "Hey, Pea-brain," Taylor shouted through the door. "Mom says to come help carry in the groceries."

How come she didn't have to help with the groceries?

She rapped on the walls as she went down the hallway, keeping time with some tune and singing. Before she turned the corner, I heard her yell, "And if you've got any other pea-brains in there, Mom's got a car load. All of you can come help."

Grrrr! She drove me crazy, but I knew I'd better go help. She would just come back if I didn't. Besides, there would probably be some tasty snack in one of those grocery bags. The idea made me hungry. Maybe it was a good time to take a break. I stood up and held my hand out to give Max a hand up.

"Max, you saw what we saw," I said when he was on his feet standing in front of me. "We all agreed it couldn't be human."

James got up. He grabbed Max's arm pulling him toward him and leaned in close, his face right in Max's face. "So you think this huge Indian's ghost took a dump in the culvert?"

"M-m-maybe," Max stammered.

James stepped back and grinned sort of lop-sided and said, "Max, you're so full of it."

"What!"

I looked at James and we burst out laughing. Max had stepped right into that one. "Crap," we said and turned to leave.

Bonnie Lanthripe

"I'm not buying it," James said when we were at the door.

"Oh, no? Why not?"

"If ghosts crap, and they don't, then it's gonna be ghost crap. That crap? In the culvert? That crap was real. Besides, like I said, ghosts don't crap."

CHAPTER TWELVE

So, bears poop in the woods. But according to James, ghosts don't. Sounded logical to me, but I'd have to think about it another time.

The next week came on like a freight train and rushed by in a blur. I spent every minute either taking tests or studying for one. I practiced for band concert every day after school, went home, ate dinner and hit the books, then fell into bed. I could hardly wait until Friday night when, except for the concert, it would all be over for a while. I looked forward to when I would pick up my clarinet and have nothing more to think about but the music. And the following week. Spring break.

My mom had surprised us by telling us we were going to my grandparents' for a few days of Spring Break. They live outside of Oklahoma City, about a three and a half hour drive from us. I know, most teenagers don't look forward to visiting grandparents, but mine are really cool. Like Grammy, they were old, but cool.

Papa is really laid-back and tells lots of corny jokes. My grandmother laughs a lot. I mean—a lot. Mostly at us kids, but not like making-fun-of-us kind of laughing. She says we just make her happy, so she laughs a lot when we're around.

There was always lots of stuff to do there. When we were younger,

Brett, Taylor and I used to spend a week every summer with Papa and Grandmother. Grandmother was the name Brett tagged her with when he started talking; not another Grammy, Grandma, Nana or Me-maw, but Grandmother. That was the name we heard him call her so that's what we called her too. My friends thought it sounded sort of formal, but it was normal for us.

There was a community pool in Grandmother and Papa's housing development and she took us every day during our week with them. She couldn't swim very well, and wore funny bathing suits with a hat and sunglasses, but she went in with us. We had fun pool toys to play with and yummy snacks to eat when it was time to come out of the pool once every hour for a safety break.

We pretty much ate what we wanted while we were there. Not junk food all the time either, but we did have our favorites and lots of ice cream. She took us to the coolest Science Museum ever and, for a while, we went to the zoo every time we were there. We'd get all excited about seeing the animals, the aquarium and getting to ride the carousel. Then we'd end up sweating, sunburned, and miserable.

One time, we'd been at the zoo for a while and were taking a break in the shade, having a snack and trying to cool off. Grandmother looked at us and her face got real serious. "You kids look plain pitiful," she said. "It's too hot to be out here. We're going home." She stood up, took me and Taylor by the hand and started for the exit, with Brett hurrying to keep up with us. We have since gone back to the zoo, but never during the summer.



I didn't know if we'd be going to the zoo this trip, but with all of our tests behind us, and the band concert over, I was more than ready to pack up and get on the road. Sunday, after church, we left for Oklahoma. As soon as we rang the door bell, we could hear my

grandmother yelling from inside, "I've got it! I've got it!" She'd been waiting for us. Papa was right behind her when the door opened.

We got the usual bear hugs and kisses as soon as we were through the door. As long as it was only family and none of my friends were around, I was okay with all that mushy stuff. We brought our things in from the car and in a little while, one by one, each of us drifted out to the kitchen. And, as usual, we raided the pantry and checked out the refrigerator and freezer. They were all well stocked. Then we kicked back and relaxed for a little while.

Before long, Grandmother went to the kitchen and started cooking supper. She put chicken in the oven and peeled potatoes while my mom started mixing a salad. Taylor and I set the table. We knew the ritual and where everything was.

Setting the table had been our job since we were little kids. We set six places at the table in the dining room and four at the kitchen table. My mom's brother, his wife and kids would be there soon; six adults in the dining room, me and Taylor with our ten and five year-old cousins in the kitchen.

The door bell rang. Taylor and I raced each other to the door and the cousins rushed us as soon as they saw us. We were sort of like idols or something to Kate and Jillian. We barely had time to say hello to my aunt and uncle before they dragged us off to play with them.

"Come on to our room," they said, pulling us down the hallway.

They called it their room, but it had been ours—mine, Taylor and Brett's—first. When we were their age, Grandmother set up my Uncle Clint's old room with a TV and games, books and videos. Papa always bought the latest Disney movie as soon as it was out. There were some new movies and new toys in there, but, like the room, a lot of it had belonged to me and Brett and Taylor, and our California cousin Abby, before Kate and Jillian came along. It would be our room again, mine and Taylor's, when the little cousins left later that night.

We played with the pirate ship and put puzzles together until mom came to tell us it was time to eat.

My grandmother made this special oven-fried crispy chicken that was one of my favorites. I poured gravy over a big glob of mashed potatoes, had a salad and all the black olives I wanted. Yum. When I thought I couldn't eat another bite, I somehow found room for dessert—ice cream sandwiches.

A while back, Grandmother made a decision. "From now on," she announced on one of our visits, "we're going to have ice cream sandwiches for dessert. Less time in the kitchen cooking and less clean-up." Grammy bakes all kinds of cakes and cookies at home all the time, so Grandmother's dessert idea was fine with me. Besides, everybody liked ice cream sandwiches and Grandmother made sure the freezer was always stocked for us.

After we cleared our plates, Kate and Jillian passed around dessert. Simple and easy, even the five year-old could do it. Then Taylor went back into the kids' room with them to play with the doll house.

The adults always sat around the dining table after supper and talked, usually discussing politics and world situations and other interesting stuff. I used to hang around and eavesdrop, hoping I'd hear some of the "interesting stuff." Sometimes my mom and Uncle Clint would start talking about when they were kids, or when they were in college.

That's where I got the idea for me and the guys to visit the farm on the other side of the ravine, and how we came face to face with one mean cow. And a very angry farmer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The past Christmas, Aunt Liz (Mom's sister), Uncle Nathan and their daughter Abby came from California to my grandparents' for the holiday. Another uncle couldn't come, but everybody else was there—my family, and of course Uncle Clint, Aunt Judith, Kate and Jillian. Things could really get going when the whole bunch was together. Especially Clint and Nathan. I didn't want to miss anything, so I hung around and listened in on the adults every chance I got. They were a lot more interesting than Taylor and Abby and two little girls.

One evening after supper, I overheard Uncle Clint talking about when he was in college and he and some of his friends went "cow-tipping." I'd heard that phrase before, but that was about all I knew. Everyone laughed a lot while he was telling the story. Uncle Clint could always make anything sound funny. From what I heard, and the way everybody was laughing, tipping a cow sounded like a lot of fun.

As soon as I got back home, I told my friends about what I'd heard.

"They were all laughing so much, I had a hard time understanding what all they were saying," I said. "But, I got the general idea. Guys, I'm telling you, it sounded like a blast."

"We have got to try that," James said.

"Oh, wow! That does sound like a blast!" Brendan said, ready to go right then.

"And I know just where to find a cow," Max said.

"The farm on the other side of the ravine in front of Patrick's house!" Jeremy was so right.

We had cut through that pasture lots of times to get to the woods on the other side. There were always a few cows standing around munching on grass as we walked across. They ignored us, and we kept our distance. Except that time.

We all agreed we would go tip a cow the last day of Christmas break.

The guys came over after breakfast that morning and we took off for the field to find a cow.

Before we went through the fence, to be on the safe side, we looked around to see if there were any bulls in the area. From what we'd heard about bulls, we figured we didn't want to meet up with one. We'd never seen any over there before . . . we probably wouldn't have known the difference anyway . . . and none of the animals looked like bulls to us at the time.

We did spot one light brown cow in the middle of the pasture, just standing there all alone munching and chewing, minding her own business. We climbed through the fence and started toward her.

From what I remembered of my uncle's story, he and his buddies would sneak up to within a few feet of their target. Then they lined up shoulder-to-shoulder and rushed the cow, hitting it broadside and tipping it over on its side. From the way Clint told it, the sound the cow made when it hit the ground was hilarious.

The people around my grandparents' table that Christmas laughed so loud I couldn't hear when Uncle Clint imitated the cow. I'd just have to hear it for myself.

When we were inside the fence, we lined up just the way Uncle Clint described. We were ready to take on that cow.

The Ringleader

Brendan took the center position, me and James on one side, Max and Jeremy on the other. We walked until we were about ten feet from the cow and then tightened our formation. We lifted our arms, leading with our elbows. On the count of three we charged.

I didn't remember Uncle Clint saying anything about yelling. I don't remember which one of my friends started, but it seemed like a thing to do and I began yelling at the top of my lungs, right along with everyone else, as we ran at the cow.

We hit her broadside. She did not fall over. Instead, she leaped forward like she was going to jump over the moon or something, and we landed on our faces.

Jeremy was on the tail end and got a face full of cow-patty.

The cow started bellowing. I don't know what Uncle Clint's cow sounded like, but the noise coming from this one was not funny. Not at all. And she was not amused with us. She turned, ducked her head and came after us.

Brendan got up first. He grabbed Jeremy by the collar and hauled him to his feet and started to run. Jeremy's feet barely touched the ground as Brendan raced with him toward the fence. The rest of us scrambled up and tore out after them.

The cow was hot on our heels, snorting and bawling really loud right behind us. And we were worried about a bull? From my point of view, that cow had it all over any bull, any day. We reached the fence only a couple of feet ahead of her and dived through the wire for the other side.

The cow seemed to know not to tangle with the fence and skidded to a stop just as Max cleared the wire.

Out of breath, but safe of the other side, we turned around to make sure she had stopped. Her head was down and she was huffing real loud and pawing at the ground. She stared at us with an evil gleam in her eyes, as if she might be thinking about coming through the fence after us. We backed up a couple more steps.

"I thought you said this would be fun," Max said, gasping for breath.

"My uncle seemed to think it was." We'd done everything just as he'd described it. There had to be more to this than what I'd gotten from my uncle's story. Or he just had a weird idea of fun.

"Hey, guys," Brendan said. "Heads up."

At that minute, we heard some shouting and looked up and saw the farmer running across the pasture. He had what looked like a baseball bat in one hand and it looked like he was shaking his fist at us with the other. Between his yelling and the cow bellowing, we decided we'd had enough. We turned and ran.

I only hoped the farmer hadn't got a good look at us.

No such luck. He'd seen us in and around the field before. He knew us and knew where most of us lived. We ran for my house. The guys all left as soon as we got there, but all the farmer had to do was come over to my house and pick up their trail.

It only took him a few minutes to get there.

My dad answered the door when the farmer rang the bell. I stood hidden from view in the hall, but I heard him ask my dad if they could talk—outside. I ran to the window and peeked through the blinds, but couldn't make out what they were saying. My dad looked back and saw me before I could close the gap I peered through. He said something to the farmer and they walked around to the front of the garage, out of my line of sight.

After a few minutes, I heard the farmer's truck start up then watched him make a turn-around in the cul-de-sac. I raced to my room. In a few seconds, I heard my dad call, "Patrick."

My knees turned to jelly. I had no idea what was coming, but figured it probably wouldn't be good. I went into the family room to face the music.

My dad sat on a bar stool at the kitchen counter and motioned for me to sit on another one. He took off his glasses and rubbed his hand

across his face, then rested his elbow on the counter with his hand covering his mouth like he was thinking something over. At least he wasn't three shades of red and pacing the floor with his hands jammed into his pockets. The result of that particular posture could be disastrous to my future freedom.

My dad is the greatest, normally laid-back and calm. And he gets the 'guy' thing. But . . . well, I guess you could say I might push the limits sometimes. Dad was always fair, but I dreaded what was coming.

"Son," he said, "Mr. Nelson, the farmer across the way, was just here."

"Yes, Sir." No trying to deny it. He'd seen me peeking through the slats of the blinds. Busted.

"Now, I know you boys have gone over in his field before."

I nodded.

"Well, he doesn't mind when you all just walk across the field, but this time I believe there was some livestock involved?"

"Dad," I said, "honestly, we didn't mean any harm." Time to come clean and tell him the whole story. It just tumbled out.

"See, at Christmas, I heard Uncle Clint talking about him and his college buddies tipping cows and it sounded like fun and I told the guys and they were all for it and we knew the farmer had cows and we thought we'd try it—for laughs." I came up for breath and looked at my father, hoping for at least a little sympathy.

He got up and walked to the patio door, looking out at the yard, his back to me. He crossed his arms over his chest then brought a hand up to stroke his chin. I couldn't clearly make out what he said, but it sounded like, "I thought it might be something like that." He turned to look at me. This time I distinctly understood what he asked. "And was it fun?"

"No, Sir. Not nearly as much fun as Uncle Clint and his friends seemed to have. The way you and Mom and everyone all laughed, it

sounded like it would be a ball. But Jeremy landed in a cow patty, we got chased and scared out of our wits and" All of a sudden, this crazy thought flew through my brain. "You know," I said, "I think that farmer might ought to check that cow for mad cow disease, or maybe something—"

"Patrick!" My dad raised his voice for the first time since he'd been talking to me. I cooled it. "This is no joking matter, son. You boys could have been hurt, or the cow could have been injured, maybe quit giving milk."

I ducked my head. Who was joking? Not me. I thought that cow had some serious issues. And, so it seemed, did my dad, but not the kind I had in mind. I mumbled, "Yes, Sir."

"You boys are not to go near that farm again," he said after a while. "Do I make myself clear?"

Cutting across the pasture was our best short-cut to the woods. "But Dad, we'll have to walk or ride our bikes all the way around to get to the woods on the other side."

My dad was in no mood to hear anything from me at the moment.

"Patrick, you are not to go across the pasture again. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." By the tone of his voice, I understood just how serious he was all right.

Then he really threw me a curve. "You seem to be the ring-leader of that bunch," he said, "so you make sure the other boys understand, too."

Me? A ringleader? When did I get appointed to that particular position? I never thought of myself that way. Apparently what I thought at the moment didn't matter to my dad, either. I just needed to agree with him. "Yes, Sir."

He turned around and looked at me. "Now, I'm going to drive you over to Mr. Nelson's and you are going to apologize. Then you will come back here and clean the garage from top to bottom."

Oh, no! Not the old face-to-face apology! My parents always made me do that when I got in trouble and—hey, wait a minute! An apology? Was that all? No restrictions? No grounding? I could still see my friends? Watch TV? Play games? That was it? Apologize. Clean the garage. I looked at my dad, waiting for the rest.

"I'll get my keys. Meet me in the car." That's all he said as he walked past me. Plus a very firm pat on the shoulder.

I couldn't believe my luck. I got in the car fully expecting to get a real lecture for the entire drive. My dad never said a word. Not one.

Mr. Nelson was standing on the porch when we got there. He must have been waiting for us. Maybe my dad called and told him we were coming.

I got out of the car and kept my head down as I walked with my dad to the house.

Mr. Nelson leaned against the porch railing when we got near.

"Patrick," my dad said. "You have something to say to Mr. Nelson."

"Yes, Sir." I dug my hands deep into my pockets and looked up at the man on the porch.

"Mr. Nelson, I'm sorry about bothering your cow," I said, looking him straight in the eyes like my dad had taught me. "We didn't mean any harm, but we'll never do anything like that again. I promise we'll respect your property. We won't cut across the field anymore."

He'd been looking me straight in the eye all the time I was talking until I got to the part about not crossing his land anymore. At that, he stopped me. "I don't mind you boys cutting across the field. Gets you to the woods sooner."

Exactly what I'd told my dad. Mr. Nelson seemed like a reasonable man to me. For an old guy.

"No, Bill," my dad said. "I've explained to Patrick that he and the boys shouldn't do that."

