

desert
shadows

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Desert Shadows

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*To my mother, who has always supported me, and my brothers,
Luke and Matt, who directly supported me through this book*

Beware, lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.

—*Aesop*

Chapter 1

JUST AFTER STOWING ROCKS in our bags, Liam and I heard the chime of a bell, followed by our mother shouting that it was dinnertime. The bell, an inheritance from our grandpa, was mounted on a piece of four-by-four about twenty feet from our front door.

“We’d better get going, Liam, before we can’t come out tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” he replied. With a grin, he added, “It’s getting dark, and we’d better beat the coyotes, monsters, and goblins home!”

Sometimes the coyotes would watch us make our way home from the desert, but my imagination is what got the best of me. Monsters and goblins were something we’d been fascinated with for as long as I could remember. We’d often joked about it, but an eerie feeling would creep upon us when the sun faded. If a coyote came after us, we’d seek out one of the occasional taller trees. We had no idea what we’d do if the predator was something other than a coyote.

Living in the desert a long way from the nearest town was different from what most people would imagine. Southeast Arizona has a different kind of desert that includes trees and shrubs since it quite often rains and even snows occasionally.

My brother and I loved living there. We spent most of our free time hiking as we explored the area, becoming familiar with all the animals, like the rattlesnakes and other venomous creatures. We were

only allowed to hike around the parts of the desert that kept us close enough to hear someone call from home, but we'd go out for hours at a time.

Every corner became a new mystery. What might be ahead, or what was down the next abandoned mine shaft? The shafts were mostly pits with large tailings of crushed rock lying outside the entrance, making them easy to spot from a distance.

We'd often rummage through the discarded rubble, looking for something the miners missed a century ago. We always thought we might find some gold or gems, but most of the time we ended up finding discolored blue-green rocks that we thought were turquoise. Mostly they were oxidized copper.

Picking through the leftover rocks was always a gamble because of creatures like scorpions and centipedes and the countless spiders that lived underneath rocks. We'd flip the rocks over with a finger or a foot, looking for possible threats before picking them up to search for our "treasure." Many kids would pay money for what we gathered!

We were supposed to stay away from the mines, sticking to the hillsides below and keeping out of trouble, but when we knew that no one was looking, we'd sometimes step as close as we dared to throw a rock down and judge the depth. Sometimes there was water in the bottom, but most of the time there was the all-too-familiar sound of rock hitting rock, followed by a high-speed rattling from rattlesnakes—an especially unwelcome surprise to anyone who accidentally fell down.

"Max!" Liam yelled out as we headed up the driveway and toward our adopted dog. "How ya doing?"

Max had been left with us by a neighbor who never came back for him. We were the ones who fed and played with him, and he couldn't have been kinder. He had jet-black fur with a little white patch on

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his chest that made him look like he was wearing a suit. He was only average size, but he seemed big and tough to us.

“Hey, Max!” I said, attempting to get him to shake.

It was a nice feeling having a pet to come home to, and he was always happy to see us. He also filled a void created by the lack of kids around our age in the area. We lived far from the regular neighborhoods, so people were scarce and kids even scarcer.

Our house was newly built and a decent size, with three bedrooms and two bathrooms—but only one bathroom and two of the bedrooms were functional. Some rushed construction procedures had been made so we could move in when we returned from our summer trip visiting relatives, but somehow things didn’t get finished.

As we neared the house, we’d pick up the aroma of my mother’s cooking, and we’d try guessing what she was cooking for dinner.

“Hey, Liam,” I said, my stomach already rumbling, “it smells like fried zucchini tonight.”

“Yeah, I love it when she makes that with the breaded Italian chicken.”

We headed inside and closed the door while our mother hollered from the kitchen for us to take off our shoes and wash our hands. These were her rules because there was so much dry dust around. Our mother liked the evenings to go smoothly, and we would usually eat early; this gave us ample time to enjoy some ice cream or occasionally some other delicious treat before bed.

“Are we eating right now?” I asked my mom.

“Yes, as soon as the zucchini cools.”

Awesome, I thought. It was freshly cut and breaded with a tempura batter that always seemed too good to spoil with the ranch dressing. We didn’t eat many fried foods, but we sure enjoyed them when we did.

We shared a room, which wasn’t bad. Liam slept on the top of our

old wooden bunk beds, and I slept on the bottom. Most nights, the shadows from the television bounced off clothes and other objects in the closet, giving them the appearance of coming to life.

Lying in bed that night, Liam said something that got my mind wandering. “Do you think when we’re out in the desert that something’s watching us?”

“What do you mean?” I thought maybe he was talking about a neighbor or our parents.

“I mean, what if an animal was just sitting there watching us? Deciding if it should eat one of us. Do you think we could fight it off or get home before it could reach us?”

Now my mind was racing, and my rising adrenaline would most likely prevent me from sleeping that night. If I did sleep, it wouldn’t be very well.

“Why do you have to talk about stuff like that before bed?” I complained.

“Just thinking. I mean, what would you do? Would you try to fight back or run?”

“I guess it depends on what kind of animal it was. I mean, if it was hurting you, I’d try to kill it instead of running away. If it was something big or there was more than one, I’d try to run. Get to a tree, maybe.”

“What if there wasn’t a tree and you had to fight? What would you use as a weapon?”

Now I was thinking about weapons instead of what Liam originally asked me. Perhaps a rock or a large stick. This was a good question. It would be smart to carry something to defend ourselves against an animal. What if it wasn’t just an animal, but a deranged person, like the ones who lived by our old house? They lived out in the desert and would come through the neighborhood, stealing stuff at the local truck stop. They even kidnapped kids.

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As if Liam could read my mind, he asked, “What if a human came after us out there?”

A human could throw rocks or climb trees or even have a weapon, like a knife or gun. How could we defend ourselves so we weren't easy targets? I slowly began drifting to sleep as I pondered this and what we would explore tomorrow after school.

Chapter 2

I DIDN'T LIKE SCHOOL. I saw no need for it, and all the work seemed like something I could do on my own because it came easy to me. Recess was just time I spent in the corner trying to stay away from others who would find some way to point out my differences. I had a few friends, more like acquaintances, but no companions like my brother and I were to one another. The ones I hung around with would walk around with me as they waited for the recess monitors to blow the whistle and call everyone back in. I often waited for the crowd to disperse before walking in, to avoid others that much longer.

During class, I waited for the time to go by, sometimes watching the clock so much that I would lose track of what the teacher was saying. My teacher was a kind, older woman who had been teaching at the school for some time. I always wanted to ask about her hair because it reminded me of a golden beehive. She taught many of the kids at the school because the school was so small; there were only several hundred kids from kindergarten through high school.

“Read from Jason’s point now, Caleb,” I heard the teacher say.

I was so caught up in watching the clock and thinking about what type of weapon to make that I had no idea where to start reading. I wasn’t a strong reader when it came to reading aloud, so this gave

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everyone a reason to laugh and stare as if I did something horribly wrong.

Later, on our way to the cafeteria, the teacher asked me to walk with her. She often seemed to take a particular interest in me, and sometimes I wondered if she could tell I was holding back and she wanted to help me break free.

“Caleb, are you okay today? Did something happen at morning recess?”

