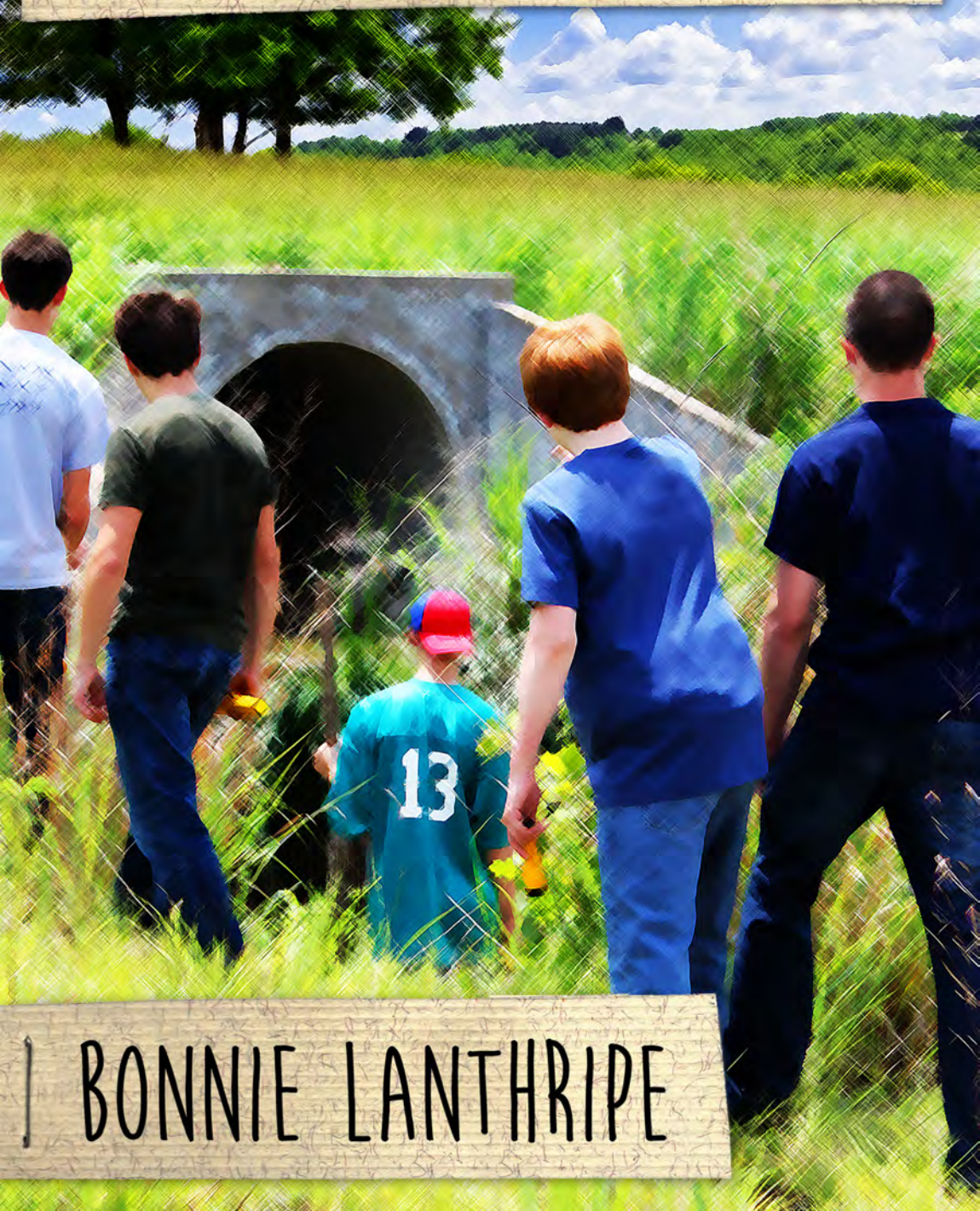


THE RINGLEADER



BONNIE LANTHRIPE

The Ringleader
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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."

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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.