Now this was an interesting turn of events. I never knew my dad

was on a first-name basis with Mr. Nelson. To me, he was just the old guy who owned the farm on the other side of the ravine.

And that his granddaughter came to live with him the year before. She was a junior at our school and, according to Taylor, her name was Emily. She had some problems at home or something and ran away to her grandparents'. She lived with them now and she wasn't very friendly and kept to herself.

You wanted to know the latest rumor, any bits of gossip? Ask my sister.

I wondered if she knew Dad called Mr. Nelson, Bill?

"Well, Doug," Mr. Nelson said to my dad, "if you think that's for the best. At least maybe not for a while." He and my dad exchanged some kind of look then he looked back at me. "You boys just be sure and stay out of trouble. And, Patrick, I accept your apology." He held out his hand and we shook on it.

I made a mental note that this was the first time I'd shaken hands like that with an adult.

The ride home was just as quiet as the ride over had been. And by the end of the day, our garage was as clean as it was the day it was built.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I never did figure out why my dad let me off so easy. I didn't complain, I'd just expected more. True to my promise, I told my friends we'd been busted and from now on we'd have to go around Mr. Nelson's property. They didn't like it any better than I did.

"But, Patrick, it'll take us forever to get over to the woods," Max said, almost whining.

"Listen, guys," I said, looking around at them. "It could have been worse."

"Yeah, we could all have been grounded if Patrick's dad hadn't handled it," Brendan said. "What if he'd told our folks?"

"I could have lost my phone for who knows how long. TV, games, videos, everything," I said. "And I really expected my dad to tell me I couldn't hang out with you guys for a while."

"That would have really sucked," James said.

"I didn't think what we did was all that bad," Max said. He was beginning to sound like a pouty little girl.

And he was getting under my skin.

"If you ask me, we got off easy," Brendan said. "Patrick's right, it could have been worse."

"So we go around Mr. Nelson's field. Just a little inconvenience,"

Jeremy said with a shrug. "But Patrick ... no more of your uncle's ideas of fun, okay? I've still got a bad taste in my mouth."



We'd all agreed we wouldn't be going across Mr. Nelson's pasture any more. But I still liked to listen to my uncle's tales.

So I hung around in the kitchen after Taylor and the cousins went back to play in the bedroom. I made a lot of noise getting ice from the icemaker, and pouring something to drink to make it seem like I had a reason to be in there. I kept an ear tuned to talk coming from the dining room, though. Not that I was going to try any more of Uncle Clint's pranks. I just wanted to see if I might hear anything interesting. I should have learned my lesson by then.

I popped a couple more olives in my mouth. Up to that point, nothing sounded all that interesting. I took my glass and headed to the bedroom to see what the girls were up to. Uncle Clint looked up as I passed by the dining room.

"Hey, Patrick. You headed in there?" He jerked his head in the direction of the bedroom.

"Yeah."

"Why don't you pull up a chair?" he asked, sliding his chair over like he was making room for me to sit at the table with them. "The girls will be in there with that doll house for a long time. You don't want to be in the middle of that, do you?"

"Nah."

"Then come on and help us solve the world's problems," he said, smiling broadly and patting the empty chair.

I looked around to see if someone was behind me. Was my uncle talking to someone else? I wasn't sure what to do. Was he serious? Everyone was smiling and nodding at me, so I figured it must be okay. I got a chair from the kitchen and casually pulled it into the dining room like I'd been sitting around with the adults forever.

The Ringleader

Uncle Clint clapped me on the back when I sat down. "So, how's it going, buddy? You doing okay in school? Had tests last week, I hear."

For a few minutes, I was the center of attention. I liked that. I brought everyone up to date on my classes, on band, and how I thought I did on midterms.

"I think I did pretty good," I said. I noticed my dad raised his eyebrows and looked at my mom. I said quickly, "I'm sure I did great."

"I'll bet you did," Uncle Clint said, giving me a swat on the shoulder.

After a while, the conversation drifted back to the stuff they usually talk about, and I sort of zoned out. I wondered when would be a good time to slip away from the table. Being with the girls, where I could maybe watch TV or play some game on my phone, sounded pretty good about that time.

Then someone asked my uncle if he ever saw any people he knew from his college days. That grabbed my attention and I was back at the table.

"As a matter of fact," Clint said, "I ran into Todd Jones a couple of weeks ago."

My mom burst out laughing. "Wasn't that one of the guys who—"

"Yep," Clint answered, grinning. "He was one of 'em."

My mom kept on laughing.

"One of which guys?" my dad asked.

Yeah, I wondered, what was so funny about this Todd Jones guy? Maybe things would pick up now. I'd hear some great story.

"Well, you remember when I told you about my freshman dorm initiation?" Clint said.

"Oh, yeah," Dad said. "There was a bunch of linebackers from your dorm who hauled you out in the middle of the night—"

"—to check out some cows," Uncle Clint said, his fingers making quotes in the air. "They thought it would be fun."

By now everyone at the table was laughing. Just like they had at Christmas.

"Well, Todd was one of them."

I didn't hear much after that. My mind went on full tilt.

Middle of the night? My friends and I had gone out in broad daylight.

Line-backers? College football line-backers? I started doing some rapid mental calculations. I might have tipped the scales at one-twenty. Same with James. We were both built sort of lean. Max liked his chips and cookies, so he had a few pounds on us. Jeremy was the smallest of us, Brendan the biggest. But none of us came anywhere near some college jock. Those guys are huge!

No wonder we didn't have any luck tipping over a thousand-pound-plus cow!

Wait just a minute. Did they say it was some kind of initiation?

How did I miss all that?

Then something else got me to thinking. Had that whole cow-tipping story been about an initiation in the first place? Had these guys taken my uncle out, making him think that's what he was going to do? I couldn't be sure there had even been any cows tipped. I never actually heard the sound Uncle Clint, or the cow, made.

I snapped out of my daze when I heard my grandfather say, "Good thing you weren't in Texas, Clint. You all could have been strung up."

What was he talking about? I live in Texas! I blurted out, "What do you mean, Papa?"

"Well, from what I hear, messing with someone's cattle is still a hanging offense down there."

Everybody roared at that. My mom was still laughing when she stood up and began stacking plates. Grandmother and Judith helped clear the table and I got out of the way. I was so confused.

I wandered back to the bedroom. Some girly movie was playing and I plopped down on the floor, resting my head on a big floor pillow, my arm over my eyes to block out the light. My mind buzzed.

The Ringleader

What if they'd all just been pulling my leg? Christmas and the cow tipping story. Stringing people up. All of it. What if it was someone's idea of teaching me to not listen in on conversations that they considered none of my business.

Okay, so I was nosey. One thing for sure, I don't think they'd taken into account a fourteen year-old guy's curiosity and the Internet. They had no idea what I'd come up with the last time I did some research.

Which lead me back to thinking about the Culvert Crap. Which led to my next brilliant idea.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was so simple and so easy. A perfect plan that just popped into my head. When Uncle Clint came to tell Kate and Jillian it was time to go home, I looked up at him and said, "Hey, you think they could go to the zoo with us tomorrow?"

Taylor's head snapped around. She looked at me like I was some kind of freak, and mouthed, "We're going to the zoo?"

I made a freaky face and shrugged my shoulders. What could I say? The idea just came to me. I mean, when crap takes over your brain, most everything comes back around to that. Within seconds, a plan had formed inside my head. I needed to do more research and what better place to investigate crap than in person, at the zoo?

Grandmother and Papa have had a Grandparents' Pass to the Oklahoma City Zoo since Brett was a baby. Just because she swore off hot summers, it was spring and I knew Grandmother would jump at the chance to use her pass and take her grandchildren for an outing. And she would insist everyone had to go.

Someone might question my wanting to go to the zoo since it hasn't exactly been at the top of my list of places to go in Oklahoma for years. For sure my parents would turn me down, tell me I could go to the Dallas Zoo when school was out, or when we came back

another time. They were already talking about going home a day early, which my sister thought was a great idea. But I really needed to get out to the zoo. Immediately.

So I figured, if Kate and Jillian wanted to go . . . well, then the trip was a sure thing. How could any parent or grandparent deny those precious little darlings? They were already jiggling up and down and whining, "Please, Daddy, please, can we go, huh, can we go, please, please, please?"

Ahh. I remembered those days. I might have been doing some whimpering and whining a few minutes later myself if my idea didn't work. But the plan went off without a hitch. By the time we all waved goodnight and goodbye, Jillian and Kate were shouting out the car window, "See you tomorrow, Patrick. We'll be here early, Taylor."

Taylor waved, a plastic smile smeared across her face, waiting until the parents and grandparents went back into the house. When Clint's car turned the corner, she punched me.

Ow! I was really going to have to learn to stay out of her reach.

"What is wrong with you!" she said, scowling at me, her arms crossed over her chest as she turned to go into the house. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Taylor, wait—"

"It will be miserable out there, Patrick. Don't you remember?"

"Think, Taylor. It's spring, not summer. It won't be so hot."

She turned and glared at me.

"Look, I just thought about it," I said quickly. "It just popped into my head and then out of my mouth before I had a chance to think it through. I thought I could check out some of the animals."

"Duh!"

I dodged this time when she took another swipe at me.

"Doofus, that's what the zoo is. Animals."

"Yeah, and I can, you know . . . observe them." She didn't look like she was following my perfectly logical reasoning. "Poop, Taylor, poop. I can check out their poop."

She actually growled at me this time, throwing her arms in the air and bringing them down to lay crossed over her head.

At least she wasn't swinging at me.

"Are you still obsessing about that? Patrick, you are being freakishly ridiculous! I think your brains have turned to poop!"

"Please, Taylor." I wasn't exactly begging, but pretty close. "I'm not going to be able to get that whole culvert thing out of my head if I don't come up with some idea of where it came from. I just thought I could learn something, first hand, you know."

She rolled her eyes and heaved a big sigh. I could tell I was getting to her. She put her hands on her hips and tilted her head, giving me a long thoughtful look. "Okay, little brother," she said and turned to go in the house. She waved one arm high over her head, pointing back at me with her hand as she opened the door with the other and called, "You owe me."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Get up, Patrick, get up!" Kate and Jillian were jumping on my bed, on me.

Being the youngest child in my family, I had no idea how annoying little kids could be. I immediately gained a new appreciation for my brother and sister. And the precious little darlings didn't let up until I got up.

We had to get an early start. Grandmother was always worried we would be late. One time, we were all going to the latest, most anticipated movie of the season, according to my Grandmother. She insisted we get to the theater at least an hour early. She was sure there would be a long line waiting to get in, and she wanted us to be at the front of the line so we'd get good seats. There was no line and our family rounded out the audience to about two dozen people. Everyone still gave her a hard time about that. She still insisted we get an early start.

I barely had time to shower and brush my teeth before we had to leave. My hair was still wet and I crunched on a toaster tart in the car on the way to the zoo. Taylor was not talking to me. Okay by me. I was going to get to see some animals. And, with any luck, scat.

When we got to the zoo, it took a few minutes for everybody

to get their hands stamped and all ten of us through the gate. I wanted to go ahead of the rest, to strike out on my own. That was not happening. Another thing my grandmother insisted on was all of us staying together. My mom must have inherited that gene from Grandmother, because she liked it that way too. So I was stuck with our little herd.

We had to visit the aviary. Kate and Jillian loved the birds. And the monkeys because they thought they were sooo cute. They spent forever in the children's petting area. Then everyone had to rest, have a snack, take a potty break, and discuss our next move before we got near any other animals.

I needed to get near some big animals. Water buffalo, giraffes, lions, tigers and bears—oh my. Like any of those were going to be wandering around our neighborhood and through the culvert. Oh, well.

The point was to look and see what was there. Who knew? When we finally got to the large animal area, I wouldn't consider what I saw littered around their enclosures much to talk about. The hippos were shoulder high in water and the rhinos not close enough for me to get a clear view. Still, I had serious doubts about hippos or rhinos waddling through the culvert either.

Then we rounded a curve in the path and I saw the elephants. I remembered what Taylor had said about maybe an elephant had left the crap in the culvert. Although I knew there was no way that could happen, I walked faster, on ahead of the rest and stopped at the fence.

Then it happened. I couldn't believe it. What were the odds that at that very moment, right before my eyes, one of the elephants took a dump! I mean dump with a capital D. Totally worthy of the stuff in the culvert. In one blinding moment, I had my proof. At least I thought so. I could then truly believe the crap in the drainage pipe was from an elephant.

What I couldn't get my mind around was how did it get in there?

While the little girls giggled and pointed, the ladies made faces and wrinkled their noses. Papa, my dad, and Uncle Clint punched each other and made a few jokes.

I just stared, my chin resting on my arms as I leaned on the top of the fence. Taylor came and stood by me and placed her arms on the railing next to mine. My eyes were glued on the pen in front of me. I didn't look at her when I asked, "Did you see that?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her nod.

"That's it, Taylor. I'm sure of it," I said softly so no one else could hear me. I pointed my chin toward the big gray animals. "That's what I saw in the culvert."

After a few seconds, she poked me with her elbow. She nodded and said, "Told you so."

Grrr. Taylor could be so smug. Plus, I hated it when she was smug and right. So she was right, so what? Because she would never let me live it down, that's what. Under any other circumstances, I would have felt like punching her. But at that moment, I didn't care. A big weight seemed to have been lifted right out of my head. Part of the mystery of the Culvert Crap had been solved. I was sure of it. Sort of.

What I needed to figure out now was how the heck did it get in there?

But not today. The steady breeze shifted and the smell from the elephant enclosure blew our way. The odor from that fresh deposit sealed the deal. I would never forget that smell. It was almost identical to what I'd smelled in the drain.

Kate and Jillian set up a real howl about the stink and wanted to move on.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you," Papa said, "but, I'm just about walked out. Besides, it's past my lunch time." He looked over at the elephants and said, "However, I do not care to eat in this place."

"Yeah, the girls are pretty much finished," Uncle Clint said.

Judith nodded. He looked around at everyone and asked, "Think we're just about done here?" They all seemed to be in agreement.

Jillian and Kate were all set to put up a big fuss when Grandmother came up with an idea. "There's a Mc—"

That's all they needed, she didn't even get the rest of the sentence out of her mouth. Those little girls had been to the zoo with our grandparents often and they knew precisely what fast-food place was just up the street. They were already tugging at their parents, and telling us what toy was being featured in the kids' meal that week. Brett, Taylor and I had used the exact same tactics when we were their age.

My mind was going ninety miles a minute. I needed to stay just a little while longer. I didn't expect to see any more than what I'd already seen, but I thought I might be able to get a shot of the elephant's dump on my cell phone. I hoped to do it without everybody giving me a hard time about how gross that would be.

I played dumb and put the cherry on the ice cream sundae, so to speak. I asked, "Oh, is that the one with the playground?"

My dad groaned a little and rolled his eyes at me. That particular chain is not his favorite spot to eat and I knew it. On top of that, he knew that I knew it.

Stalling for a little more time, I delivered my finishing touch. "But I thought you all were going by the gift shop before we left," I said, looking at my grandparents and cousins. I was the picture of pure innocence.

My dad eyes almost rolled back in his head before he focused back on me. I felt a little bit bad for playing everyone like that, especially my dad, but I needed just a few more minutes, and there was nothing to do now but keep going and follow through.

Kate and Jillian were yards down the path ahead of the rest of us, skipping and chattering with Grandmother. Papa trailed along behind them, grumbling.

Taylor hung back with me while the rest of the adults scurried after Kate and Jillian.

"What are you up to, Patrick?" my sister asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I aimed my phone at the elephants and clicked. We were too far away to get a decent shot, but I took two or three anyway. If I'd only had my dad's camera, I could have zoomed in for a really good close-up.

I heard him calling for us to catch up to them.

"Be right there, Dad," I yelled.

"Patrick!" Taylor said as she stomped off toward the gift shop. "This is beyond gross."

I took another quick look at the elephants and sprinted after my sister. Nothing was going to get to me right then. I'd had a really productive day, and I was actually looking forward to a burger, fries and a chocolate shake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I should never trust a trip to the zoo. I'd turned down the offer of one of Papa's hats and the bubble-gum scented sun-screen Aunt Judith slathered on Kate and Jillian. I mean, who wanted to walk around all day being my granddad's twin, advertising his favorite ball club, and smell deliciously chewable?

I paid the price for being cool, though. My face and arms were bright pink before we finished our burgers and fries. I couldn't wait to say goodbye to my cousins, my aunt and uncle, and get back to my grandparents' house.