The other students were glancing back, trying to figure out what was going on.

“No.”

“You keep losing your place in the group readings.”

“I just get a little sleepy sometimes after being outside and then coming in and sitting right down.”

“Well, if you get tired like that, maybe you need to take some vitamins or medicine or find something to keep you awake during class.”

“No, it’s no big deal. I’ll work on paying more attention from now on,” I said. She simply nodded before she left me to get in line for my food.

Out in the field, after lunch, I often liked to stay by a tree. For some reason, there was comfort in it. A few of us would gather there, never saying much, but we all knew why we were there. The kids would come and go. They would be friendly when they were part of the tree crowd, but once the normal or popular kids accepted them, they would turn their backs on us. Sometimes they would come back after a few weeks because something made them a tree kid again.

This recess always marked a milestone for me because I knew that the day was almost over, and I was counting down to the time to go home. That day the sky grew cloudy, but the rain never fell, so I was glad that I could go out in the desert with Liam.

We usually got rides home with a neighbor lady named Betty. She would take several kids in our neighborhood. We would sit in the far back of Betty's van, where there were no seatbelts, and the front seats were full of older kids. It didn't really occur to us that anything might happen to us in the far back without seatbelts. We arrived home to Max barking uncontrollably at the van, as he usually did, until it was too out of sight for him to be interested anymore.

In the valley area where we lived, the sun set much faster, the large mountains nearby took away thirty minutes or so of daylight, depending on what time of year it was. In the winter the sun set further south, and the mountains blocked it out sooner than in the summer. One of these mountains was scary to us, so we named it Spirit Mountain, like the one in an old Disney cartoon from *Disney's Halloween Treats*. We eventually found out it was actually considered a hill and was named something else, but we still called it Spirit Mountain.

We headed out into the desert after telling our mother about where we were going; this made her worry less. Up or down the desert wash, Black Rocks or Red Rocks—even a more vague direction, like toward one of the neighbors' houses, would work. Up the wash—the narrow, dry bed of an intermittent stream that usually only had water after a flash flood—was our favorite way to go on an afternoon's exploration, so we took that route. We could always find something interesting, and all the old mines were up that way.

“Hey, Caleb, did you think of a weapon to make today?” he whispered, in case we were still close enough for our mother to overhear. She seemed to grow exceptionally great hearing when we ventured out and was probably listening in case something went wrong or one of us screamed.

“Kind of. I've been thinking all day about what to use and how to make something.”

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“I got a couple good ideas, but until we can make something real good, I think we should just gather rocks and find some good sticks for now.” I agreed that storing rocks at certain points between our fort and home and maybe in some of the trees would be helpful. “I want to make a stick into a spear on one end and a mace on the other.” I could see that Liam was already keeping a watchful eye out for that perfect stick.

“Maybe we could use a big flat rock to sharpen them.”

“I got a better idea. I’ll show you when we get a little further down the wash.”

We chose a quicker route into the wash and headed to an area by a small rocky cliff, which was far enough away that no one could see or hear us.

“Look what I got out of the cedar chest when Mom was down by the well.” I brandished an engraved pocketknife with a metal Statue of Liberty medallion in the wood handle. It was small, but it was still a knife.

Liam looked a bit shaky but also excited.

“I’ll put it back after we make our weapons. Just a few spears and some carved handles for future weapons.”

“Okay. We can’t let Mom see our spears because she’ll be able to tell we used something to whittle them.”

“I didn’t think of that,” I admitted, thankful for my brother’s quick thinking.

An hour later, we had both found some good sticks for spears, spike traps, and our main weapons. We choose a spot near three large trees, old mesquite ones that appeared dead from the aged bark that covered their bases. One was easy enough to climb and stow some rocks for defense.

“We got a lot done today,” Liam said as he climbed down. “We should call this place Three Trees. We should probably be heading

back. It's getting dark, and we can't do any more today anyways. Besides, you need to feed and water Max and take care of the you-know-what without anyone seeing."

I gave him a look. "Don't worry, and we're certainly far enough away that you can call it a knife!"

"So this is your new hangout?"

I spun around to face our mother, petrified, thinking she had overheard.

"How'd you find us?" Liam looked at her and then back at me, trying to hide a fearful face.

"You told me which way you were heading, and I was done with my jobs, so I thought I'd come visit. I heard you talking from the wash, so I followed your voices. Cool tree."

"So you were spying on us," I joked, feeling annoyed.

"Yeah, it's cool isn't it? Come look. We got some really great ideas for what we're going to do. What do you think?" Liam already seemed to have forgotten about the knife.

The only thing she recommended was moving some larger rocks away from underneath the tree. When she was growing up, she knew someone who fell out of a tree onto some rocks and died. We had no problem doing this since it would keep her from asking too many questions about the area. I wondered if she'd noticed the sharp sticks or heard me talking about the knife. It seemed she hadn't.

Over the next few weeks, we built quite the defensive position and attached old planks on branches for us to sit on. We also built platforms on the other two trees nearby, hoping that we could build some type of bridge between them, or maybe just a rope swing.

We were working on the main platform one afternoon when we heard older people's voices coming up the wash—older people we didn't recognize.

"Do you think we should try to get home without them seeing?"

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I asked Liam. My curiosity was turning into suspicion as we waited quietly. I was creating different scenarios in my mind for if the owners of the voices spotted us. “We could stay low in the wash, where they can’t see us or mistake us for game.”

We’d been told stories about hunters confusing people for game and accidentally shooting them, but we also wondered if making ourselves known would be wise in case they were up to something else. “Coyotes,” as some called them, used these back roads to do their business away from the eye of the law.

“It’s just up ahead,” I heard one of the voices shout, like he’d outpaced the people he was with.

I could see the brim of a hat rising above the desert broom in the wash. It was a raggedy straw cowboy-style hat, and as he moved, I saw a faded dark-gray shirt with a strange logo on it. I could also see his face and knew I didn’t know him. Then we heard another voice.

“Gene, slow down, Dale had to piss one good,” said a more heavysset man making his way around the bend.

“Well, Robert, if we slow down any more, we might as well head back, unless you want to be scurrying through the camps after dark. I’m not going to hang around to get bit up by rattlers and scorpions, so you two better hurry up.”

A third person appeared, scruffily dressed like Robert. “Why can’t we just drive? Why do we always have to walk?”

“You know that guy up the hill will chase us out again. Last time I was here by myself, I got back to the main road, and the sheriffs were waiting by my car. I guess this guy is just trying to hog it all for himself.”

Just as Gene said that, the other two came to a stop and stared ahead. Liam and I exchanged uncomfortable glances as the hair on the back of my neck began rising. We knew we’d been spotted and both began looking around for Gene, who had disappeared.

“Hello, boys,” drawled Gene from underneath the platform we were lying on. We were only about eight feet up in the tree and within easy reach. “What you doing up there? Just hanging out, spying on people, or have you got other intentions, like an ambush?”

“Nothing. Just playing. We live close by, and our parents are coming to see our fort in a little while. Do you want to meet them?” Liam said, quickly improvising.

Gene’s smirk changed to a slightly nervous frown, and Liam seemed to have caught him off guard.