After a cool bath, I smeared a big blob of aloe vera and calamine lotion over all the burning parts.

"Did you get that aloe vera lotion, Patrick?" my grandmother said outside the bathroom door.

"Be sure you spread it all over, Patrick," my mom said.

I looked to see if the door was locked. They would both be in the bathroom to help me if it weren't. "I got it," I told them.

"It will help you, dear," Grandmother said.

"I'm on it."

I was really happy to hear the sound of their voices as they walked away from the bathroom.

After a while the aloe and calamine kicked in and I did feel much better. I went out to the patio where my dad and Papa were grilling hamburgers for dinner. It was too hot by the grill, so I took a cold drink from a cooler and climbed into a lounge chair away from the flames.

I pulled out my phone and flipped to the pictures I'd taken earlier. My mom came out of the house and I closed the cover. If she saw the pictures of the elephants, she might ask a lot of questions. I had enough of my own at the moment.

"Patrick, put that away," my mom said, spying the phone. She placed a large tray filled with sliced red tomatoes, lettuce, pickles and onions, on the patio table. "You'll be home tomorrow and you can talk to your friends then."

I didn't bother to try and tell her I wasn't talking to, or texting, my friends. Any other time she would be right. I slid the phone into my pocket as Taylor came out onto the patio with more food.

"Hey, little brother," she said when she noticed the phone go into my pocket, "go help Grandmother."

Grrr. She really could get to me when she used that bossy-big-sister tone with me. But I was really hungry and willing to do whatever it took to get some food.

By the time I brought out the paper plates, cups and napkins, plastic forks and knives, Papa and dad were serving up the meat. After a couple of burgers, some potato salad, baked beans and roasted corn, I began to feel a little more human. And stuffed. I decided to wait a while before helping myself to the stash of ice cream sandwiches in the freezer. I might have even a couple more before adding another layer of aloe before I went to bed.

The sunburn wasn't bothering me very much by the time we headed back to Texas the next morning. After a big breakfast of biscuits and gravy, bacon and eggs, I was ready to settle in the back seat and chill. I put in my earbuds, turned on some tunes and snoozed most of the way home.

Vacations are fun, but there's always the getting back home. We made it to our house by mid-afternoon. Our dog, Pinto, raced out the front door yipping, happy to see us. He's good company for Grammy when we go out of town for a few days, but, I had to admit, I was glad to see the silly little mutt. We brought in our bags and cleaned out the car, finishing off the goodies my grandmother sent home with us. Afterward, Mom took off for the grocery store and I headed to my room.

Not wanting to take the chance that just anyone might see the pictures I'd taken at the zoo, I sent a short text message to my friends to let them know I was home. "Interesting news. Call when you can."

Within seconds my phone started buzzing.

James was the first to send a text: "So? What?"

Max followed. "!???!" was his message.

Jeremy sent, "Later. Family time now."

Brendan would be home later in the evening from a trip to Colorado. Lucky guy.

After a few texts back and forth among us, we decided we would meet at my house sometime the next morning.

My sunburn was itching and I hopped in the shower. The cool water felt soooo good—until my sister started banging on the door, telling me to quit hogging the bathroom. I shut out the noise she made and stood very still, letting the water run down my back.

Taylor kept up the noise until it became entirely too annoying, so I gave up and let her have the bathroom. I thought I'd get a quick nap in before supper, but my mom had other ideas. All our dirty clothes had to be rounded up and in the laundry room before we ate. Then I had to help with kitchen clean-up because Taylor had a baby-sitting job. By the time that was done, I was ready to turn in for the night.

Nothing like your very own bed after a few days being away. My sunburn was itching again and I slathered on some more lotion. I tried reading for a while, but couldn't concentrate and turned off the light. I listened to some music and thought about . . . what else?

I got my phone and clicked the Photo icon. I scrolled through pictures until I came to the ones I'd taken of the elephants at the zoo. There it was. I'd seen it with my own eyes. I had the pictures to prove it. I had the evidence I needed, or at least I thought I did. But what exactly could I prove? I could as easily believe a huge, deranged Indian's ghost had taken a crap in the culvert as that an elephant had been in there. Sure. Why not?

I'd talk to the guys tomorrow, show them the pictures and see what they thought. I really need their help. I drifted off to thoughts of elephants, Indian ghosts and a massive mound of scat.



We were inching our way through the culvert, which had somehow grown to the size of a gigantic construction tunnel. Max and Taylor chattered away all excited about the circus, and dancing elephants.

"Did you see the one walk on its front feet?" Max said as he did a hand-stand, mimicking the trick he'd seen.

"Yeah," Taylor answered, as she flipped onto her hands and strolled along beside Max as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

I didn't even know my sister could walk on her hands. Wow! But wait a minute, what was my sister doing here in the culvert anyway? Then I noticed the rest of the guys were trailing along behind them.

"Grandpa says you can train an elephant to do almost anything." Max said as he turned to an old man walking beside him. "Isn't that right, Grandpa?"

I wondered where the man came from. And why would Max's grandpa be wearing buckskins and moccasins? But the old guy seemed to agree with what Max was saying.

Taylor turned right side up and called out to me. "Hey, Patrick, you hear that? An elephant can be trained to do all kinds of things.

Maybe like sit down to do his business, since you're so interested in that kind of stuff."

Max, Grandpa and Taylor all thought this was extremely hilarious. They started laughing, bent over and holding their sides, the sound echoing through the tunnel.

Then the top of my head hit something. The pipe had shrunk and I was walking inside the culvert. Taylor and the old man had disappeared and Max lay in a heap in the dust. Brendan grabbed his collar and dragged him to his feet. We were standing at a familiar angle in the pipe and we shined our lights ahead of us. The passageway seemed to go on forever and ever. Funny, it had never seemed that long before.

My legs were aching like I'd been carrying weights on them. I seemed to be walking through some kind of thick gunk that sucked at my feet. It was really hot in there and I had a hard time breathing because of the smell. I knew we had come to the right spot when I saw my mom's aluminum baking pans.

Then the slime vanished and the stink disappeared.

All at once, a loud clanging noise came from overhead. We aimed the flashlight beams toward the sound. Above us was a large round metal plate anchored in the pipe. Now where had that come from? I'd never noticed it in the drainage pipe before. Had it always been there? How could I have missed it?

We stood up as straight as we could, put our hands on the metal disc and got ready to push. The clanging sound came again. This time it was louder, followed by a grating, rasping sound of metal on metal. It was coming from outside.

We took our hands off the disc and waited. Something pulled the metal plate aside and we jumped back against the walls, clinging to the curved sides of the pipe as light streamed in. We blinked at the blinding brightness coming from a clear sky overhead.

"Hey, Brendan," I said, stepping into the ring of light, "give me

The Ringleader

a boost up to get a better look." He cupped his hands and I was just about to put my foot up when everything got dark again. We whipped our flashlights up again, aiming at the spot where the hole had been. I cringed at what I saw. Taylor's words rang in my ears as I stared up at the huge wrinkled elephant rear end within inches of my face.

I yelled, "Oh, crap!"

And it did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke with Pinto in bed with me licking my face and Taylor leaning over me.

"Hey, mush-brain, snap out of it," she yelled, shaking me. "You're having a nightmare."

I sat up in a hurry and rubbed my face, wiping at Pinto's slobbers as hard as I could. So it wasn't elephant dung on my face, but his breath smelled so bad it came in a close second. All in all, I was just glad it was only dog drool after all.

"Dad's already been for donuts," Taylor said.

Some weekends, instead of making pancakes for all of us, our dad will pick up donuts. My stomach rumbled and my mouth watered at the thought. Great time for donuts. Way to go, Dad.

"Oh, and James just called," Taylor said as she walked to the door. "He said to tell you he's on his way over."

"What . . . ?" I looked around for my cell phone and found it beside me under the blanket. It was dead. I'd gone to sleep and forgotten to plug in the charger when I went to bed.

I jumped out of bed and connected the charger to my phone. I looked around and noticed Taylor still standing in the doorway. I glared at her. She'd broken the rule. She'd come into my room. Oh,

right. After all, she had let me know the guys were headed over, so I decided to let it pass this time and not make a big deal over it. But why was she still there?

"Well?"

Her eyes narrowed as she glared right back and shook her head. "You're welcome," she said as she slammed the door behind her.

I barely had my jeans on when the doorbell rang. I slid my feet into my sneakers, pulling a T-shirt over my head as I ran for the door. Brendan was with James and they followed me into the house, back to the kitchen where we grabbed some donuts and a glass of milk each and took them to the table.

"So, what's the interesting news?" James asked.

I figured my mom would have heard us in the kitchen and would be coming from her bedroom any minute so I shook my head and whispered, "Later."

Right on cue, she came through the door, with bed head and still in her pajamas. She mumbled "good morning" to anyone in general. I don't know why I worried about her asking what we were talking about and wanting to know if there was any news. My mother is not a morning person. She poured a cup of coffee, got a donut and sat in her chair and clicked on the TV.

We finished off our donuts and downed our milk. "I'll be right back," I told the guys and I went to my room to get my phone. The charge wasn't complete, but it had enough juice for the time being.

"Hey, Mom, we'll be outside," I told her as we went out the front door. I didn't wait for a reply, I knew there wouldn't be one.

I picked up a basketball off the front porch and we walked out to the basketball goal at the end of the street. One neat thing about living on a cul-de-sac, it's a good place to set up a goal with a place to shoot hoops any time you want. Plus, it's a great place to have a little privacy. You can see anyone or anything coming from almost any direction.

Neither of the guys asked about my news right off. They knew I'd tell them when I was ready. Great friends do that. After a few shots, we took a break and sat on the curb.

The morning was cool and I wished I had on a long sleeve shirt, but the shiver that ran down my back came more from the news I had to share with my friends than being cold. I pulled out my cell phone and clicked the Photos icon. Without a word, I passed the phone to James while Brendan looked over his shoulder at the pictures I'd taken of the elephants.

James handed the phone back to me and asked, "What is this, dude?"

"Proof," I said. I filled them in on our trip to the zoo, how I'd actually seen the event and, even though it wasn't a close-up, I was sure. "I'm telling you, the Culvert Crap is elephant doo."

They looked at each other, took another look at the pictures on the phone. "Okay, Rick," James said, handing the phone back to me. "If that's what you say it is, then that's what it is."

"And you're sure?" Brendan asked.

"It's what I saw, I know it." I stared at the picture. "But, what I still can't figure out is—"

And we all said together . . . "how the heck did it get in there?"

When Max called and told me he couldn't come over, I felt relieved. Then a text message came from Jeremy saying he couldn't make it either. That made things even simpler. Brendan, James and I had come up with a plan that would go quicker without the others.

The three of us had decided we'd go back to the culvert. I didn't know if the pile of poop would still be there, it had been a while since we first saw it. I figured at least it would be changed, but if it was still there I wanted to see it for myself one more time while the images from the zoo were still fresh in my mind. Maybe I couldn't really compare them that way, but I was going to take a picture this time. Just in case.

It was time to put our plan into action. Brendan and James ran home to get flashlights while I went back inside. I found my mom in the same spot. She was still in her pajamas but it looked like she might have run a hand through her hair. And, with a fresh cup of coffee, she at least registered my presence now.

"Mom, the guys and I are going to go hang out. Okay?"

"Where are you going, Patrick?"

"Just around."

"Don't go far," she said. "Do you have your phone?"

I pulled my phone from my pocket and showed her that I did.

"Well, check in. You boys be careful and don't stay out long." She went back to whatever she had been watching on TV.

I grabbed a flashlight and a long sleeved, flannel shirt from my bedroom and went outside. James and Brendan walked up just as I stepped out the door. We fell in step together and made it to the dead-end in a few minutes. We made our way single-file down the incline to the entrance of the big pipe.

What am I hoping to accomplish? I asked myself with each step I took. Maybe this time we'd find some clue to what it was, or where it came from, I thought, answering myself. Something. Anything.

At the entrance, we turned on our flashlights, ducked down and walked into the culvert.

"Well, everything looks about the same," James said as we moved along. "I know we poked around in that pile up there," he said, shining his flashlight on a bunch of leaves and stuff. "The same soda cans are there. The rest doesn't look any different to me."

I pointed my light at the floor. "I don't think anything has been in here since we were," I said. "Look. There's where we walked." We could clearly see our footprints in the dust. Some going away from us, some coming at us.

"There's the angle where we turned," Brendan said shining his light up ahead of us. We knew where we were headed now for sure.

"Okay, guys," I said. "No backtracking from this point."

We moved on at a steady pace, not stopping for anything on the way. In a few minutes we stopped as we saw ahead of us what we'd come to see.

"There it is," James whispered loudly as the beams of our lights reflected off the roasting pans.

We crowded together, not saying a word, before edging our way toward the familiar heap. The pans were just as we'd left them. The only difference in the pile we'd come to find was that it now looked like an enormous cow patty that had been left in the pasture for a very long time, with the large lumps still in the middle. Dried and crumbly around the edges, but still really smelly.

"Now what?" James breathed.

"Honestly? I don't know," I said.

We slumped down the curve of the pipe, resting on our heels, and pulled our shirts up over our noses. And just looked. After a while, I took out my cell, leaned forward and snapped a couple pictures.

"Hey, Rick, maybe you should pose with it," Brendan said. "You know, like a big game hunter?"

"Yeah, use this," James said as he picked up a long stick and handed it to me. "Instead of an elephant gun, this can be your Poop Poker."

That cracked me up and I started laughing. These guys could always help me see things on the brighter side. After we quit laughing so hard I said, "Okay, I'll pose, but no way am I going to plant my foot on that stuff."

I handed Brendan my flashlight and phone and took the stick from James. I stood up and brushed off the seat of my pants. Like it was going to matter if my pants got dirty? Ha!

Being careful to not bump my head again I had to stand hunched over next to the shiny roasting pans. We goofed around for a while, my friends full of all kinds of advice on how I should pose.

"Go on the other side," James said as he aimed the phone at me. "I'll take another picture from that angle this time."

As I moved around I put out my hand to steady myself while trying to keep my feet out of the mess. I was touching something above me, something that didn't feel like the surface of the rest of the pipe.

"Hey, Brendan," I said, "shine the light up here."

The beam of the flashlight followed my arm up to where my hand rested on what looked like a black plastic trash sack.

"What is that?" I said, poking at the dark surface. "I don't remember seeing this here before."

"Me neither." James said.

"We were sort of busy," Brendan said. "I know I was too busy looking at the crap to notice much else,"

Then I heard a noise. I'd never heard anything like it in the culvert before.

"Quiet, guys," I said, putting my hands out to hush them. "Listen!"

They stopped talking and looked at me. They heard it too, but for a minute it was like we were frozen. It couldn't be. It sounded like rippling water. Headed our way.

James and Brendan aimed the flashlights in the direction of the sound that got louder by the second. Muddy brown water, mixed with leaves and sticks and trash, moved toward us in a slow but steady stream. They shot to their feet and started running. I threw the stick aside and raced after them. Brendan still had my flashlight so I stayed close on their heels with the sound of the water growing louder, coming closer behind us.

We came around the angle and the light at the mouth of the culvert was straight ahead. All of a sudden, I lost my footing on some loose gravel and stumbled to my knees. Brendan heard the thud when I went down and stopped, turning to see what happened.

"James!" he shouted. "Rick's down!"

James looked over his shoulder and skidded to a halt. They started toward me. I felt the water hit my shoes, my knees were soaked in an instant.

"Go on!" I yelled, waving them on as I sprang to my feet. "Get out of here!"

When they saw me on my feet, they turned and began to move again.

"Run!" I yelled. Seconds later I saw them dash out the opening and disappear. Safe!

I could tell by the noise behind me that the water had picked up speed and, from the sound, there was a lot more of it. I looked over my shoulder. The stream was coming faster, deeper, and lapped around my ankles. I sloshed through the water, fear crawling through my gut and I scrambled forward. I hit the end of the culvert, straightened up as soon as I knew my head would clear the opening and jumped to the side. My feet hit the path, but I didn't have good footing and I began to slip.

"Help!" I yelled and began to slide toward the black slimy mud that formed a border around the pond.

My feet went in first, I was sinking fast. I grabbed at anything nearby, but the thin clumps of grass pulled out of the loose sandy soil and I slipped further and further. I clutched dried grass in my fists as my feet slid deep into the mud.

I looked up just as water gushed from the big pipe, bringing trash, sticks, stones and all kinds of junk with it, pouring into the pond.

A hand grabbed my collar, stopping me from sliding farther.

"We've got you, dude." Brendan held my shirt in a death grip, James beside him, reaching for me. He braced a foot on a rock and grabbed my arm. They began hauling me out of the slick muck, scooting backward. My feet came free with a sucking sound and I back-pedaled as fast as my legs could move.

I laid back on the sandy incline between my friends, sucking air into my lungs. They moved around until they got their feet on solid footing and reached down to help me to stand.

"No!" I shouted, waving them away. I twisted back around aimed head- first toward the ooze. I crawled commando style, edging my way to within inches of the muck. "Grab my legs, guys," I shouted and pushed forward.

"Are you nuts!" James yelled. He dived for me and clamped onto one leg just as my hands sank into the black muck. Brendan had my other leg.

"Hold on, guys," I grunted and plunged my hands further into the mud. "Let up a little so I can get in deeper," I told them.

"What are you doing, Patrick!" Brendan shouted as he held onto me.

They held tight to my legs but let me ease forward enough so that I could push my arms deeper into the stinky gunk. I was in elbow-deep and groped around until I felt what I was looking for. I got a firm grip then shouted, "Okay! Pull me up!"

They pushed backward, holding my legs, bringing me with them until I was free from the mud. When I could be sure I wouldn't slip back into the mud, I flipped over onto my back and sat up, grinning and holding my prize.

"My mom won't like me having muddy clothes," I said holding up a grimy canvas hi-top in each hand, "but these are new and she'd kill me if I came home without them."

My friends totally understood.

By the time we got to our feet, there was barely a trickle of water coming from the pipe. It had sounded like a freight train about to run us down in there, and I was sure there would be more pouring out any second. We waited for more water to spill out. But there wasn't anything more to see.

We took a few steps to leave but kept turning and looking back. Still nothing. We slowly made our way to the top of the slope. A few steps and then we'd look back, until we were finally on the other side of the barrier. When we looked at the opening of the culvert,

the flood of water that had chased us from the pipe was now only a steady drip.

My arms were covered with the black goo and I could see my muddy footprints where we'd climbed up the trail. It was hard to believe that was all that was left of the riddle which I had obsessed about for the past few months.

Well, my footprints weren't all that was left. My mom's beaten, battered, still-shiny-aluminum roasting pans floated on top of the pond.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Well, I guess that's it," Brendan said as he and James turned and started to leave. "Not much more to see now."

I didn't move a muscle. I just stood there staring at the stupid culvert.

James poked at my arm, trying to get me to go with them, but I wasn't going anywhere. Finally, he tugged at my sleeve and said, "Come on, Patrick, let's get you home and cleaned up."

The mud was beginning to dry on my arms and they itched like crazy.

"Yeah, you might want to get that stuff off your shoes before your mom sees it," Brendan added. "Besides, it stinks pretty bad."

"Yeah?" I snapped, whirling on him. "Well, that's not all that stinks! This whole stupid thing stinks!" I pointed with my shoes at the gaping hole. "I just wanted to know. That's all, you know?" I said as I paced back and forth. "I didn't know if I'd ever figure out what that stuff was, if it was elephant crap or what, but now I'll never get the chance. Will I?"

I dropped my shoes and bent down and picked up a handful of gravel. I stood up and hurled it at the drain. I planted my palms on the top of the barrier and ducked my head. My chest burned like I was going to explode or cry or something.

"Hey, pal," James said, his hand on my shoulder. "You might just have to chalk this one up to an 'unsolved mystery'."

"James, listen. Okay? I think I could have accepted that—eventually. That I might never know. Maybe." I sniffed, but not much. I stood straight and wiped my nose with the front of my shirt. There was too much mud on my sleeve. "The thing is . . . what is so frustrating . . . what makes me so mad is, I got rid of one mystery and now I've got another one!"

I kicked at a rock. Big mistake. I scraped the skin off the end of my toes. I forgot I didn't have shoes on, not even socks. The stupid mud had sucked them off my feet, just like it had my sister's.

"What do you mean another mystery?" he asked.

I looked from James to Brendan to the mouth of the culvert. "What I want to know now is: after all the times we were inside that stupid pipe and we never, not once, saw one drop of water . . . where did all that come from?"

"You're right!" Brendan said. "I guess I was so scared and in such a hurry to get out of there, I didn't stop to think about it. And, then I got busy trying to keep your head out of the mud."

James slapped me on the back, nodding his head. "He's right, Dude. For a minute there, I thought you'd lost it. Finally cracked at last," he said with a half-hearted chuckle, trying to grin. Then, both their faces got all serious and James looked me straight in the eyes. "Seriously, Patrick, you, uh —the water—scared the snot out of us."

"Me too," I said and sat down in the dirt, flinging my shoes to the side. "Sorry."

The guys sat down next to me. I looked at my shoes. They were completely covered with black mud, I could smell them from where I sat. I had a feeling the dark stains would never come out. My mom might kill me after all, at least ground me for half my life. Right then I didn't even care.

My legs itched.

"What all do you think is in that water?" I said, pulling up one leg of my pants.

"No telling," James said. "Oh, well, not counting what we do for sure know."

"I just hope my skin doesn't fall off," I said, scratching at my stinging skin.

"Hey, be glad Max isn't here," Brendan said. "He'd have the thing full of toxic waste. You wouldn't just be losing skin, you're whole leg might fall off before he got through."

Another good reason for Max not to have been there.

"Hey, that can't feel good," James said, looking at the red marks my nails left on my leg. My skin burned as I scratched harder. "Come on, Patrick, let's go back to your house so you can get that stuff washed off," he said and stood. "Besides, we can't solve anything right now anyway."

"It won't ever get solved if it's left up to me. None of it," I said getting up, slapping at the grit on the seat of my pants and brushing it from my palms. I bent down and picked up my shoes. I straightened up and took one more look at the shadowy opening of the culvert then back at my friends. "I'm done," I said and turned to go.

I'd taken only a few steps when they caught up with me. Falling into step with me, James asked, "What do you mean, you're done?"

I stopped and faced them. "Look, guys," I said stopping to face them. "When we first went inside the culvert, it was fun. All exciting and stuff. I got a huge rush thinking about it, hoping maybe we'd have a big adventure. Like, you know, we'd never done anything that far out before. Well, except maybe for trying to tip that cow. But, now . . ."

"Look, guys, when I saw that crap, it really scared me at first. All I could think of was there had to be something really big that would leave something that size in there. That's why I got out of there so fast. Then I thought if it was in the culvert, then it could be around the neighborhood. You know?"

James scuffed at the gravel with the toe of his shoe. "That whole thing was pretty crazy."

"Then when we went back and all that wild rumbling noise—."

"Hey, Rick, wait just a minute," Brendan said. "Don't put this all on you. We all decided to go back in there."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't have if it hadn't been for me."

"Maybe not. But you don't know that. Maybe we would have. It's what we do, Rick. You know . . . explore . . . check out stuff."

"Brendan's right, it's what we do," James said. "So it was scary. No harm done."

"Scary? Oh, it was scary alright. But did you ever stop to think that maybe we should have stopped then? We didn't know what it was, where it came from. Maybe the rumbling noise was a warning. But, oh no. I had to investigate. I had to go to the zoo, take pictures."

I looked over my shoulder at the culvert, the opening growing smaller with each step we took away from it.

"Then I had to go back in there and take more pictures! Guys, I let this thing take over my life. You have no idea how many hours I spent thinking about it. And I just wouldn't let it go. I had to find out what had left that crap in the culvert."

I started walking, headed for home, the bottom of my wet pants dragging in the dirt making scratchy sounds. Brendan and James fell into step with me again.

I started telling my friends about all the things that had flashed through my mind while I ran from the drain.

"Look, guys," I said as we walked. "Remember how we talked about there not being water in the culvert? But we knew there had to have been some at one time from the way the trash and stuff was piled up in places. All the signs were there. Just because we never saw any water didn't mean there could never be any."

I stopped walking and James and Brendan stopped and stood beside me. I told them, "Everything up to this point has been fun . . .

scary, but fun . . . because we could let our imaginations run wild. Now . . . well, that water was real, guys. One of us, all of us, could have been hurt. Maybe dead."

A shudder ran down my spine. I started walking again, my friends at my side. "The thing is, I can accept I'll never know where the crap came from, or the rumbling, or the water." I was shivering now, and didn't trust myself to look either of them in the eye. The whole thing had just caved in on me and I didn't want to lose it.

"But I'd never get over it if anything happened to one of you, any of you," I said in a raspy whisper. "Because of me."

I looked straight ahead, and kept walking. We were almost to my house. "So now I'm telling you. I'm letting it go."

Brendan coughed softly beside me.

James cleared his throat as we kept step with each other. He said, "Yeah, how about that cow."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Lucky for me, the garage door was up when we got back to my house. Brendan pulled my flashlight and phone from his pocket and handed them to me. Somehow he'd managed to keep anything from happening to them. I told them I'd see them later and opened the door into the house. I watched them walk down the sidewalk together as I put down the garage door. I stripped off my jeans and carried them and my muddy shoes into the house and through to the bathroom. I put everything in the bath tub and had just turned on the water when my mom knocked on the door.

"Patrick? Is that you?"

"Yes."

"Are the boys with you?"

Seriously? Did she think they were in here to keep me company or something? While I took a shower? We're close friends, best friends. But not that close.

"Uh, no, they went on home."

"Oh. I thought maybe they were coming in for lunch."

"Nope," I replied. "They had to go home. Uh, maybe they'll be over later."

I knew both James and Brendan planned to be back after they

stashed their flashlights back at their houses, cleaned up a little, and grabbed something to eat while they were there.

"I'm starved, though," I told her. "Got something good to eat?"

"You bet," she said from the other side of the door. "Sandwiches? What do you want?"

"Oh, whatever you fix will be fine. Surprise me." My arms and legs were really itching and if we kept up this little chat, there wouldn't be enough hot water left for me to scrub clean. "Thanks, Mom. I'll be right there."

I figured she left to make the sandwiches when I didn't hear her talking anymore. I zipped through a shower, the dirt came off fairly easy. The water washed over my jeans and shoes at the same time. Might as well wash all the dirt and grime down the drain at the same time. I was surprised that most of the muck actually came off my clothes. I squeezed as much water as I could from my pants and toweled off.

I dug around beneath the sink trying to find some lotion to put on my legs to help stop the itching. The only thing under there belonged to either Grammy or Taylor. I pulled a couple bottles out and wondered which I should choose. I could go for Mango and Lime Moisturizer, or Watermelon and Strawberry Body Lotion. Truth was I really didn't want to go around smelling like either one of them. I poured some of each in my hands, rubbed it all together and smeared it on my arms and legs. I smelled like a regular fruit basket when I walked out of there.

With a towel around me, I took my wet clothes to my room. My shoes looked as if the worst of the dirt had washed off. I dug around in my closet until I found an old pair of sneakers. I picked some jeans out of my dirty clothes hamper; they were good for another wear. I had just pulled a clean T-shirt over my head and slipped into the sneakers when my mom knocked on the door.

"Food's ready, Patrick."

"Be right there," I told her. I hung my wet pants over the back of my desk chair to dry out a little before they went in the laundry room. Then I went to see what my mom had whipped up.

Mom pattered around the kitchen while I put away a couple bologna and cheese sandwiches, corn chips and a big glass of chocolate milk.

"Your sister and I are going shopping in a little while," she told me. "Would you like to come along?"

Was she kidding? I'd rather have a root canal. I'd never had one, but I'd heard they were rather painful. "No, but thanks for asking," I said.

Taylor came in right then. "Oh, Patrick, are you going shopping with us? We're going to . . ."

I frowned at her. Who was she kidding? She didn't want me going along any more than I wanted to go.

"Nah. I think I'll pass," I said.

"Grammy's coming too," Taylor said, flashing me a fake sweet smile. "Sure you don't want to come with us?"

Oh, sure. Three generations of females . . . and me. What were we going to do next? Have a tea party. No thanks.

"I'm sure," I said, refusing to let her get to me. I gave her my version of a sweet smile. "You guys go on without me. Have a great time."

As soon as they were out the door, with the usual, "stay out of trouble, call if you need anything," from my mom, I called James.

"Hey," he said. "We're almost there. Brendan's with me."

"Oh. Okay, see you in a sec."

Next I phoned Max. "Hey, how's it going?" I asked.

"Things are fine. Where have you guys been?"

I wondered if he'd been trying to call me. Neither mom nor Taylor had said anything about me getting any calls. But hey, they were going shopping, who had time to give me the message?

"Did you call?"

"No. I just thought you would have called by now. You know, with your big news. When are we going to find out about it?" Max asked.

Let's see, I thought, which news? The one where I found out what the crap was in the culvert, or thought I did? Or the one where I nearly got washed into the pond? Maybe, best of all, that the crap was gone, and all I had to show for it were the zoo pictures and the last two shots from inside the culvert? Whichever, there was a lot of catching-up to do.

"Well, James and Brendan are coming over in a few. Can you make it?"

"Sure. I'm on my way."

"Say, Max, can you call Jeremy?" I figured he could get past Mrs. Wilson quicker than I would. For some reason, she never seemed nearly as interested in Max's family as she always seemed to be in mine.

I dropped my phone in my pocket. I picked up the basketball off the front porch and walked out to the cul-de-sac to wait for my friends. I saw James coming up the street a couple of houses away. When he got to my front yard we sat on the curb and talked while we waited for the others.

Within a few minutes, we saw Brendan headed our way. By the time he reached my house, Max and Jeremy rounded the corner on their bikes.

With everyone there, I looked at James and Brendan. I told Max and Jeremy, "Hey, guys, take a seat."

They laid their bikes down and everybody sat on the curb. I pulled out my cell phone and clicked the Photos icon. I scrolled to the pictures I took at the zoo then handed the phone to Max. I figured this was the best way to start.

"This was my news," I said, as he and Jeremy looked at the shots I took.

"Hey!" Max looked from one picture, to me, switched to the

others, and back to me. His eyes grew bigger each time he looked at me. His hair stood up like flames popping out of the top of his head. "That's it, Patrick! That's what's in the culvert!"

"Not anymore," I replied.

Max jumped to his feet. "What do you mean? You did it, Patrick. You found out what the . . . uh, the—"

"Crap," we all finished for him. We were used to it by then.

"Yeah, what the crap is in the culvert!" Max had always gotten excited really easy. He hopped around a few seconds looking at the pictures then stopped. His mouth hung open, his eyes weird, totally confused now. "Hey, wait a minute," he said after letting something ramble around in his brain for a minute. "If that's an elephant, and that's what's in the culvert"

Wait for it . . .

Wait for it . . .

One. Two. Three. Here it comes

"How did it get in there?"

Bingo!

"Max, buddy, I have no idea and, sorry to say, I don't expect to ever find out."

"But that's it, Patrick. You found out what it was!" Jeremy leaped up and stood beside Max. "You can't give up." He looked at James and Brendan. "Tell him, guys. Tell him he can't give up. We can't give up."

Neither James nor Brendan said anything; just looked at me, back at them, and shrugged.

"Wait just a minute. You know something," Max said, squinting at me. He stopped and held the phone out toward me. "Okay, you guys, what's going on here?"

Jeremy turned to me, everything I said just then beginning to get through to him. He looked at me suspiciously and said, "And what did you mean 'not anymore'?"

"Sit down, you two," I said, "and I'll tell you."

I started at the beginning; from the first time we'd gone into the culvert and I'd seen the crap, on to when we went back to check it out and heard the loud rumbling that made it seem like the earth shook.

Max began to squirm, muttering, "Uh-huh." Getting more impatient by the minute, he finally snapped, "We already know all that, Patrick. We were there."

"I know, Max," I said. "I know, you're right. And it was all was pretty scary, huh?"

Max nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I guess so."

"So after that we decided to take a break, go on to something else."

"And that's exactly what we did, Patrick. We picked up on the video." He still had my phone. He looked through the pictures again and held it out toward me. "So, what about this?" he said, getting more suspicious by the second.

The picture on the screen was the last one I'd taken. My last shot of the Culvert Crap, just before we heard the water and saw it coming at us.

"Just hold on a minute, Max. Okay?" James said. He knew how spooked I'd been that morning and that I would be dreading to repeat what happened. "He's going to get there. Go on, Patrick."

Max gave me a really grouchy look. "All right. But I don't understand what's going on." He sat beside Jeremy to let me finish.

"The thing is," I said, "I couldn't get it out of my mind. Like . . . like it possessed me, or something. You know?"