“I’m just teasing you boys. You have fun now, but don’t be sneaking up on us. We might think you’re after our buried treasure!” He’d tried to sound like a pirate with the last sentence. “Seriously though, don’t come sneaking up on us. We carry guns. Make yourself noticeable so we don’t confuse you for something or *someone* else.”

“Got it!” I said loudly. I was glad they moved away, up the wash, disappearing under the growth of the desert broom. Once they were out of sight, we grabbed our spears and headed straight home.

We decided not to tell anyone about our encounter or to talk about it at home, but as night fell, we couldn’t resist. “What camps were they talking about?”

“Maybe it’s just an old campsite that they use to hunt from or hang out,” replied Liam from the bunk above. “I heard that Scout troops used to come up here to camp and get badges. I even heard the area where we built the fort used to be an area they camped, and they had a big fire pit there.”

“That would explain the pile of rocks by the wash. Maybe we should rebuild it. Who knows? Maybe they left something in there, like a time capsule.”

“Yeah, that would be cool, but I’m still wondering about the camps. Maybe we should check it out or ask the neighbors what they meant.”

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“I don’t think we should say anything to anyone. They’ll ask us where we heard about them and maybe not let us go there.”

It’s strange how the forbidden could become an obsession—like the camps—and our conversation led into an argument about how to find the camps the next day. Eventually, we compromised on one of us heading up the wash a little while the other waited and listened in case our mother called for us.

“You know something, Caleb?”

“I know a lot of things,” I said sarcastically.

“Even before those guys showed up, something was weird. I felt like we were already being watched. It felt close, like something was right there in the tree with us.”

I thought about what he’d said and immediately agreed, remembering a weird sensation just before we had heard the voices. “Yeah, I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, we’ll figure it out tomorrow. I’m going to try to sleep now.”

Every time we had a conversation before bedtime that really made me think, it was more difficult for me to fall asleep. Thoughts raced through my mind, keeping me awake, and I knew tonight would be harder to sleep. I was wondering about the camps and how we were going to sneak up the wash tomorrow. The only thought that kept popping into my mind was that Gene and the other two guys were trying to get to Liam and me to make sure their little secret didn’t get out.

Every creaking noise from the house was them pushing sharp sticks toward my sleeping head. Every pop from the water pipes in the ceiling was one of them walking on the roof, trying to find a way in. I should have told my mom about Gene. At least she would know what happened to her precious children, when they were horribly speared to death and smashed by rocks dropped through the roof at night.

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Pop! Creak! Snap! Pop!

My eyes remained closed, although I knew they were slowly sneaking up on me in the darkness. When I opened my eyes, Gene would be sitting on the edge of my bed. Somehow, what you don't see can't hurt you. Right?

Chapter 3

MY MOTHER CAME IN early to wake us. Well, at least to wake me. Liam was an early riser; I was the night owl. I looked out the window to see that the day was clear. No clouds. This meant the possibility of rain later.

I heard my mother holler, “Caleb, you need to get moving so we’re not late again!”

“I know. Just looking outside.”

“Well, you can look outside when we go to the car. You’re going to make Liam mad if you make him late again. He doesn’t want the teachers to be inside when we arrive.”

Liam sometimes had the same problem with bullies, so being around an authority figure was always a good place to be.

“I know. I’ll get going.”

I grabbed my backpack and realized my papers were out of place, not stacked how I had left them. I liked to organize my books and homework for each period of the day.

“I thought you said you had everything ready,” my mother said from outside the doorway.

“They’re just stacked different than I remember. No big deal.”

“Liam, did you do something to Caleb’s homework?”

“No. Why?” He sounded believable.

“Never mind. You two just get in the car,” my mom said, searching through her purse. “Have either one of you seen my keys?”

“I think I just saw them in the bathroom when I was brushing my teeth,” I told her as she went to look in frustration.

“Hey, Liam, did you do something with my homework to mess with me?” I said when I saw him, knowing our mother had already posed the question.

“No. I was in bed before you. You probably got sidetracked doing something else and forgot to organize it.”

“I don’t think so. They were stacked really weird. Are you sure you’re not just messing around?”

“I told you. Maybe you did it in your sleep again.” It wasn’t uncommon for me to sleepwalk or do other things in my sleep.

My mom came walking down the hallway with her keys. “Found them. They were on the kitchen counter.”

I could have sworn I saw them in the bathroom.

I usually rode in the front seat on our way to school because sometimes a school bus would get in front of us, allowing the school kids to look at us. It bothered me some, but it really bothered Liam.

“I’ll see you guys this afternoon. Have a good day, and Jesus bless you.” This was my mom’s normal good-bye for the day.

We walked in the school courtyard and parted ways early enough to slip into class before the other kids. I said hello to a couple of the tree kids and my teacher before sitting down at my desk.

“You still have ten minutes before class starts if you want to play outside,” my teacher said, looking up from her desk.

“I know. Just making sure I got my homework done before class begins.”

“What did you do after school yesterday?”

“Not much. Just played around at home and did some chores.” I wouldn’t dare tell her what I was really up to.

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The bell rang, and the other students began coming in, replacing the smells of last night's cleaning products with those of cheap perfume and body odors. After everyone took their seats, the school day started and went by normally, but no matter what we did, I couldn't get my mind off the camps.

When we got home, the sky looked a little cloudy but not stormy, which meant we could still go out into the desert. We did our basic chores and said good-bye to our mother before heading out the door. We told her to ring the dinner bell in case we were hammering nails at the fort and couldn't hear her calling when really we would be somewhere we weren't supposed to be. Just as we were leaving, she stopped us to speak with us. It was like she was reading our minds.

Chapter 4

“HAVE YOU GUYS SEEN anyone out in the desert lately? The neighbor thought he saw a few people wandering by his property, and I wanted to check and make sure it wasn't you. You know he drinks and carries his gun around. I would hate for anything to happen, and I wouldn't know what I would do if he accidentally shot one of you.”

“No,” Liam said quickly—almost too quickly. “We haven't been wandering around the neighbor's land.” This was true, although we did see Gene and his friends going that way.

“Okay, but if anyone comes up to you out there, you head straight home or to the neighbor's house. There are a lot of crazies out there.” She looked relieved yet still troubled. “Go have fun, and I'll ring the bell before dinner is ready.”

“Alright, Mom. Love you,” we both said as we began walking back down the driveway.

“What do you think Mom was getting at back there?” I asked Liam.

“Maybe there's more to Gene and his friends than we think.”

“That'd make sense.”

“Maybe we should try asking some of the neighbor kids about Gene to see what they know.”

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“Yeah, if we can without Betty hearing. Maybe we could write a note.” I thought this was a really good idea, because it was mine.

We both agreed to write a note the next day and pass it around on the ride home. We also reconsidered heading further up the wash. We didn’t want to take any chances, especially today when our mom might come around again, so we stayed around the fort.

We worked hard into the evening before hearing the bell. We managed to set up some good trip wires around the area but were careful to place them out of our usual path.

The next morning was a repeat, with my mother misplacing her car keys and frantically looking for them before shooting us a suspicious look and finding them on top of the microwave. Maybe she was multitasking too much and blindly put them there, not even thinking about it? Weird.

“Got them; let’s go!” she told us, and we headed out to the car.

Just before we got to school, Liam said he was feeling sick—right before he puked all over the back seat.

“Caleb, go ahead to class. I’m taking him to your aunt’s for the day.” My mom looked pretty upset.

Walking toward the schoolyard, I had a strange feeling that someone was watching me. Once again, it felt like someone was right next to me, yet there was no one there. When I got closer to the schoolyard, I noticed that one of the older bullies who often messed with Liam was standing by the entry to the courtyard. Instead of chancing a confrontation, I decided to wait for the bell to ring before heading in, but at least I knew what was watching me. At least, I thought I did.

Around lunchtime, I was called into the office for a phone call from my mother. She was going to pick up Liam after work, and I would have to ask to stay with Betty until she got home. When the last bell rang, I headed toward Betty’s van and explained the situation.

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She was fine. Once we got going, I slipped the piece of paper out of my pocket.

Who is Gene? I heard about him the other day.

It was passed around and received slight shakes of heads before it reached an older teenager named Susan. She was nice to Liam and me. She read it and then looked around for the source of the note. I nodded to let her know it was from me. She turned around and began writing on the note before handing it back.

Bad guy! Tell u tomorrow.

I felt a shiver run down my spine as I shoved the paper back into my pocket. I would show Liam later.

Chapter 5

THE NEXT MORNING, I was anxious to see what Susan might reveal, but I didn't see her on my way to class. I hoped to see her during the day somehow, but if not I would see her on the ride home.

As I headed into the classroom, the teacher was writing sentences with errors on the board that we would write in the correct format. This was one of her "brain jump starts" to the day. The bell finally rang, and the students began finding their desks. Then a girl named Krystal slipped something onto my desk and signaled for me not to tell before sitting down herself. I felt awkward because it was the most interaction I'd ever had with her.

It was a note, and the whole first period I sat wondering what it said. Did she like me? Was she trying to let me know in secret because I was a tree kid? Too many questions were racing through my mind while I tried paying more attention in class. The bell finally rang for recess, and the anticipation to see what the note said was killing me. The note was written in cursive with the fine penmanship that I recognized as Susan's from the night before.

Hey, little bud. Sorry. I didn't want anyone hearing me talk about him. He used to teach my older half

sister at the university. He still lives around here somewhere and got into some bad stuff. Ever since he got out of jail for breaking into a house a while back, he's been bouncing around. He's always looking to make a buck and has been known to beat up kids even your age. So I hear. My mom doesn't let me talk about him, so that's why I didn't say anything. She's just happy my sister isn't around him. If you see him, stay away and don't let him know about you. My dad gets really mad if I bring him up and gets really crazy sometimes.

He grows attached to people and doesn't leave them alone. He might try to figure out information about your house so he can break in or do something like that. If you see him, tell your mom. His friends are okay, I think. He's like their leader, but he's scary to me.

The information didn't bother me that much, since in my old neighborhood, this described most people who lived in the desert. The part that bothered me was her question.

P.S. Why do you want to know? Have you seen him or something?

I would have to answer her but wondered how well she could keep a secret. If I lied, she might get angry and tell. I wished I knew her better. I grew more anxious to leave until the final bell, and as I was packing my stuff in my bag, I found myself imagining an encounter with someone robbing a house. I wondered what people felt and what my reaction would be.

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“Can I have a minute, Caleb?” said a voice from behind me.

I snapped out of my daydreaming to notice my teacher, who had a concerned look on her face, gesturing for me to come talk to her. I walked past the last few students heading out the door and toward my teacher.

“You seem to be staying on track more, Caleb, and I wanted to tell you I’ve noticed. However, I noticed I lost you during the last period. What keeps grabbing your attention away? Is something at home bothering you?”

She asked this in a persuasive voice, like I was hiding something, so I told my first lie that also had some truth in it.

“No, just a little bored. It’s just too easy for me sometimes.” Did I just ask for harder schoolwork?

“I had a feeling that’s what it might be. I’ve noticed your answers are usually correct, and you’re outpacing the class. I’ll get some approvals to increase your level of difficulty in the class. If it’s still not enough, they may want to evaluate you for accelerating to the next grade.”

I didn’t want this right now. Where did my lie (which was really the truth) get me? I asked if we could talk more tomorrow because of my ride situation and left.

Liam was better from the day before, and we found our usual seats at the back of the van.

“Liam, I found out some stuff about that guy,” I whispered. He looked confused for a second before realizing what I was talking about and read the note.

“We’ll talk about it later,” was all he said.

We got close to Susan’s, and she gathered her stuff and leaned toward me.

“Promise you’ll tell someone if...” she whispered and left it at that.

A short while later, we were on our way to the tree fort. Liam had a small lighter in his pocket to burn the note. I thought it was a little overdramatic.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I believe her. I’m pretty sure I’ve heard people speaking about him before. I also think he used to live in that old house on the hill.”

The house he was talking about sat alone on the face of a hill and had been ripped apart by the weather and years of neglect. It seemed that the owners only made repairs that were absolutely necessary. Fragments lay scattered down the hillside where the wind had carried them over the last several years. Bad things happened to everyone who lived there.

“I don’t think we should tell anyone,” I said to Liam once we’d climbed into the tree fort.

He went up into his crow’s nest perch before answering. “So what . . . we saw him one time. If he bothers us again, then maybe we should say something, but otherwise I think we should just leave it alone.”

“Yeah, I think so too. You know, he might not be that bad a guy. People just mistake him somehow, and he uses it to keep going through life. You know what? We should ask him about the camps or maybe one of those other two guys if we see them again.”

“I don’t think so, Caleb. They seemed protective over it when they first saw us. What if they’re really mean and think we heard too much? Maybe we should just keep our distance. You know, not dig too deep.”

“So . . . you want to forget about the camps? I’m still curious. What if we tried to go up there tomorrow like we first planned? It’s Saturday, so we’ve got all day.”

“Sounds good to me. I was kind of thinking the same thing earlier. We should just forget Gene and his friends and focus on seeing what

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the camps are. I never saw them come back down yesterday so we should be on the lookout. I guess it would be hard to see them from our house. We were probably inside.”

“Probably. They’re grownups and don’t have to check in. Heck, they probably stayed the night out here.”

The walk home that night seemed lonely, even though I was with Liam. That eerie feeling of being watched came over me, and a chill went down my spine. I looked around, checking behind us, because I was bringing up the rear. Nothing was there. Just the desert plants swaying from the breeze in the diminishing light.

That night, we quietly discussed how we were going to go out the next day and explore the area we thought the camps might be. What if there were all kinds of cool stuff or actual hidden treasures?

Chapter 6

AFTER BREAKFAST, WE HEADED out to the Three Trees, with plans to venture further up the wash. Once there, we grabbed our weapons and a few other sharpened sticks for a long-range standoff before using our primary weapons. It sounded like a good plan at the time.

Liam's primary stick could be thrown because it was straight, with both ends sharpened to a point. He added notches and painted symbols that resembled tribal patterns. My stick couldn't be thrown with any great effect because one end was large and knobby. I found my stick on one of the trees that we thought looked evil because of its dark, dead-looking features and strange twists and lumps. Only one end of my stick was sharpened, but I pounded a couple of nails into the knobby end, making it like a medieval mace.