"You were possessed?" Max leaned forward, looking at me all weird. "Seriously?"

Max loved drama. Of any kind. Any other time, I would have played him along for a while, just for the fun of it. But that wasn't why we were together now, for this meeting. The whole reason was for me to tell them what had happened while Brendan, James and I were in the culvert this time.

"It sure felt like it sometimes, Max," I said. "My sister even said my brains had turned to poop, I thought about it so much. But no. I was not possessed. Not for real."

Max looked genuinely disappointed that something had not taken over my mind and body.

"So," I went on, "when I was at my grandparents' I got this brilliant idea."

I explained about our trip to the zoo, the perfect timing of the photos. "I had the proof I needed," I said. "Or so I thought,"

"You mean you were right there! You actually saw the deed?" Max said. "Whoa. What were the chances?"

"Yes, I was there. That's how I got the pictures. And after I had those pictures, I wanted to compare them with the actual stuff. The stuff in the culvert. So this morning, we went back there. To the culvert."

Max and Jeremy looked at each other and then at me. "We? What do you mean we?" they shouted. "Who's we?"

"James and Brendan and I went to the culvert this morning."

"Hey, no fair! We explore together, you guys," Max cried. "That's what we do!"

"Look, Max, I'm sorry," I said, "but hear me out. Okay?"

He grumbled loudly, "Why didn't you wait for us?"

To my surprise, Jeremy said, "Calm down, Max."

I thought he'd be as upset as Max, but without all the drama.

"Neither of us could come this morning, remember?" Jeremy went on, explaining to Max. "I'm sure they had a good reason for going on without us."

I got the feeling, from the way he said it, so calm and smooth, that good old Jeremy wasn't so cool about our going without them any more than Max. A second later, I was sure.

He crossed his arms across his chest. "So? Explain," he said, his eyes narrowed, staring at me.

He waited and I explained. His arms fell and dangled limply by his side, his eyes grew as big as Frisbees. The color had drained from his face by the time I got to where James, Brendan and I were safe at the cement barrier.

I decided I wouldn't add any of the conversation I'd had with Brendan and James on our walk home from the culvert.

When I'd finished, no one said a word. I could hear Pinto barking from inside the house. I rolled the basketball between my hands, listening to the scratchy sounds it made on the gritty concrete.

"Are you nuts!" Max exploded, leaping to his feet. He was like a ping-pong ball bouncing back and forth, all over the place. He would sit down and a second later he was up and glaring at me.

"What were you thinking?" he said. "Did you all go to bed stupid last night, or just wake up this morning and lose your minds?" He flung his arms out to include the three of us. "You could have been killed. Oh, my gosh," he said as a thought suddenly zinged through his head. It was like I could see it bouncing around in there. He couldn't decide which way to go, moving from one foot to the other, his face flushed. He ran his hands through his hair. "Oh, my gosh! We all could have been killed if we'd been in there!"

"That possibility did cross my mind," I said calmly. "Though, now when I think about it, I'm not so sure about that."

"Huh?" Brendan turned to look at me in total disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

This was all news to him. He'd been in the culvert with me, kept me from going into the mud, pulled me out. He knew how scared I'd been. How scared we all were. I didn't blame him for wondering how I could have changed my mind in such a short time.

"Think about it," I said, talking directly to Brendan and including James. "With the amount of water that came out of the pipe and as quick as it stopped, I'm thinking that maybe the worst that would have happened was that I could have slipped and ended up in the pond."

"And when did you come up with this brilliant idea?" Brendan asked, trying to make sense of this change in direction.

"When I was in the shower."

"Okay. You want to tell us more about it?"

"Well, of course, the whole time I was in the shower, every detail was playing over and over in my head." I was talking to the whole gang now, explaining to them all.

"I'd put my clothes in the shower with me—you know, two birds with one stone."

"Hey, sweet idea, Rick," Max said his head bobbing up and down. The other guys nodded in agreement.

"Okay. Okay. But listen. So, they—the clothes and shoes—covered the drain and the water backed up, coming up over my ankles. But, when I moved them from off the drain, the water went right down."

"I thought about the water in the culvert. I couldn't believe it when we saw the water coming at us. It just came out of nowhere, and sounded like Niagara Falls."

Max and Jeremy, mouths open, hung on every word I said.

Brendan cocked his head, concentrating on what I told them.

"You know how noise echoes off the cement walls," I explained. "Well, I think the shock of seeing the water coming at us like that made it seem louder."

"No, Rick. It really was loud," Brendan said. "And scary."

"Right. And, there were lots of sticks and cans and stuff that came with it. That could have made it sound louder. But there wasn't all that much water, Brendan. Not really. Think about it. It just sort of came out in one big whoosh and then it was over."

Brendan looked at James. I'd had a chance to talk to James and tell him what I'd been thinking when we waited for the others.

"Makes sense," he said to Brendan.

"Maybe."

"But you got stuck in the mud," Max said.

"Yes, but that was the mud that was already there. And Brendan and James pulled me out."

"You said you could have ended up in the pond. You don't know how deep the pond is," Max said. "You could have sunk to the bottom and never been found!"

Max was getting all dramatic again.

"I don't know, I'm thinking it might not be all that deep," I told him. "But I sure wouldn't want to take a dunk in there. I mean, think about it—everything came out of the pipe."

"Everything?" Max sounded raspy when he looked at me, wide eyed.

"Everything," I answered, nodding my head. I looked at Jeremy. "That's what I meant by 'not any more'. I'm sure the crap washed out right along with everything. No telling what else has been going into that pond all this time."

"Gross!"

"Gross doesn't even come close." I said.

"But we'll never know for sure if we don't go back and check it out," Jeremy said. "Besides, our plan was to explore the culvert until we discovered where it went, where it came out."

Jeremy was the one who thought, who insisted, we make the second trip inside the culvert. He just wanted to make sure that time, too.

"I don't think it's a good idea, Jeremy," I said. "Now that we know for sure that water comes through there at some time, I think it's too risky to go back inside to find out. We have no idea where it came from and there might be more next time. Things could get a whole lot worse. We could get caught in there."

"Whoa, that could be dangerous," Max breathed hoarsely. He dropped down beside Jeremy, sitting cross-legged on the cement.

"Yeah."

"And you're absolutely sure everything washed out?" Jeremy said eyeing me.

Bonnie Lanthripe

This guy was like Pinto with a bone. I couldn't blame him, though. I understood how hard it was to give up.

"Let me put it this way, Jeremy," I said. "That ain't a roast sitting in my mom's aluminum pan that's floating on top of the pond."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We sat in a circle on the cold cement, and in a little while I rolled the ball to James. He pushed it back to Max, and on it went back and forth among us.

After a few minutes, I said, "I don't know about you guys, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm done with that whole gig." I passed the ball to James. "I say we go on to something else."

"Maybe we should stick to something . . . safe," James said and winked at me. He passed the ball on to Brendan. "I say we should finish the video."

Everyone liked that idea. Another day would be soon enough to figure out the details of the next time we'd be filming. We decided to not waste our last day of Spring Break and actually played a couple games of basketball.



Except for having to get up early Monday morning, I really didn't mind being back at school with my friends, starting new assignments and projects. Working on new pieces for band gave me focus.

Within a couple of days I'd settled into the school routine again. But it was school, after all, and by the end of the week I was ready

when afternoon rolled around and we got some time out of class for a special assembly.

The Fire Department was coming to school.

James and I were in the same homeroom with Max and Jeremy so we sat together on bleachers in the middle of our freshman section in the school gym. Brendan sat a few bleachers down from us with some jocks from his home-room. He turned and saw us and waved.

It took a while for all the students to get in place and the noise to die down. After we sang the alma mater and pledged allegiance to the flag, the principal introduced Captain Brookes from the fire department.

Captain Brookes introduced some of his firemen and then they went over the same safety rules we'd been taught since kindergarten. You'd think they'd update their material after so many years. My mind drifted to the experiment James and I were working on for Chemistry then something the Captain was talking about caught my attention.

"It may appear that we're wasting water," he was saying. "But it's very important that we check the hydrants to make sure they are working properly. In case of a fire, we wouldn't want to have a home or business on fire and learn when we got there that the hydrant wasn't functioning as it should."

In a flash, I had total recall of everything he had said. It was like a rewind on DVR. I remembered specifically what he said about gallons of water being released from fire hydrants. This was something I'd never heard before.

As a training exercise for department personnel, he said, crews flushed, or flowed, the lines to make sure everything worked properly.

I'd seen fire department crews out with their truck, letting water run from a hydrant. I never understood what they were doing or why they did it. Now it made sense.

Something else made more sense now, too.

I felt James's elbow in my ribs. "Patrick! Did you get all that?" he whispered loudly.

"I got it!" I could hardly keep my voice low, just between the two of us.

Brendan didn't even try to keep quiet. I heard him shout "Whoo-hah!" at the top of his lungs. I looked to the bleachers below us and he was standing up facing us, his fists pumping the air as if he'd just made a winning score. He got it too.

A couple of teachers gave us some very grim looks because of all the commotion we were making. We toned things down before we got in trouble and got detention.

Before he sat down, Brendan flashed us a huge grin and I clasped my hands over my head as a sign of victory. James gave me a high-five and we sat down quickly. Our faces would have broken if we'd smiled any wider.

"What was that all about?" Max hissed.

"Tell you later," I said ducking my head when I noticed one of the teachers scowling at me. I couldn't sit still. My feet tapped impatiently on the metal bleacher in front of me.

When we were dismissed, I stood up and looked for Brendan. He was standing, looking for me. When we spotted each other, he pointed at the door, motioning wildly to let me know he'd meet us outside. I couldn't get out of that place fast enough.

Some teachers already had their eyes on us and if we ran now, we could get in trouble, big time. I didn't want any problems when we were so close. So James and I made our way down the bleachers as fast as we could without calling anymore attention to ourselves. We hurried through the crowd, pushed through the glass doors and outside.

Max and Jeremy raced to keep up with us.

"Are you going to tell us what's going on?" Max yelled behind us.

"You'll see," I called over my shoulder and kept going.

Once through the doors, James and I ran to the big red fire truck parked in front of the gym. Brendan was already there.

"Did you get all that?" he asked excitedly as James and I came to a stop next to him. "As soon as Captain Brookes said a fireman would be out here to answer questions—."

"I know!" I cut in. "After that, it felt like they were never going to let us out of there."

We gathered around the truck with a bunch of other students. Fireman Delaney introduced himself and asked if we had any questions.

Questions? Did I ever!

My hand shot up, and I couldn't keep the goofy grin off my face thinking I got to go first. Maybe now I'd get some answers to the puzzle. I hoped this Delaney guy didn't think I was some kind of nut case, like a pyromaniac or something.

"What are we, third graders?" Max, standing next to me, muttered out the side of his mouth.

I put my other hand on the back of Max's neck and squeezed. Hard. Before he could make any more comments that the fireman might hear. A sound like a mouse squeaking came out of his throat. I held on and waved my hand higher above my head.

"Sure," Fireman Delaney said, and extended his hand toward me. "And you are? . . . "

I let go of Max's neck, but not before giving it a little extra pressure. I took the fireman's hand. "Patrick Morrison, Sir."

"What did you want to know, Patrick?"

"Well, Sir, Captain Brookes talked about flowing the hydrants, and I had a couple questions about that."

"All right." He took a broad at-ease stance. "Shoot."

"I was wondering if there is any particular place you flush the hydrants? Like, I've seen parking lots being flooded, but are there other places you might go? If so, is there a specific time or place, or is it random?"

I hoped Fireman Delaney would appreciate my interest in his job. I tried to not sound like a pyromaniac.

"Good questions, Patrick," Fireman Delaney said. "Yes, we routinely check out hydrants in all the neighborhoods around this area. We try to make sure all hydrants in our territory are checked on a regular basis, making sure we don't obstruct any streets, or interfere with residents."

"And in these neighborhoods, what happens to the water you flush, er, flow?" Wow, I thought, I sort of sound like a reporter or something. I was feeling pretty impressed with myself right then.

"Why, it goes down the drain, so to speak," said Fireman Delaney. "Part of the process is to make sure gutter and storm drains are clear, that the water disperses in a timely way into and through the underground systems to approved sites."

I really liked this guy. So rehearsed, so confident. So informative.

Another kid had his hand up. But, before he could get Fireman Delaney's attention, I had one more question.

A frown crossed the fireman's face. I could tell he thought I was being rude and pushy. He just didn't know how important this was to me. I went on.

"These approved sites, would that be like creeks, or a ravine, or . . . say, maybe a pond?"

"Well, yes, that's possible."

I heard a sharp intake of breath behind me. Surely Max and Jeremy got the picture now. I couldn't tell who had made the noise, but at least one of them was following what was going on. About time!

Brendan and James stood on either side of me with goofy grins plastered all over their faces, their heads moving up and down. They reminded me of those dashboard Bobble-heads.

The other kid in the crowd finally got to talk to Fireman Delaney. That was okay with me. I had the information I was looking for. The guys and I waited around until everyone had a turn to ask questions.

"I'm very proud of the interest you boys have taken in fire safety," Fireman Delaney told us. "Maybe someday when you're thinking about what you're going to do after school, you'll consider a career with the Fire Department."

Good pitch. I didn't really think it would happen, but I couldn't tell what might happen in the next few years. For the time being, I had lots of exploring to do. And the fireman had given me some outstanding information. The least I could do was be courteous.

"I'll give that some thought, Sir," I said as we all shook hands with him and said good bye. "Thank you for your help."

Max started drilling me as soon as we walked away.

"Hold on, Max. Let's get inside the building," I said, looking over my shoulder to see if we were out of the fireman's range of hearing. I shouldn't have worried. Fireman Delaney was already answering questions for other students who now surrounded him.

James pulled the main entrance doors open and as I stepped inside, Brendan grabbed me around the neck with one arm. He held my head in the crook of his arm and rubbed his knuckles into my skull with his other hand.

"Can you believe it! That's got to be the greatest piece of information ever," he said. He let me go and looked from me to James. He put his hand in the air and I gave him a high-five one more time. Then it was James's turn again.

I could see the wheels turning in Jeremy's head. He started to say something but Max beat him to it.

"Will someone please fill me in on exactly what happened here?" Max said somewhere between a whine and a demand. He looked like he might go ballistic.

Before I could begin to explain, a teacher came along. "You boys know assembly period is over," she said. "Time to get back to your classrooms now."

None of us wanted to risk getting detention. We nodded and took

a couple of steps like we were going to break up and go to class. As soon as the teacher disappeared around a corner, we stopped and huddled up again.

"Listen, guys," I said, "let's meet in front of the building the minute the final bell rings."

We went in all different directions then, hurrying to the last class of the day. I think I might have done a little dancing on my way to Band.

Amazing! I thought, as I walked down the hall. When I got up that morning, the puzzle of the Culvert Crap and the water suddenly appearing in the culvert had still been a mystery nagging at me. Then Well, there was still lots I didn't know, but that whole flushing and flowing by the fire department sure opened up a lot of possibilities of how the water might have gotten in the culvert. It just had to be connected. If we could only get some kind of lead on the rest of the mystery, the bigger one.

The Culvert Crap. How the heck did it get there?

No matter, I would go to bed that night knowing that in one of our nearby neighborhoods, our esteemed fire department had cleared their hoses and flowed the hydrants that day. And I would sleep like a baby.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I broke down my clarinet in record time and put it in the case and was out of my seat as soon as the final bell rang, class dismissed. I met the guys outside like we'd planned. One look at the big grin on Jeremy's face and I knew he had already figured everything out. I gave him a high-five, and we fell into step with the others as we all walked to the bike rack.

Max was all together a different story. We brought him up to speed as much as we could. There were only a few minutes before we all had to head for home, but we went over everything Fireman Delaney had told us one more time. We all came to the same conclusion: the water that washed out the culvert had to have come from hydrants being cleared somewhere.

"Okay. So you're saying that's how the water got in there," Max said. "But how come we never saw any gutter outlets, or storm drains? Light from the outside would have come in, wouldn't it? We would have seen some kind of light from somewhere."

He had a point. It had been pitch black in the culvert.

"Don't you see?" James said. "We were in an area where there were no outlets that let water or light in. The water started up the line from where we were, in some neighborhood somewhere that

had gutters and outlets. When the fire department flushed out the lines, it washed the crap down to where we saw it, somehow without disturbing it a lot. Then later they flowed more hydrants, with more water this time. The force was greater and it washed everything out, including the crap."