We began walking up the wash to the border of our safe zone, the area we were allowed to roam. When we reached the last bend, and probably our limit of hearing distance to and from the house, we set down our gear and went over the plan.

“Okay. I'll walk up slowly until I can see the crazy neighbor's house. When I get to where I think he can see us, I'll put a few rocks in the middle of the wash. Then we'll know how far we can walk to before we have to be careful.”

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“Sounds good,” I replied. “Isn’t he usually gone in the mornings? I think I heard his truck go by earlier this morning.”

The wash provided good cover because we were about two feet below the regular desert terrain, but unfortunately, the gun-wielding neighbor lived up on a hill and would still be able to see us. We really didn’t think he was crazy since we’d barely met him. He never had a problem with the neighbors or us, but he kept to himself, and I think that’s where the rumors began.

“Once I get to that point, I’ll come back and see how everything’s going before you take a look. We’ll keep working it like that.” I seldom minded his authoritative tone because he was my older brother, but sometimes it irked me.

“When it’s my turn, I’ll venture a little further and make a rock pile and take turns moving forward like that.”

“I thought we already agreed on this, Caleb. Why are you changing things?”

“Because I want to be able to see something first too. This is new to both of us, so why do you get to go everywhere first?”

“Because that’s what we agreed on. Just stick to the plan. I’m not trying to cheat you, and your hearing’s better if Mom starts calling.”

“Alright, go then,” I said begrudgingly.

He began walking up the wash with caution. We were under the impression that if we couldn’t see the neighbor’s house, he couldn’t see us, but we couldn’t be sure.

Liam turned around about twenty paces from me and spoke almost in a whisper. “Make sure you run and get me if Mom calls.”

I nodded and watched him disappear around the forbidden bend.

I began focusing on whatever might be worth hearing. The sound of the breeze was disappearing as the day warmed up, but it would probably return later. This was good, but the buzzing of millions of insects was still intense this time of year. The usual neighborhood

noises also filled the valley and included radios playing, hammers banging, and motors revving. After absorbing this for a moment, I tuned them out to listen for my mom or Liam.

The next few moments dragged on, and I began drifting away, imagining what was going on at the neighbors' houses, at my house, with Liam, and with Gene. There was something I couldn't figure out about him, as if something was missing in him when he looked at me. This could be why people like Susan's parents didn't like him. He had a lost look in his eyes. While I stood there thinking, I stared toward my house and could hear the clothes dryer going in our metal shed; it was always loud. I was trying to keep Gene out of my mind by tuning into the other noises, but I couldn't. His lost eyes filled my thoughts.

Suddenly a sharp point swiped across my back, just grazing me. It was followed by a slight giggle that sounded like a little girl.

"Got you!"

I let out my breath when I realized it was just Liam seizing an opportunity to sneak up on me. I was usually the one doing the sneaking.

"You jerk!" I smacked his stick away. He just smiled, and we sat down in the sand. Although I was angry, I was excited to hear his news. Apparently, a smaller, hidden wash joined the main one a little further back. We could use that to sneak past the neighbor's house.

"Do you think anyone else knows about it?"

"Probably not. If I was taller, I probably wouldn't have seen it. There's a tree that spreads out real wide and low to the ground, covering the narrow wash."

This time, being short was an advantage.

We walked back to where the washes joined, and Liam drew a pattern in the sand explaining how he thought the washes flowed together. The shape resembled a peapod joining at both ends but flowing apart in the middle.

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“You know, Caleb, I bet Gene doesn’t know about this because it gets us clear of the neighbors’ view. It runs deeper, with steeper sides, and has more overhanging trees too.”

We spent the remaining morning covering the entrance to the small wash with more branches and brush before heading home, happy with what we accomplished. When we were ready to cross the road to our driveway, we had to wait for a truck flying down the road. The man waved out the window at us. It was the “crazy” neighbor.

“I thought you said he was out,” Liam said with an irritable tone as we crossed the road.

“I said I thought I heard his truck go by. I didn’t say I saw him leave for sure,” I snapped back in frustration. As usual, our spats were short-lived.

“So, what do you wanna do after lunch?”

“Maybe we can do more at the Three Trees or something. I don’t know, maybe hike down the wash a little further and see if anything’s new down there.”

“Yeah, maybe go to the cow-pond. We can see if there’s any water in the back pond.”

The cow-pond was usually empty except when the washes flowed and filled it up long enough to replenish some of the wildlife. It would be a good destination for the rest of the day now that the “crazy” neighbor saw us, but it would give us a chance to reach one of our other goals.

Chapter 7

AFTER WE ATE, WE headed back out and decided to stick to the outer wash to avoid any houses on our way toward the cow-pond, but we now had a different destination in mind. Once we saw the abandoned house on the hill, I felt exposed. The house overlooked the whole valley, providing a clear view of us if anyone happened to be looking. Our plan was to get to the cow-pond and wait for it to be clear before making our way up the north side of the hill toward the house.

When we reached the cow-pond, Betty passed by, honking her horn, and after her van was out of view, we began our ascent up the hill. It wasn't a steep climb. It was a little tough at the beginning and the terrain was almost barren of trees or bushes, so we took our time moving among the shadows.

The coast seemed clear as we made our way past a broken water tank and a demolished shed near the house. We still weren't sure if anyone was living there, but knowing how Gene and the others looked, it wouldn't have surprised us. As we came up on one side of the house, I started thinking about the guy who lived here before. Apparently, that thought crossed Liam's mind too.

"Hey, Caleb, remember that guy who lived up here before?"

"Yeah, barely. I think I only saw him once."

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The guy he was talking about was once a keen hiker and outdoorsman. People said he was nice, and they had no idea what set him off. Some said booze and drugs, but there wasn't anything that anybody thought would be enough to push him over the edge like it did that one day a long time ago. He was never seen again.

I peered through the window and didn't see anything. I was aware that the loose skirting around the house was a good hiding spot for rattlesnakes; as I walked around, I was anxious to get inside.

I reached the back side of the house and looked in another open window. I listened one last time before pulling myself inside; Liam stayed outside to keep watch. A slight breeze blew through the house, delivering a foul, putrid odor that reminded me of vomit or a dead animal rotting for days in the desert sun. The wood floor supported me, but bent, rusty nails stuck out everywhere. The inside of the house was in a far worse state of repair than we'd imagined.

"No one seems to be living here," I said to Liam, and he climbed in.

"Can you smell that?" The scent grew more powerful.

"Yeah, what is that? Maybe the plumbing's messed up?"

"I don't know. Seems weird that there's any smell in here at all with the windows open."

There were holes in the floor, though, and the smell seemed to be coming from underneath. Every time the wind blew, it got nastier.

The wall farthest from the window had most of the paneling intact with some furniture and boxes next to it. A thin layer of undisturbed dust on the floor reassured me that no one had been inside recently except us. Before searching through anything, I wanted to make sure that we were alone. I could deal with a rat or a bird or the thousands of insects that called this home, but I wasn't ready to deal with a skunk or snake.

The door to the room was half attached and leaning into the

hallway. The rest of the walls seemed tattered, full of holes with shredded insulation falling out. When I left the room, the next door in the hallway was a bathroom. A torn shower curtain covered the tub's remaining filth and some broken wood lying in the bottom. The toilet was missing, but the lid remained over the hole in the floor where the toilet had drained. There were a few shelves with some used disposable razors, a rusty can of shaving cream, and a smashed pack of cigarettes. The next room was small with some old trundle beds pulled open, as if ready to use. They reminded me of the beds Liam and I used to sleep on.

The smell was growing stronger as the hallway opened up into a living room. Cobwebs decorated with dead insects filled each corner. Three chairs sat in the center of the room, spaced apart so that two together faced a third. I assumed the door on the far wall led to another bedroom. The door was not completely closed; the doorknob was broken off, so someone had used a piece of wire wrapped around some screws to hold it shut.

The door had a crack of open space around it, and a slight movement caught my attention. I squatted down to get a better look and began thinking that this was the moment something would break the door down and grab me. I still couldn't see what caught my attention, so I untwisted the wire, allowing the door to open.

Just like a typical door in an old house, it creaked but didn't whine. As the dim light fell into the room, things began moving to evade the light. A mattress was lying on the floor with guacamole-green bedding. When I opened the door more, I saw more movement and two other mattresses with sleeping bags on top.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something on the doorjamb crawling down toward me. I quickly smacked it without hesitation, already knowing it was a kissing bug. Some people called them conenose bugs or used their scientific name, *Triataminae*, but

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where we lived, they were known as kissing bugs. I hated them since they always seemed to attack me and leave Liam alone. They stalk and hunt their victims before sucking their blood. Usually you find them after you start itching and get a welt with a slight burning sensation.

I found it strange that blood came out of the bug I smashed, but who knows what it had just fed on. The light from the house revealed more kissing bugs all over the floor, and I quickly closed the door with a thud that startled Liam.

“What the heck are you doing? You scared the crap out of me,” Liam said, looking at me with an angry but startled expression.

“Kissing bugs,” I said as I tied the door back in place. “There’s nothing but some mattresses on the floor and a bunch of those evil bugs crawling around.”

“Gross. Like someone’s actually been sleeping here?”

“Maybe. But not for a while, it looks like. Kind of creepy though.”

“Well, let’s not go in there anymore. Let’s check out the rest of the house, but we need to be quick because we still have to make it back down the hill without getting caught.”

“Why do you think the chairs are set up like that?” I asked. “Reminds me of reading time at school.”

“Don’t know. There’s some old food containers and bug-infested leftovers in the cabinets. There’s nothing in the fridge but an exploded egg and some baking soda boxes.”

“You think that’s the smell?”

“No. It’s not coming from in there, and the egg’s too old to smell. It probably exploded from the heat a long time ago. Let’s check the first room; then we can head out.”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me. I bet we already stink like this house.”

“Probably. I’ll hurry, too. Watch for scorpions.”

I watched Liam looking at the cobwebs as we walked toward the first room we came in. Aware of the kissing bugs, he probably didn't want a spider to fall on him. He hated spiders as much as I hated kissing bugs.

Back in the first room, I looked out the window and saw that the sky was beginning to fill with storm clouds. I was trying to recall if I heard about a storm coming in, but my attention was soon drawn toward a box on the floor labeled New Home.

I kneeled down and gave it a little push to warn any pests that I was about to open it. It was full of loose rags. One of the rags I pulled out unraveled, dropping a rusty nail about three inches long and fairly thick. I picked it up to see an engraving on the head. A stylish number was there: 53.

I had no idea what the number stood for, but I pocketed it anyways. It didn't feel like stealing because it was left behind. In a second rag was a small skeleton key that was missing some teeth and didn't look functional anymore, so I pocketed it also. I found nothing else in the box and placed the rags back in before moving on.

"Find anything cool yet?" Liam tapped the first box I looked through with his foot.

"A rusty skeleton key and a weird nail," I said as I began opening a second box.

This box had a bunch of paper, including some personal letters, bills, and old pictures. I could tell they were old from what the people wore and because they were black-and-white with little gloss. They reminded me of pictures I saw when we took a trip to Gettysburg.

"Hey, Liam, check these old pictures out."

"Where do you think that is?"

"I don't know. Looks like some old building or something."

"Yeah, kind of like those buildings out by that old west amusement park."

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The pictures had buildings that resembled the structures in the amusement park that used to be an original part of the nearby city. I had a strange feeling I'd seen them before, but it wasn't from the amusement park. I decided to leave them.

Liam was looking through the dresser by the window. "Nothing but a bunch of candles, some matchbooks, and some old incense, it looks like. Wait, check this out."

From the top drawer, he pulled out a dirty knife. It had a rusty blade with no shine and a handle that looked like bone. In his other hand, he held a leather sheath so worn it was barely a sheath. He smiled and put it back in the sheath.

"What's with the creepy look, Liam?"

"We can leave this at the Three Trees, and no one will know we have it. We can make all kinds of stuff with it down there and carry it around."

"Yeah, cool. We can sharpen it on those flat rocks with some spit."

"We can't tell anyone."

"Yeah, somebody will probably think we're doing something bad."

He put the knife in the back of his pants while he closed the drawers and looked out the nearby window.

"Did you hear anything about it raining today?"

"That's what I was wondering."

"I know Mom didn't say anything, or she would've told us to be home earlier. Heck, she probably wouldn't have let us back out after lunch."

"We better go in case it starts raining. You know Mom will be mad." Liam took one last look around before climbing out the window.

I grabbed some loose papers to wrap the key and nail in and followed him out. I should have been watching what I was doing

instead of watching the sky, because when I jumped out the window, I almost landed on Liam.

“Watch it, Caleb. Just slow down a little bit.”

Once we knew that we were clear, we made our way down the hill and back into the wash. We stayed in the shadows, but we weren't as cautious on our trip back. It occurred to me that when we were in the house, we didn't hear the wind outside, and there were no noises at all. Down in the wash, the wind was picking up and growing loud through the valley.

“Liam, we should probably get to the Three Trees as fast as we can. I don't think we would hear the bell or Mom from that house. She'd go there first if we didn't come home after she called.”

“Don't worry. We would've heard her. The wind would carry her voice, and we were downwind.”

He was right. The wind did carry noises more often than not in this valley. Sometimes distant noises were so clear that you could hear the neighbors talking almost a mile away.

When we reached the Three Trees, I felt like something was watching me, but I was probably paranoid from going into that house; I tried not to think about the tragedies that befell those who once lived there. Still, I looked around as I pulled the key and nail from my pocket to show Liam.

“So? I got a knife.” Liam pulled it out cautiously from his pants.

“Yeah, that's a lot cooler. But they're all for the fort, right? I mean, we both can use the knife, and these are both of ours.”

“Yeah, but this is a little more mine, and those are a little more yours. Of course I'll always let you use it if I'm not doing anything with it.” He had to keep holding the knife and looking at it as if it was the world's greatest treasure.

I began folding my treasures away into the piece of paper I grabbed when I noticed some writing on it. It said something about someone

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named Robert. I opened it to see what it said, and there was an age, a description—that sounded like Robert—and an address. Some of the other writing that was still readable mentioned assault, assault with a deadly weapon, breaking and entering, grand theft auto, and indecent exposure. This explained the sleeping bags. The house was most likely Gene's old house too or at least he had lived there with Robert. I imagined that the trio lived there together at one point but hadn't lived there for a while.