"Yeah, I guess it could have happened that way, but we still don't know where the water started," Max stated.

Now he decided to be the voice of logic? What about the part when I nearly got washed away? Almost sunk to the bottom of the pond? What happened to all his near hysterics? I wondered. But then, that was Max—hysterical one minute, calm and logical the next.

"You're right, Max," I said. "Delaney didn't tell us if there's a schedule or not, so we probably never will know."

"But you'd think they'd have a record or something, at least so they know where they've been."

"Maybe so," James said, "but unless there's a very good reason, I don't think the fire department is going to share that information. Especially not with us, a bunch of teenage boys. We have to let it go, Max."

Max didn't look very happy about that. I couldn't blame him, neither was I. But what could we do?

"Look, Max, maybe we'll run across something someday and just like that," I said, snapping my fingers, "it'll all make sense. Some kind of explanation, just like the fire hydrants, you know?"

"I guess so," he mumbled, unhappy to settle for that. "But I still want to know how the stupid crap got in that stupid pipe."

"Me too, pal. Me too. Another time, maybe."

Of course I still wanted to know, but I wasn't going to let it suck me back in and make me nuts any more. Max seemed to have forgotten that we'd all agreed to let it go and finish the video. I looked around at the other guys. They hadn't forgotten. Besides, one mystery solved . . . at least sort of . . . was enough for me at the moment.

"Right now, it's time for me to go home," I said and climbed on my bike. "See you tomorrow."

"All right!" A grin spread across Max's face as he realized we were on for the next day. We hadn't exactly put that into a plan of action. He hopped on his bike, his feet on the pedals. "We'll be there," he said.

"What time?" Jeremy asked.

"After breakfast, Jeremy," I said, pushing off. "After breakfast."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The smell of waffles cooking woke me the next morning. Taylor and I came out of our rooms at the same time. Her room was right next to the bathroom. Grammy's was in-between mine and hers. No way was I going to get in the bathroom before my sister camped out in there.

Her reddish-blond hair was a wild tangled mess piled on top of her head. Brett's hair is the same color and sort of curly, like our dad's. Mine is straight and almost black like Mom's. The look on Taylor's face reminded me of something.

When I was little, my brother and sister teased me a lot. One of their favorite things was trying to make me believe I was adopted because I didn't look a lot like them.

Until Mom found out.

One morning before school, they had ganged up on me, laughing and poking fun at me. When I couldn't take it anymore, I went running to Mom. (After all, I was just a little kid.) She was in the kitchen packing our lunches.

"Mom-my!" I cried all the way down the hall. When I got to her, I really turned on the water-works and wailed, "Brett and Taylor said I was adopted."

Mom put the last bags of chips and cookies in one of the lunch bags, closed it, and wiped her hands on a towel. She put one hand on her hip, tilted her head to one side and looked at me. For a long time. Like she was trying to figure something out.

"Patrick," she said, studying my face. "Whose eyes do you have?"

I looked up into her eyes. The one thing Brett, Taylor and I share. Our eyes are all the same, and they are all exactly the same clear blue as Mom's.

"Yours." I snuffled and wiped my nose on my shirt sleeve.

"Uh-huh. And where did you get those freckles?" She took my arm away from my nose and wiped it with the towel.

"From you."

She dropped the towel on the floor, then rubbed her hand across my head and smiled. "And where did you get that beautiful dark wavy hair?"

I smiled back at her, just a little. "You."

She put my lunch bag in my hands and leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. She held my face in her hands and looked into my eyes. "Patrick, we know who you belong to. Right?"

I nodded.

Mom straightened and took her purse and car keys off the kitchen counter. She held my hand and we headed for the garage so she could drive me to school.

"Well, Sweetie," she said as we passed Brett and Taylor in the hallway where they'd been listening. "I don't know where those other kids came from or what they're doing here, but it's time for them to go to school."

They laid off me for a while after that.

I didn't expect a break from Taylor that morning. And I was too old to go crying to mom any longer. But my sister surprised me. She looked at me, sort of sleepy-eyed, shrugged and walked past me. I couldn't believe my luck. She had to have something up her sleeve. I was sure I'd find out when I got out of the bathroom.

I did. She smirked when I walked into the kitchen. I watched as she held the bottle of syrup over her plate and deliberately squeezed the last drop onto her perfectly buttered waffles. Evil-she-devil woman.

"Taylor," my dad said, "stop giving your brother a hard time." He opened the micro-wave and took out a bottle of warm waffle syrup and handed it to me. Way to go, Dad. Now it was my turn to smirk.

I picked up a plate of waffles, plopped a big glob of softened butter on top and took them with the warm syrup to the table. I hummed 'na-na-na-na-nah' softly.

Taylor gave me the right-handed, thumb and fore-finger signal for "loser" against her forehead when I sat down at the table across from her.

I curled my lip, sneering as I stuck out my tongue to lick syrup from my fork.

"All right, you two, cool it," my dad said. He sat at the table with a glass of orange juice. "We've got too much to do today for you to carry on like this."

What was this too-much-to-do! What did we have to do? This was the first I'd heard about it! I looked at Taylor. By the look on her face, she didn't know any more about this too-much-to-do-today stuff than I did.

"But, Dad—" we said at the same time.

"No 'but Dad,'" he said holding up one hand, cutting us off.

"Seriously, Dad, I'm supposed to go shopping with some friends today," Taylor said.

"Yeah, and the guys will be here in a little while," I put in. "We have plans."

"Then you will just have to call your friends and tell them you can't make it right now," Dad said. "Both of you." He looked over the top of his glasses at us. When my dad looks over the top of his glasses, it's best not to argue with him. He got up from the table and took his juice glass to the sink. "Now, finish your breakfast and make

your calls. Both of you get dressed and, Taylor, go see your mother when you're done. Patrick, meet me in the front." He walked out of the kitchen and toward the garage.

I looked across the table at Taylor. Amazing how things can change, I thought. Within seconds, we had gone from enemies to allies.

We finished off our breakfast, grumbling between bites, rinsed our plates and put them in the dishwasher then went to our rooms to get dressed. I heard Taylor on the phone telling her friends the news.

"It'll just have to be later, that's all," she told them. "I'll be done in no time. Give me an hour or so. See ya."

I dialed Max first. He had already left his house and was at Jeremy's.

"How long is it going to take?" he asked when I told him I had chores to do first.

"How do I know? I didn't even know I had to do anything!" I snapped. I just hoped whatever it was wouldn't take long. "I'll call you back as soon as I can."

The doorbell rang as I hit James's number and I walked to the door. When I opened it he and Brendan were standing on the porch, James with his phone to his ear.

He closed his phone and kind of waved it at me. "So, what's up?"

"There has been a change of plans," I said, canceling my call to him. Then I explained my dad's plans.

Brendan looked at James and shrugged. He asked me, "So? What have you got to do?"

"I don't know yet. He hasn't told me."

James said, "Maybe we can help."

My dad was in the garage and saw the boys when they came up. He stood in the drive way watching us talk. Looking at me over the top of his glasses.

I went to him and explained. "I tried to call them, Dad. Honest. I called Max and Jeremy, and told them not to come yet. They won't

come until I call them back—after the chores are done. But Brendan and James got here before I could get hold of them. Dad, I mean, James's phone was actually ringing when I went to open the door."

He pushed the glasses up off his nose, and said, "You still have chores, Patrick."

"Yes, Sir, I know," I said. "Is it okay if they help?" I looked over my shoulder to where they waited on the porch. I turned back to my dad and told him, "They offered, Dad. I promise. Uh . . . what do I have to do, anyway?"

My dad chuckled. He asked, "You mean those boys offered to help you and didn't even know what you had to do?"

I looked at James and Brendan again. I told my dad, "Well . . . yeah. They're my friends."

"And pretty good ones, I'd say."

"So, they can stay?"

"On one condition, Patrick. No goofing around."

"Yes, Sir." No goofing around? That might be hard to pull off, but I told him we could do it.

"And you do a thorough job. No slacking off."

"Right."

"All right, then. They can stay. You can start with the weeds in the backyard, then the front." He pointed to the flower bed in front of our porch. "Pay extra attention to that area. There's some mulch around the side of the house you can spread in there when you get done with the weeds."

I looked at the flower bed. All in all, I figured the three of us could whip everything out in no time. Our entire yard wasn't very big so it shouldn't be too bad and should go fairly quick.

"We'll get right on it," I said and waved James and Brendan over. I started to leave to get the tools we'd need before we went into the back yard.

"Oh, and there's one more thing," my dad said, stopping me.

"Some mud got tracked into the garage. You need to clean that up, and you might want to check the sports equipment while you're at it."

We made quick work of the weeds and took extra care in the garage. While I was hosing out the muddy footprints I'd tracked in from the culvert, I couldn't help but wonder why my dad hadn't said anything about it before. Did he somehow know how it got there? Did he agree to James and Brendan helping me out because he suspected they might have helped put it there? Actually not much of a stretch there. We were usually together. Whatever the reason, there wasn't a trace of mud when we finished.

"Good job, boys," my dad said later when he checked out everything we'd done. He smiled at me and gave me a sharp thumbs-up. "Thanks, Patrick. Go on. Call the other boys," he said on his way into the house. "Stay out of trouble."

I called Max's cell and we agreed to meet him and Jeremy at the elementary school across from our high school. We needed a place where we could talk without any distractions, and with no one to overhear us.

"Bring your boards," I told them.

I carried my skateboard as James, Brendan and I walked to James's house. He picked up his board, we went a few houses down to Brendan's and got his next then we all skated the rest of the way to the school. Max and Jeremy got there a few minutes after we did.

The street between the elementary school and the mid-high is a really sweet place to do some boarding. We skated for a while then took a break and sat on the curb. There wasn't enough of the day left to do any filming, so we took the rest of our time to plan our next step for the video. We only needed the ending and I already had an idea in mind for the last scenes.

I ran my idea by them and they all liked it. All I needed now was my dad's help.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Monday through Friday, classes and homework, rushed by. When the weekend came, everything had fallen into place for us to complete our video.

First, my dad agreed to let us use his camera—with the condition that he came with us. I understood. First of all, his camera is an expensive piece of equipment, and second, I have a reputation for things getting broken around me. So it would have to be okay by me because James's camera wouldn't get the distance shot we needed. It would even be nice to have my dad see what we'd been working on with the video.

I was really glad he went with me to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Vincent, the elderly couple who once owned the land our housing addition was built on. They'd stayed in their old two-story Victorian as houses grew up around their property.

They invited us in and Mrs. Vincent brought out a fancy China tea pot with cups to match. She served crunchy little wafer cookies on a plate that matched the tea pot and cups.

"So, Patrick," Mr. Vincent said, after we each had a cup of tea and a cookie. "Your dad said you have a project you're working on and you'd like to talk to Mrs. Vincent and me about it."

I was having a little trouble balancing my cup of tea and eating my cookie at the same time. I put the cookie on the saucer beside the tea cup and set it down on the small table next to me.

I looked at my dad and he gave me the nod to go ahead.

"Yes, Sir," I said to Mr. Vincent. "You see, my friends and I have been working on a video for a while now."

"You don't say," Mr. Vincent said.

"Well, do you remember when we first met, that time the guys and I were outside the fence looking at the incinerator?"

"Sure do," he said. "You remember that, Martha?"

Mrs. Vincent nodded.

"So, we're about ready to wrap up the video," I went on. "And I got this idea where we could use the incinerator as the backdrop for the final scene," I said. "That is, if it's all right with you?"

"Why, what a delightful idea," Mrs. Vincent said. Her voice had a soft, honest-to-goodness Southern drawl. "I've been after Mr. Vincent forever to have that old thing torn down, especially ever since you boys uncovered it."

"Well, now, then," Mr. Vincent said, looking at his wife with a smile. "I guess it's a good thing I didn't, now that it's going to be in a movie." He winked at me over the rim of his cup as he took a sip of tea. I saw the same twinkle I'd seen in his eyes the first time I met him.

Once, while the guys and I were out exploring, we'd gone through a vacant lot behind the big yellow house and noticed what looked like a brick chimney coming out of the ground. Of course, it just begged for us to check it out, and our curiosity got the best of us, so we stopped to give it a closer look and try to figure out what it was.

For a while we just stood and looked at it, pitching around ideas as to why there was a chimney in someone's backyard. We decided to give it a closer look and while we were poking around it, a gate in the fence swung open.

"I thought I heard voices out here," a tall, thin man with white

hair said as he stepped through the gate. He smiled at us and said, "What are you boys up to?"

"Uh . . . we were just wondering about this . . . uh, chimney," I said.

"And who is it wants to know?" the man asked.

"Oh. Umm. My name's Patrick Morrison, Sir," I said.

"Well, Patrick Morrison, I'm Henry Vincent, and that's my chimney," he said, still smiling.

"We didn't mean to bother you, sir," I said. "We . . . uh, my friends and I . . . well . . . you see, Sir . . . we explore. You know, check things out."

"And who are these other hooligans?" He was still smiling as he said it, so I figured he must not be mad or anything.

I introduced all the guys, then said, "We've gone all over most of the neighborhoods around here and we've never seen anything like this." I pointed to the brick structure. "We just wanted to see if we could figure out what it is, that's all. And why it would be here."

"Well, now, then," he said, his bright blue eyes lighting up. "Boys, that is not just a chimney. That there is an incinerator, it's how we used to get rid of our trash and stuff. Before we had garbage trucks to pick it up and haul it away, we just threw all our stuff in there and burned it up."

My jaw dropped. "Are you serious!"

I looked at the guys, their mouths were wide open too. Speechless.

"Well, yes. I am serious." Mr. Vincent chuckled. He winked at us and asked, "Want to see her?"

"Sure!" I said.

The guys were nodding and looking at each other, not believing our luck.

We followed him through the gate into the yard. There was a big tree of some kind in the middle of a lot of green grass and lots of flowers planted all over. As yards go, it looked pretty neat.

We lined up in front of the incinerator with Mr. Vincent standing

next to it. He pulled down a rusted metal door that looked like an over-sized oven.

"We'd put all the trash and stuff in here," he said. He pointed inside. "After a while, when there was a good amount in there, we'd light her up."

My mind went wild thinking about how cool it would be to have one of those things. Imagine, being able to go in your own backyard and throw your trash in there and just stand back and watch it burn. Why, if we had one of those, I thought, I'd never complain about having to take out the trash again.

"I'd show you how it works, but it's against the law now," Mr. Vincent said, shaking his head.

What a disappointment. I'd really hoped he might demonstrate how it worked for us. A great old piece of equipment like this and nobody got to appreciate it. Seemed like a big waste to me.

We stared at it, imagining what it must have been like in olden times, when you could just burn things up whenever you wanted.

"Mr. Vincent," someone called.

We turned and saw a lady with hair as white as Mr. Vincent's, standing on the back porch.

"Would you all like some lemonade?" the lady called out.

"What do you say, boys?" Mr. Vincent asked.

I looked at the others. James, Brendan and Jeremy shook their heads, shuffling their feet. Max, always ready for free food or drink, opened his mouth to accept, but I cut him off.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but we have to go home now," I said.

"The boys have to go," Mr. Vincent called to his wife. She waved and went into the house. He walked with us back through the gate.

"Thank you, Mr. Vincent," I said, as we stood outside in the field.

"Yeah, it was really cool," Brendan said. "Thanks."

"You boys come back any time," Mr. Vincent said. He turned and looked at me before he closed the gate. He winked and said, "Mrs. Vincent makes great lemonade."

We found out for ourselves a few weeks later as we sat in the backyard with Mr. Vincent, sipping lemonade and listening to more stories.

"You know," he told us, "we were real happy when they started building houses on the property around here. We'd been out here in this old house, nothing around us. Thought it'd be nice to have some neighbors."

"We live in The Meadows, up past the pond," I said. I thought our subdivision might be one of the developments built on the property he was talking about. "So do James and Brendan. Are those the houses?"

"Some of them. All that area, between there and the pond down here to the field behind our house, was supposed to be a green area, like a park. On the other side, they were supposed to build another section of houses."

I knew which area he was talking about. On the other side of his fence where we'd first seen the incinerator, not far from the pond, between Mr. Vincent's and Mr. Nelson's farm, was a more-or-less deserted housing addition. Streets and side-walks, everything needed to make a neighborhood was there, but only a few houses. The developer had run into some problems and only three houses had been built, surrounded by acres of vacant lots.

The memory of that story had given me the idea for the end of our video, and my reason for sitting with my dad in the Vincent's living room.