"Liam," I said, handing over the paper, "I think it was their house, or they had something to do with it."

"Well, at least we know where their place is; perhaps they were back there the other day for the night or something. It kind of makes us even. They know where we hang out, and now we know where they chill."

Liam handed the paper back to me and started climbing toward his crow's nest, where he wedged the knife in between two branches.

"Can you see it from down there?"

"No." I know he wanted to make sure that no one walking through, like our mother, could see his new knife.

I climbed up to the lower platform and found a hole in the main trunk to hide the paper, key, and nail. It seemed to be a good spot and not very obvious. Someone would probably find it and think nothing of it anyways.

After sitting there for a while, we decided it would be best to head home because of the storm. The wind was blowing a cool, creosote scent down through the valley. We reached the driveway and began walking toward our house. The weather was keeping Max huddled down in his house, and he didn't bother barking at our arrival.

Chapter 8

“**W**HERE WERE YOU TWO?” our mom asked as we walked in the living room.

Liam blurted out, “At the Three Trees. Why?”

“I called for you guys to come home a little while ago, when it started getting stormy. I don’t want you getting caught in a flash flood or anything. I expected you to be back sooner. The storm is practically here.”

“We just got caught up in what we were doing and didn’t realize how close the storm was. When we did, we hurried home.” Liam was good at setting stuff up so that it seemed like we tried redeeming ourselves by hastily getting back home.

“Okay, but you still should’ve been able to hear me. That tells me that maybe the tree fort is too far away.”

“No, we can usually hear you fine,” Liam replied quickly. “It was probably the wind.”

“It’s starting to rain outside. Is there anything we need to get covered up?” I asked her. With the lack of rainfall around here, people had a tendency to leave items out that they wouldn’t want getting wet.

“No,” said my mother. “I already took care of it after I yelled for you guys. What are you two going to do for the rest of the day inside?”

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“Don’t know. Probably play a game like *Battle Masters* or something. Maybe put on a movie. Is there anything you need us to do inside?”

“No. Go ahead and do what you were going to do. Just remember that tomorrow you have to get all your chores done before you go out. Did Max get food yet?”

“Yeah. Caleb checked his dish this morning.”

From our bedroom window, I couldn’t see much of the storm because a hill blocked the view. Liam was already getting the game out, and it took a while to set up. It was fun setting up because you could really look at the ogres, goblins, trolls, and the opposing knights. The game took up a lot of floor space, so the battles usually had to wrap up in one sitting.

The lights began flickering, which meant lightning was getting close. We would probably lose power, which lasted for some time out where we lived; my mother brought us some candles just in case. I liked the way the candles looked, making the room seem cozier, but at the same time, I knew that we could easily be plunged into darkness.

I looked out the window again and followed two ravens flying along the hillside, swooping up and down and dodging the opposing air currents with little effort. I always saw ravens in this weather, like they belonged in it. Perhaps that’s why Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” was so eerie to me. I followed their flight as they flew across the path of something black in the distance by a small mesquite tree. It looked like a black trash bag had gotten stuck in the tree and was trying to break free with the wind.

I felt compelled to remove it because it didn’t belong there. I imagined the two ravens removing it from the tree, but they disappeared. The whole desert was empty of any living thing. As I began to close the blinds, the bag started to break free, revealing a worn-out straw hat.

The blinds fell down in front of me, and I fumbled to reopen them. I scanned the hillside but saw nothing, not even the bag. It had to be my paranoia and imagination, but I decided not to rule out any possibilities.

Liam had gone for some cookies and milk, and after I lowered the blinds and pushed Play on the VCR, I sat down by the game board. The beginning credits of the movie always made me wish I was there, in that place, fighting off evil forces. When Liam came back in, I told him what I thought I had seen.

He just looked at me while he finished chewing his cookie and then whispered back: “What do you mean, you think you saw him?”

“I was looking out the window, and I thought I saw a trash bag stuck in the tree. But then the blind accidentally closed, and I thought I saw his hat. It was like he was wearing a black trash bag around him against the rain, to not be seen.”

“You’re just nervous from earlier. Did you open the blinds back up and look?”

“Yeah, but nothing was there.”

“See, then it was just a bag and your imagination. I think my goblin archers are going to attack your knights first,” he said as the game began.

We played for a while, and it took scary things off my mind. But the storm worsened, and when the power flickered off, we left the game out for the night, determined to continue the following morning. However, if I listened to the thoughts in my head, I knew we wouldn’t. I couldn’t stop thinking about the creepy, smelly house and the black trash bag. Again, it seemed like my brother was reading my mind or perhaps it was obvious that he was thinking about the same things.

“Hey, Caleb.” Liam leaned over from the top bunk. “Do you think Gene’s out there right now?”

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“Shut up. That’s not funny.”

I grabbed a book off the floor and turned on my battery-powered reading lamp. I needed to get my mind off things. The book was about mythical creatures and had pictures accompanying their descriptions.

Eventually, I could hear Liam snoring, and my eyes were getting tired, but then I suddenly heard a clinking noise coming from the window. The clinking turned into a whistle, and I realized a draft was coming through. I put my book down and went to close the window, and that’s when I heard voices coming from outside. I eased it open a little more, and it sounded like an argument, but they were too faint to understand. I gently pushed a small part of the blinds aside to look out.

Not being able to see anything made me more nervous because I felt that they might be able to see me. I decided to close the window, but as I grabbed the handle, a gust of wind hit the window and me with an icy coldness that made me shiver uncontrollably. I shook the feeling off and managed to gently and quietly close it, hoping I hadn’t alerted anyone. Maybe I did because I began to hear the voices again, and this time they sounded angrier.

I looked at Liam and whispered his name to wake him up, but he kept snoring. I pulled the blinds aside to have a better look out the window and found myself staring right at the pale silhouette of a human face pressing against the glass. I jerked away, leaving the blinds flapping enough for me to see the face smear the raindrops from the window as it moved out of sight.

I tried to wake Liam again by pulling the covers off him and shaking him. He was completely pale—his eyes were a grayish-blue reflecting a slimy look in the broken light. His face and neck were covered with scars that resembled bug bites that had been scratched until they bled and scabbed over.

joshua dowidat

I shook him again, but the only reaction I got was from the remaining air escaping his body. I jumped off the bed, twisting my ankle, and the floor suddenly felt like a magnet pulling me down onto my belly. I was wondering if maybe I was so tired and freaked out that I couldn't function, but I had to get help. My ankle began throbbing, and each yell for help only escaped my mouth with a whispered breath.

I dragged myself toward the door, hoping to bang on it if I couldn't reach the handle, and then everything was plunged into total darkness. My body shuddered before going numb. I jerked myself forward in my bed, and the book fell and hit me in the face. It was a bad dream.

"What's up, man? You alright?" Liam said, tossing around in the top bunk.

"Yeah, it was...just a twitch or something," I replied, but the dream had really freaked me out. I turned off my light and put the book away, hoping I would not dream again when I fell back to sleep.