"So, Patrick," Mrs. Vincent said as she poured more tea, "tell us about your film."

I was so glad she didn't call it my "little" film. A lot of adults would have, like Mrs. Wilson calls us Jeremy's little friends. If Mrs. Vincent had done that, I think I'd have had to come up with another ending, one that didn't involve their incinerator. Then, I might have to do that anyway if they didn't give me permission after I told them about blood-sucking, flesh-eating, zombie alien vampires.

I crossed my fingers, took a deep breath and gave them a brief overview of the video. When I finished, Mrs. Vincent delicately cleared her throat and looked at her husband.

"Well, dear," she asked Mr. Vincent, "what do you think?"

"What do I think?" Mr. Vincent replied.

They started laughing. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. It took them a while to actually stop. They'd stop, look at me then at each other and off they'd go again.

What was it with me and this kind of effect I seemed to have on some people? I wondered. Like when the guys thought I'd meant to say insulate instead of urinate. I'd never thought of myself as such a comic. Evidently they thought differently.

I was beginning to get uncomfortable.

When they finally got control of themselves, Mrs. Vincent dabbed at her eyes with a lacy white napkin. Mr. Vincent wiped his on his shirt sleeve.

I looked at my dad, wishing I could tell what he was thinking. Up until now, he hadn't exactly known the plot of our video. He knew we'd been working on it for a while but not much else.

The only thing I'd explained was about the final scene when I'd asked to use his camera. We needed a telescopic lens, but I hadn't told him about the cast of characters—blood-sucking, flesh-eating, zombie alien vampires. At least he wasn't looking at me over the top of his glasses. In fact, he smiled.

Hoping that was a good sign, I took another deep breath and asked, "Well? What do you think, Mr. Vincent?"

"Patrick, I think it'll be a hoot!"

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Vincent added, patting her hands together. "Now, tell us, Patrick, how does that old incinerator feature in the film? Oh, but wait," she said as she stood up. "Let me get us some more cookies. I want to hear all about it."

She hurried out and came back in a little while with a fresh pot of tea and a fresh supply of cookies.

I explained the final scene: The hero—me—takes his final stand in the rubble of a building—a tight shot of the incinerator. As the last of the monsters close in on him, he shoots them with his silver-tipped arrows, killing them all. He looks out over the ruined town—the vacant lots. The sun rises to signal a new day, a day without the aliens. The End.

Of course, I filled in some details to make it sound a little more interesting. But I couldn't say a lot because we hadn't actually completed the details yet. We'd figure that out when we knew we were going to be able to use the incinerator.

When I finished, Mrs. Vincent clapped her hands and cried, "Bravo, Patrick. Bravo! I can hardly wait!"

After congratulating me on our project, they agreed that me and my dad and my friends would arrive at their place before dawn the following Saturday morning.

Mr. and Mrs. Vincent walked us to the door.

"Thank you," I told them.

"Why, thank you, Patrick," Mrs. Vincent said. "This is the most excitement we've had here in months. Maybe years."

"Look forward to seeing you and your friends bright and early Saturday morning," Mr. Vincent said.

My dad and I told them good-bye and walked to the car.

Dad didn't say much on the way home. He asked how I'd come up with the idea for the video and about some technical details. It seemed to me like he was driving extra slow. I'd had a little too much tea for comfort. As soon as we pulled into the garage, I jumped out of the car, tore open the door and ran through the house to the bathroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The next week seemed to drag. I had trouble concentrating in class. All I could think about was the weekend. The guys showed up at my house around six o'clock Friday evening. My parents ordered pizza for us and the only thing we could talk about was the next morning.

We got all the stuff together to transform the guys into blood-sucking, flesh-eating zombie alien vampires. We laid it out with my bow, quiver and arrows, alongside the clothes I would wear the next morning.

A few times something about the culvert would run through my mind. But I pushed it aside real quick. It was lots more exciting thinking about our plans for the next day.

When we were satisfied we'd done all we needed to do and had everything, we rolled out sleeping bags in the front room and settled down for the night. We didn't sleep a wink.

The weather forecast called for sunrise at five-thirty the next day with clear skies. We were in the car headed to the Vincent's long before five. This was one time I was happy my dad was a morning person.

Mr. and Mrs. Vincent were waiting on the front porch when we got there. She had a tray of Styrofoam cups filled with hot chocolate for us. Just like a real movie set, I thought. We all went to the backyard and through the gate.

We took our places a few feet from the back side of the incinerator. James called, "Action" as the sky became lighter. I ran to the "chimney" and started to climb. The aliens were almost on me.

"Cut!" James called.

"Places."

I climbed a little higher. The aliens grouped up around the bottom of the bricks.

"Action!"

Growling and snarling, they pawed at me and reached out like they were trying to grab my feet. I kicked out at them.

"Cut!"

Max, Jeremy and Brendan knew what to do for the next scene and stepped away from the bricks.

Once again James called, "Action!"

With the camera now directed at only me, I pulled my bow, cocked an arrow and shot. I repeated the action two more times. Actually, the arrows plunged into the dirt at the base of the incinerator. Easy target.

"Cut!"

James stopped the camera and the guys hurriedly pulled the arrows out of the ground. Then they lay down and arranged the arrows through their rags and bandages to make it look like I'd shot them. Max supposedly got one through the head. Jeremy looked like he had taken one through the throat. Brendan held one of the arrows close to his body with his upper arm to make it appear one had pierced his chest.

"Action!"

The three dead aliens lay still as James slowly played the camera over them. He then panned up at me as I looked triumphantly toward the sunrise. The sunrise about to happen.

"Cut!"

"Hurry, James," I called and edged around to make room for him.

He gave the camera to my dad while he climbed up the bricks. My dad handed it back to him when James stood next to me. With the sky getting lighter and lighter every second, timing was crucial now. I knew that soon the sun's first rays would come up over Mr. Nelson's barn.

I don't remember when I first put everything together for the final scene; it had just all come together in my head. Maybe it came while we were talking about our past exploring together, all the places we'd checked out around the area.

When we'd first seen Mr. Vincent's incinerator we thought it was a chimney. In my mind, I saw it as the ruins of a house for the video. The vacant lots had been there since before we moved into our house, and the guys and I had cut across them lots of times. For the video, I pictured that whole area as a neighborhood the aliens destroyed. I couldn't remember ever seeing the sun come up over Mr. Nelson's barn, but somehow, I knew it did. The sun . . . well, it's the sun and it comes up in the east, in the direction of Mr. Nelson's barn.

The sunrise would be the hero's hope for a new beginning.

"Where, Patrick?" James asked, looking at me then out over the field. We'd talked about the final scene, which shots to get, but we hadn't had the chance to actually go over it. This was live, no rehearsing. Take the shot or miss the sunrise. Who knew when we would get this chance again.

I grabbed the camera and aimed it in the direction of Mr. Nelson's barn. It came into focus perfectly. Next, I hurriedly pointed the lens out over the vacant lots. I swung it in an arc to get as many of the empty spaces as I could.

Then I froze at the scene that came into view. My hand started to shake and I had to force myself to be still. I squeezed my eyes shut, rubbed my sleeve across them, then looked back through the lens to make sure I wasn't seeing things that weren't really there. But what I

saw wasn't my imagination; it was more like a replay of the past and just as real. In that moment it felt like a giant pachinko machine where all the shiny metal balls fall into place.

"Hey, Patrick, are you okay?" James said laying his hand on my shoulder, jerking me back into the present. "Don't we need to hurry?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said, getting hold of myself and ready to go on with the video. I swept the lens across the development once more and handed the camera to James.

"There," I told him, quickly pointing to only one area of the deserted neighborhood, away from the place I'd seen before. "Then there," I added, "over the top of Mr. Nelson's barn. That's where the sun will be."

James angled the lens exactly where I'd directed, he knew we didn't have much time before the sun was over the peak of the barn. He panned across that one area of the neighborhood where I'd pointed.

I then motioned for him to aim at the barn and hold the camera there. The sun peaked over the top of the barn just like I knew it would. Bright rays lit the sky.

After a few seconds, I called, "Cut."

"That was great, Patrick!" James said, switching off the camera and slapping me on the back. The guys cheered below us, pumping their fists in the air.

Dad wore a big grin and gave me a thumbs-up. Mr. and Mrs. Vincent were smiling from ear to ear.

"Did we get it?" I asked James, my voice cracking. "Did we get it all?"

"Sure, Patrick," he said, confused why I would ask him. "I got everything you told me to film." He pushed 'Rewind' then after a few seconds pushed the 'On' button and turned the camera so I could see the last images he'd taken. "See?"

It was all there. The sunrise perfect, all the things we'd planned to record. A great ending. We just hadn't recorded everything I saw before I showed James where to start filming. There was more to the story. Another story.

I took the camera out of James's hand. My palms were sweating as I held it up and looked through the lens, using it like a telescope, moving in the opposite direction of where I'd told him to start filming. The image I was looking for came into sight. Nope, I had not been imagining anything. It was still there, just as I'd seen it. I almost dropped the camera. "Oh, crap!"

"What the . . . Patrick? What is it?" James said with a worried, confused look.

The camera was still filming when I handed it back to James. I pointed to where he should aim, and said, "Look."

He focused on the spot then gasped. He held the camera still, looking through the lens as he grinned at what he saw.

"Oh, crap is right," he said quietly, turning to look at me. He put his eye back at the lens. "But what's Emily Nelson doing out there?"

"What are you talking about?" I shouted. "What the heck are you looking at?"

"Emily Nelson. Mr. Nelson, the farmer's Emily? His granddaughter? She's running through that neighborhood straight for the—"

I grabbed the camera and checked through the lens. James was right! I flipped the camera to 'Off', hung the strap around my neck and started to climb down the bricks. "Come on, James" I yelled, "we've got to get there before she does!"

James scrambled down behind me. Mr. and Mrs. Vincent looked around, confused by our sudden excitement, trying to figure out what was going on. My dad, too. I handed the camera to him and said, "I'll explain later, Dad, but we've got to get over there."

"Where is over there? Patrick?"

I motioned to the deserted lots. "There, Dad," I shouted, moving in that direction, my feet scrambling in the dirt. "Oh, and you might want to call Mr. Nelson," I called over my shoulder. "I think Emily is on the move again."

My friends were looking at me as if I'd lost my mind. There was

no time for explanations. They could see for themselves when we got there. "Come on, guys," I yelled motioning for them to follow as James and I took off running. "You'll see!"

Without a second thought, they fell in behind us as we rushed to the deserted lots. We waded through the tall damp weeds, leaping over brush and stones, breaking out onto the cement of the first cul-de-sac. We raced toward the next one. Two more over, a large truck was parked next to the curb.

We were close enough that everyone could read the big bold print on the side of the truck.

BRUNO'S EXOTIC ANIMAL TRANSPORT, INC.

"Yeah!" Brendan bellowed.

"Holy cow!" Max shrieked.

"I told you you'd see," I said. We kept going toward the truck. "Before James took the camera to film, this is what I saw. I saw that!" I told them, pointing at the truck. "It wasn't all I saw, but I didn't say anything because I didn't want to take a chance and lose the sunrise," I told them as we moved closer to the truck. "We had to have the final shot while the sun was coming up." I took a big gulp of air. "I was pretty sure everything would still be here when we finished."

And I was right. A guy we assumed to be 'Bruno' was behind the truck with a wide utility broom, pushing a huge pile of stuff into the storm drain. Two large black plastic garbage bags were propped against the curb next to the drain. He whirled around when he heard us rushing toward him. His eyes grew round and wilder by the second as he looked from one of us to another. He dropped the broom and threw his arms across his head like a shield. And screamed like a girl.

We came to a stop within a few feet of 'Bruno.' Now it was our turn to be confused. What was up with this guy? Sure, we'd taken him by surprise, he couldn't have expected us to be there. But what was all the shaking and squealing and howling about? I started to take a step forward then felt James's hand on my arm.

"Hold on, Patrick," he said. "Look at us."

No wonder Bruno was shivering in his boots.

James was the only normal-looking one of us.

My bow hung over my shoulder along with my empty quiver. Fake blood was matted on top of my head and streaking down my cheek. Max's hair stood out in bright red spikes above bloody-looking bandages with an arrow poking out of them. Jeremy's stained bandages were still wrapped around his throat, an arrow jutting out from between the folds. Brendan held his arrow in his hand. All their faces and tattered clothes looked as if they'd been through a blood bath—or caused one.

I suppose anyone might get a bit uneasy seeing blood-sucking, flesh-eating zombie alien vampires coming at them.

Well, not everybody. At that second, Emily Nelson stepped into the empty lot. "What are you all doing here?" she demanded, clearly seeing through our weird appearance. She obviously had not expected to find us there, her eyes bored holes straight through us.

"I might ask you the same thing," I shot back at her.

At the sound of my voice, Bruno's hands came down from his head and he looked at us through his fingers, getting a really good look at us now. He cautiously looked over his shoulder and saw Emily. He spun around looking from us back to Emily. Eyeing us closely for a few seconds, he clearly saw through our disguise.

"Who are you?" he barked at Emily.

"My name is Emily Nelson."

"You know these, uh . . . uh . . . them?" Bruno asked her, pointing at us.

"Yes, I do," she said, clearing her throat. "They go to my school. But we're not together." Emily's voice cracked then and she took a step backward. "I'm not with them."

I didn't like the look on Bruno's face. He'd gone from white-as-a-sheet to beet red. His big beefy hands closed into fists. Emily was the closest of us to him, and must have seemed the least threatening. Bruno took a step toward her.

She backed up a step then stopped and stuck out her chin. "I know what's in that truck. I've been watching you from my bedroom window." She pointed to the farm house. "And I believe what you're doing is against the law."

Bruno stopped moving toward her. "Oh, yeah? So what's it to you?"

"I want to hitch a ride with you when you leave."

"Now why would I want to do that?"

"Because, if you don't, I'll report you."

Bruno glared at her then picked up his broom. "Go on, kid," he said waving the broom at her. "Get out of here."

I pulled my bow off my shoulder and grabbed the arrow out of Brendan's hand. I cocked it and pointed it at Bruno the Bully. "I wouldn't do that," I shouted in my best Rick Morrison—Hero voice. I hoped I sounded more convincing than I felt right then.

He stopped his move on Emily, but then he rounded on me.

He'd seen through my bluff and I wasn't sure what my next move was, but my friends had my back. James stepped up and stood next to me, Brendan moved up on my other side. Max and Jeremy took their places on the ends of the line. Perfect formation for tipping a cow, I thought. Maybe, if worse came to worse, we might have to try that play on Bruno. I wished it wouldn't come to that. If it did, I could only hope we'd have better luck with Bruno than we did with the cow.

Bruno the Bully hesitated, giving us a really nasty look. He held the broom over his head and waved it around, coming toward us. Then he froze.

What happened next stopped even the blood-sucking, flesh-eating zombie alien vampires. And Rick Morrison-Hero.

Car horns came blaring like crazy onto the scene. We watched with our mouths open as my dad sped into the cul-de-sac, tires squealing. He came to a screeching stop and jumped from our black SUV. Mr. Vincent was right behind him. His big tan sedan pulled to a stop. The old guy stepped gingerly out of the car and stood next to my dad.

Bonnie Lanthripe

I recognized Mr. Nelson's truck that followed tight on their bumpers and came to a quick stop. His door hung open when he leaped out and ran over to Emily.

It looked like a genuine three-ring circus! All we needed now was an elephant.

I ran over to the back of the truck and pulled on one of the heavy doors. James came to help me get it open as Brendan, Max and Jeremy took hold of the other one. We pulled them back at the same time and looked inside.

Bam! We had a circus!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Most people might not find the rear end of a grown elephant attractive, I suppose. But, the big, gray, wrinkly back side staring me in the face was the most beautiful thing I could imagine seeing at that moment.

“What did I tell you?” I looked at Max and snapped my finger. All the pieces were falling into place.

My dad had his phone out, talking as he walked over to us. “My emergency is that a man is threatening my son and his friends,” he was saying into the phone. He stepped around to the back of the truck and got his first real look at the prize inside. “What in the world!”

“It’s a long story, Dad,” I said.

“I can’t wait to hear it,” he said, stunned. “No, Ma’am, I wasn’t talking to you,” my dad told the 911 operator. “Patrick, what is this?”

“Well, Dad, you see—.”

“What?” he said into the phone. “No, I was speaking to my son How old are the boys?”

“Well, now, then.” Mr. Vincent had come over and stood behind the truck with the rest of us. He scratched his head and grinned from ear to ear. “Would you look at that.”

“They’re fifteen” Dad said. “No This very big guy, with a

very big—uh, broom,” Dad said. “Uh, well, he is a really big guy and it is a really big broom—”

He listened for a minute then said, “Yes. Yes, I do want you to send the police.”

He looked into the truck, then at me and shook his head. “One more thing,” he told her. “You also need to send someone from Animal Control, Animal Protections Services, or something.” This was going to be a tough one to explain. “You see, there is a very large elephant in the back of a truck”

He had all my sympathy. Try getting someone at the zoo to help you find out about animal poop, I thought. Everyone thinks you’re a comedian.

Of course, the people he was talking to thought he was joking. First, he tells them there’s a really big man with a really big broom threatening a bunch of teenage boys. But an elephant? At least they didn’t hang up on him. Maybe because he was an adult. I don’t know if he ever convinced them, but by the time the police had arrived, he had the word from the person on the phone that someone would be there shortly.

My dad handed one of the officers his phone to talk to the person on the other end while his partner took in the situation, then came over to us.

“Boys, I’m Officer Long,” he said. “Are you all right?”

Was he kidding? I was having the time of my life! A ring-side seat to my own personal circus. Talk about adventure!

“Yeah,” I said, looking around at the guys. “We’re fine.”

“So, you want to tell me what’s going on here?”

We gave him a run-down. By the looks of us, the policeman had no trouble believing our story about making a video. Besides, we had the footage in my dad’s camera if he needed proof.

“So, where does the elephant come in?” he asked.

“Well, a while back we were in the culvert over there by the pond,” I told him, looking around at my friends. “And I saw this huge pile of—”

"You know you were probably trespassing," he said, not letting me finish.

I looked at James and the rest of my friends. "I didn't see a sign about trespassing. Did any of you?"

No one had seen one.

"But, you know going in that culvert can be dangerous, don't you, boys?"

"Yes, Sir." Okay, time for the short version. "That's why we don't plan to go back in there." No need to tell Officer Long about the two other times we were in the culvert, I thought. Or about the water.

I went on to tell him about going to the zoo and how I thought what I'd seen in the culvert might have come from an elephant. What we didn't know was how it could have gotten there.

"So, we'd been working on this video and Mr. Vincent said we could use the incinerator in his back yard." I pointed to my elderly friend, who seemed to be having about as much fun as we were.

"While we were shooting, I saw the truck out here," I said. "It didn't take me but a few seconds to put two and two together when I saw an elephant taking a dump. When I looked again, the guy was trying to get the elephant back inside the truck, and I knew I had to hurry before he took off. So me and my friends got over here as quick as we could. I didn't want him to get away."

"But what we didn't figure on was him coming after us with that broom," James said.

"He was scared at first," I said, laughing. "I mean, he was squealing and crying like a girl or something."

Officer Long looked at me and my friends and laughed too. "I can see why that might be."

"I just wanted to see things for myself," I said looking around at the guys. "It was important to us all. To know?"

"Well, looks like we're just about to find out," the officer said.

Animal Protective Services (APS) had arrived, along with some

people from the zoo. They were working on backing the elephant out of the truck.

"That's my animal," Bruno shouted. "Gertie belongs to me!"

Another cop, Officer DePlano, put a hand on Bruno's shoulder and told him to sit back down and be quiet.

One of the guys from APS came over. "Hi," he said. "I'm Dan Randall. Are you the boys who found this elephant?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, come on over and meet Gertie," he said.

Whoa! No more invitation needed. In a flash we were up close and personal. This time we were looking at the other end. I looked from Gertie to the interior of the truck. "How did he ever get her in there?" I asked.

"He shouldn't have," said Mr. Randall. There were scratches on Gertie's side from where she'd rubbed against the inside of the truck.

Between the policeman and Mr. Randall, we learned that Bruno Korpovski did actually own Gertie.

"Why were you here? In this place?" the officer asked Bruno, and took out a pad to write down the information.

Bruno's story spilled out. "See, I been traveling all over, taking Gertie around to kiddie circuses. Sometimes private parties, if they got the money to pay. But business has been really down, you know."

Bruno was nearly whining, looking for sympathy. When he realized he wasn't going to get any from the police, or from us, he went on. "I had to try something, you know, cut out some of the overhead. So instead of the truck I usually took Gertie in," he said, "I rented this truck here from a guy I know."

"A truck entirely too small for a large animal like this elephant," Mr. Randall said through gritted teeth.

Bruno turned red and rubbed the back of his neck. He looked down at his feet.

"And how did you end up here?" Officer Long asked.

"Well, you see, with the truck and, uh . . . the circumstances and all . . . I couldn't take a chance of bein' stopped. You know? And the tolls on the toll ways around here . . . they were killin' me. So I sort of went back roads as much as I could."

Bruno looked down and rubbed his foot around in the gravel. He was really spilling his guts now. "One day, early in the morning, I came across this place. I brought the truck in here, took Gertie out so I could clean things up before I went on to my next gig. Seemed to work out fine, with no one around." His eyes darted to where Emily sat with her grandfather. "Or so I thought. So I just kept using this place every now and again."

"What do you mean by 'cleaning things up'?" I asked. I knew this was going to be another piece of the puzzle.

Officer Long quit writing and looked up at me. He hadn't expected me to interfere with his investigation, I suppose.

Bruno glared at me. I didn't care. I wanted to know once and for all.

"Good question," Officer Long said. "Want to answer that?" he asked Bruno, and started writing again.

"Well, you know, like . . . geez, elephants make a lot of—"

That was our cue. "Crap!" we shouted together. Another piece fell into place.

Bruno glared our way again before he said, "Well, yeah. But we was doing fine before you kids showed up."

"No, Mr. Korpovski, you may have been fine with the situation, but you're animal was not doing fine." Mr. Randall said. He turned to Officer Long and said, "He's broken several laws. He has a lot of explaining to do."

"Why don't you take Mr. Korpovski and get those answers?" Officer Long asked Mr. Randall.

When Bruno and Mr. Randall were gone, Officer Long turned back to us. He asked, "What about the girl?"

I looked around at my friends, and said. "We're not really sure."

"We know who she is," James said. "But we had no idea she was going to be here until we saw her coming across the field. Then she said some things to Bruno we didn't understand. It might be better to get the whole story from her."

"Sounds like a good idea" Officer Long said, looking to where Emily and Mr. Nelson were talking to the other cop.

"This ought to be good," I said to the guys.

We walked over with Officer Long just in time to hear Emily tell her grandfather how one night she had stayed out past curfew.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa," she said, crying. "I thought I could get back into the house without you knowing."

Mr. Nelson hugged her and told her, "It's all right, Em. We'll talk about that later. Go on."

Emily looked around at the deserted streets. "I had my friends drop me off here so I could cut through to the house," she said. "Then I saw that big truck. I got close enough to see the driver shoveling something down the storm drain," she said and pointed to the plastic sacks resting next to the curb. "Then he tried to stuff trash sacks like those in there."

Kerplunk! Another shiny ball fell into place. I remembered when James, Brendan and I had gone back inside the culvert and taken the pictures. I'd seen something totally out of place before we'd been scared by the water. Now it made sense. It had been black garbage sacks stuffed in the drain. Bruno's sacks of trash. They had blocked any light from coming in.

Emily looked at the policemen. "I mean, that's illegal, isn't it?"

"It is," he said.

"Since it was real late and dark and all, I figured he must be trying to hide what he was doing. I went on home, but when I got upstairs I could still see him out my bedroom window. I decided to keep an eye out to see if he came back."

"Why?" Officer Long said, as though he suspected there was more to Emily's reason for being there that morning.

"When he showed up, I was going to hide in the truck or hitch a ride. If he said no, I'd threaten to tell the police."

Aha! Emily was planning to run away, and blackmail Bruno the Bully.

"My god, Emily," Mr. Nelson said. "You could have been hurt! There is no telling what that man is capable of. You came here because you weren't happy at home. Are you really so unhappy here that you would take such a chance? Why didn't you tell us?"

Emily began to cry louder. "Oh, Grandpa, I miss my mom and dad," she wailed.

It was time for me and the guys to move along. This was a conversation Mr. Nelson and his granddaughter should be having in private, they could work it out without us hanging around.

I'm not nosey like my sister. Taylor would be having a field day if she could hear this story, though.

Officer Long nodded and smiled when we turned to go.

We wandered over to where APS was standing around Gertie. After they got Gertie out of the truck, they'd found one of those big plastic jugs of water and put it in a tub for her to drink. There was also a little hay for her to eat.

I sat on the curb with my best friends, happy to just sit and take in the big, wrinkled gray animal quietly munching hay. I sighed and said, "Isn't she a beauty?"

They all agreed that, as elephants went, Gertie wasn't bad looking.

"I'm just glad that we've actually seen her," Max said. "Now we know what was in the culvert."

Jeremy said, "Yeah, but still—"

I knew what he was going to say and cut him off before he could get it out.

"I know, I know. If the crap went in here," I said, pointing my finger at the storm drain, "how did it get there?" I nodded my head in the direction of the culvert. "Right?"

"Right."

"Look, dude," I said and swept my arms in a wide arc from one side of the neighborhood to the other. "Guys," I said looking around at my friends. "Look."

James's eyes followed the path my arm took and I could tell he made the connection immediately. James is always the first one to get things.

"Oh, my gosh!" he said. "I was so focused on the truck, and Gertie, I totally missed this."

Brendan was right behind James in putting it all together. He just smiled and nodded his head and said, "Sweet."

Jeremy looked around. After a few seconds, he nodded and quietly said, "Oh. Yeah."

Then there was Max. Max jumped up, his head swiveling around like someone possessed, and yelping, "What? What!"

"Sit down, Max," I said, patting the curb beside me.

When he settled down next to me, I said, "Remember I told you about looking through the view finder of the camera and seeing the truck?"

"Yeah."

"And then putting two and two together?"

"Right." His head bobbed up and down. "You saw Gertie taking a dump." He stopped and got this real weird look on his face. "Man, imagine seeing that happen like that—twice. What are the chances?"

I cleared my throat hoping to get him back on track.

"Anyway," Max went on, "that's when you figured out that must be where the stuff we saw came from."

"Well, I was pretty sure at that point that was where it came from. But that wasn't the only thing I saw through the lens. What I saw—all of it, I mean everything—well, it all made sense then."

Max jumped up again. "So, you solved the mystery of where the crap came from, Patrick. I get it. An elephant." He pointed at Gertie. "But, it still doesn't all make sense! Not to me, Patrick. I don't get all of it. I don't understand how it went in here and came out over there," he said, pointing in the direction of the pond and culvert.

He turned round and round, searching for a clue, trying to see what we all had come to see.

"Look, Max. Look. The fire department . . ." I said, prompting him.

"I am looking!" he yelled. For a minute I thought he might still be looking for the ghost of a huge deranged Indian. I mean, Max looked pretty wild right then.

After he looked up and down the street several times, he came to a dead stop and screamed, "The fire department flows the hydrants!"

At last, Max got the picture as I'd seen it.

Complete with streets and sidewalks and driveways and storm drains, fire hydrants dotted the landscape of the deserted housing addition. As we got ready to film the rising sun, I'd seen them silhouetted against the back-drop.

"You got it!" I shouted.

"But I thought—."

"Look, Max. The crap hadn't been washed down to where we found it like we thought at first. It was right where Bruno swept it into the drain. But we never knew how far we'd come in the pipe; we had no idea we were beneath this development. But when I saw Gertie doing her thing, and the trash sacks and Bruno and his broom, it all came together. Two and two added up to an elephant, plus the fire hydrants and water.

"Bruno swept the crap into one of the gutter drains. We thought it was eventually swept to the point where we discovered it in the culvert when the fire department flushed the lines. We didn't realize how far we'd actually gone in the drain and that we'd been standing right under a gutter drain in the deserted development.

"The trash sacks Bruno stuffed in the drain blocked the light so we couldn't see. And we had no way of knowing there were hydrants and that the fire department flushed the lines. Sometime after that, when they checked to see if everything was working okay, that was the day James and Brendan and I almost got flushed out in the process."

"Men, today was the last time Bruno will be cleaning out the truck and sweeping it into the drain," I said. "There's one more pile of crap—Gertie's crap—down there. But I won't go looking for it."

"We don't need to anymore," James said. "And someday it will be washed through the bends and turns inside the culvert and out into the pond"

"Anyway, we solved the mystery!" Max held up his hand for us to high-five.

"Actually, there were two mysteries," Jeremy reminded us. "The crap in the culvert and where the water came from."

"Hey, buddy, that's right," Brendan said, giving Jeremy a soft push on the shoulder.

"I'm just glad I won't have crap on the brain anymore," I said. "Time to use my head for other things."

"Got any ideas?" James asked.

All the guys were looking at me, waiting. I shrugged.

"Who knows? Who knows what new adventure might be just around the corner?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

My dad couldn't have been cooler when I told him the whole story. In fact, he laughed every now and then. There was only one time he gave me one quick glance over the top of his glasses; when I came to the part about me almost landing in the pond.

"It might be best if we don't tell you mother about her roasting pans," he said with a slight smile. He tilted his head to one side and grinned at me. "I'm proud of you, son. I had no idea you were making a video like that. But you did a great job. I can't wait to see it. What an adventure!"

It had been a great adventure. Maybe one like some of Uncle Clint's that I would tell when the whole family was together.

Bruno was charged with several violations. My friends and I were hoping we would be called to testify against him. We had video and we weren't afraid to use it. It wasn't needed. But being in a court room? Now that would have been a new adventure. The police and APS had seen enough to convict Bruno and, from what I understand, he sang like a canary.

He wouldn't be hauling anymore animals like Gertie around in something not much bigger than a moving van either. In fact, he wouldn't be driving anything for a while.

Gertie got to retire. Mr. Randall helped to find a home for her in an elephant sanctuary in Tennessee. The refuge has a whole herd of elephants, a small herd, but I'm sure Gertie will like that. My dad is going to take me and the guys to visit her soon.

City officials put pressure on the developer who abandoned the housing project to clean up the pond or face stiff fines and penalties. The scummy pond was drained, dredged, and cleaned out. That meant all evidence of The Culvert Crap was gone. The city placed a metal grate over the mouth of the culvert. Water can still drain out into the small lake the clean-up created, but no one will be going into the culvert from there anymore.

At least not from that entrance, anyway.

It seems that people who were looking to buy a house in the neighborhood heard rumors that a bunch of rowdy teen-age boys had been seen running around and playing leap-frog over the fire hydrants in the housing addition. Sales didn't exactly take off right away.

Emily explained to her parents it was only some friends celebrating. She called us heroes, but the part we had played in saving her from Bruno had been entirely by accident. Although we were glad things turned out the way they did.

Emily's dad got a new job outside Dallas and they were able to all be together again. Maybe she won't be running off again anytime soon since she'll be living just across the pasture from her grandfather. She talked her parents into being the first to build in the development. With more houses going up every day, it's beginning to look like a real neighborhood.

Our video previewed in the Vincent's back yard. My dad helped Mr. Vincent transform the incinerator into a barbeque pit and grill and we had a royal cook-out, followed by popcorn and gallons of Mrs. Vincent's lemonade to wash it down.

You would have thought I was a big Hollywood producer the way my mom reacted to the video. She oohed and aahed and clapped through the entire showing, dabbing away a tear at the end.

Taylor gave me a big hug and told me, "Great job, little brother. I'm proud of you."

As we sat in the dark and watched ourselves on a large screen set up in the yard, I actually felt a little shy watching my face at the end.

The expression on my face was no act. At that very moment, watching the sun come up over Mr. Nelson's barn, knowing the solution to the mystery of the Culvert Crap was within reach, I felt like I really was on top of the world.

When 'The End' rolled and the lights were turned on, James turned to me and asked, "What's next?"

"Well, we never did find out where the culvert came out. Maybe we can explore and discover where the other end is. Maybe we can start another video. Who knows? What do you think about "Alien Zombie Vampires Meet Fury, the Renegade?"

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bonnie Lanthripe, playwright, award-winning actress, novelist, has degrees in Theater and Creative Writing. She has written several one-act stage plays and “Estate Sale,” a full-length published work. An independent editor, her short stories have appeared in inspirational, historical and devotional anthologies. Originally from Arkansas, she and husband, Jim, made their home in California for several years before moving to Edmond, Oklahoma. With four children (grown) and six grandchildren, Bonnie says there is always a story just around the corner.

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