Chapter 9

SUNDAY STARTED THE SAME as usual: do some chores before returning to the game. It was still raining steadily and showing no sign of letting up, but after about an hour of cat-and-mouse with the game pieces, we called it a draw.

As we were putting the game away, we heard a vehicle coming into the yard. Max usually took cover in the storms, but something got him barking. Our mother was already on her way to the front door when we joined her to see who was here.

“Who do we know with an orange station wagon looking vehicle?” she asked, looking out the window by the front door.

Liam was trying to peek through the window just in front of our mother. “I don’t know. Can you see the driver?” The car stopped about halfway up the driveway before turning around and leaving.

“They must have been lost,” my mother said, closing the blinds and walking away.

“Sshhh!”

“What you shushing me for, Liam?”

“What?”

“Did you just shush me?”

“No. It was probably the blinds.”

“Oh really? So I’m hearing things now?”

Back in the room, we finished picking up the game before finding a book to sit down with. Liam couldn't decide which book he wanted so he brought several from the hall closet to his beanbag chair. The house became still with the faint sounds of the living room television and our mother humming while she baked.

Although it was fall, it was still warm enough that we had our ceiling fan going. It rocked just slightly off balance, making a light knocking sound as the pull-chain tapped on the glass. Sometimes a gust of wind came through the valley, making the rain hammer down harder against the house. Finally, I brought up the subject of the car.

"I've never seen that car before. Have you?"

"No. Why?"

"Just thinking about it, you know . . . it could be one of the neighbors that live around that house."

"Talk quieter when you talk about it. Don't you realize how quiet it is in here?"

"I know, but Mom would never know what we were talking about anyways. I was just thinking about it and wondering if maybe someone saw us and came to tell Mom."

"Don't you think they would've come yesterday?" Liam looked a little flustered with the conversation and shook his head as if to end it.

I sat back in my beanbag and continued reading, but then there was a knock at the door. I could hear my mother walking toward the door as I looked into the hallway, hoping to catch a glimpse.

"It's that same car again. Must be lost," my mother said before she opened the door, leaving the security door locked between her and the visitor. We still couldn't see and joined her as the door finished swinging open. I could now see who it was through the security door. Gene.

"Can I help you with something?" my mom asked with a confi-

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dent tone, not giving any indication that she was nervous. “Honey, someone’s here!” she said toward the living room, as if she was speaking to someone else in the house; our dad had left us a long time ago.

“No big concern. Wanted to ask you if you’re perhaps the mother of those two nice boys I saw in the wash the other day?” Gene replied, trying to get a better look through the security door.

“Maybe. Liam, Caleb! Did you see this man in the wash?” She looked directly at me as if she already knew the answer.

“Just briefly, Mom. He said hi and went on up the wash,” Liam said quickly, trying to gain control of the conversation.

Now she was upset. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We didn’t think it was a big deal. We were in the tree, and he was down below. He didn’t say much. Right, Caleb?”

“Yeah, no big deal, Mom. Liam’s right.”

“Well, I will speak with you two later about this, but anyways”—speaking to Gene, she said—“was there something I can help you with?”

Gene hacked a couple times in a laughing cough while looking at the house on the hill before taking a deep breath and shaking some rainwater from his dirty straw hat.

“No, not really. I just wanted to see who they were and to let them know that I didn’t mean to startle them or anything. People around here say things, and I wanted to speak with their parents to let them know who I was.”

“Well, thank you for that. I assure you they weren’t startled or they would have said something to me.”

“That’s good to hear ma’am. I pulled up earlier, but thought I was in the wrong driveway. The neighbors didn’t seem to know anything about two boys so I thought I’d just knock on all the doors until I found out.”

“I appreciate you letting me know. Is there anything else you need

to tell me or was that it? They didn't do anything, did they?" My mother was already closing the door and seemed uncomfortable with the situation.

"No, no. They seem like good boys. I walk around here, and there's no need to be startled if they see me. Don't need anyone calling the cops for no reason or something like that," Gene said, looking at the house on the hill again.

"If that's all, then I really need to get back to my cleaning and baking. I hope you have a good day."

"You too, ma'am, and tell the boys I said hi. By the way, my name's Gene."

"Nice to meet you, Gene, but I must be getting back."

"Okay, ma'am. Sorry to take up your time. You have a good day yourself. Good boys you got there."

"I know, thank you," my mother said as she was closing the door. To her he was probably just a concerned neighbor, but to us he was something more.

"I wish you two would have told me so it wasn't so awkward."

I gave her my puppy-dog eyes. "We didn't think anything of it, Mom. That's all."

She stared worriedly at us and then walked toward the kitchen. Although Gene never entered the house a faint, sour smell of stale beer and cigarettes lingered in the hall from the brief conversation.

Liam headed back into our room as I watched Gene peel out in the muddy red clay before heading out of our driveway. I watched the fog from my breath disappear from the window as I let the blinds sway back into place, but then I noticed something else at the window. Not just something, someone.

I reached for the blinds, nervous to look out but pulling them aside regardless to see that the window was still fogged up from my breath. I held my breath to prevent any more fog and watched a sil-

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houette on the outside move as the fog somehow increased. I quickly wiped it away with my hand and immediately looked out in case I startled anything that might try to run off. Unfortunately, the fog was coming from the outside. The fog centered on one area that kept getting larger and then smaller, just like it did when I was breathing on the glass inside.

Suddenly, a small hand cleared the fog, and two pale-blue eyes were staring at me. I began backing away from the window as the eyes followed me. They looked so alone and angry. Then, in a sudden movement, like flipping through pages of a book, the face looked to one side and then the other, and then back at me. The figure put a finger up to its mouth and pushed against its lips before the window instantly fogged back up. Then the figure was gone.

I didn't know how to react. Everyone would think I was imagining stuff, especially Liam, because we snuck around that house. I stood in shock until a hand landed on my shoulder, causing me to jump back.

"You coming back to read?"

"We have to talk, but later sometime. Outside. Okay, Liam?"

"Alright. You okay? You look sick or something."

"Yeah, just startled a little bit. Let's make sure the windows are closed and latched."

"Why?"

"Can we just do it? If Mom asks, it's because of the rain."

Liam looked at me as if he wanted to ask why again, but something in my expression must have told him to keep quiet. Finally, he just gave me a quick nod of his head.

"Okay. I'll get the back bedrooms, and you get the others."

While closing the windows I kept an eye out. Yes, it could have been a figment of my imagination, but I was certain I saw and heard something. The weather kept us inside for the rest of the day, and we

joshua dowidat

relied on more books and a few movies to keep us occupied. I never took the chance of speaking with Liam because I feared our mother would overhear.

Despite the events of the day, I actually fell asleep quite quickly that night but was plagued by dreams. In the most vivid, a black fog rose out of rocks on a windy, cloud-covered day. The rocks were familiar, reminding me of the rock formation up the wash that we believed was old coral or lava, and the fog came out through cracks, rapidly swirling in the wash ahead of me and then at my feet. I began running away, but when I looked back, it was right behind me, and it felt like I was exhaling all the air in my lungs and then not breathing in again. But the feeling and the fog stopped when I crossed the road by my house.

Chapter 10

THE NEXT MORNING WAS just another school day. The rain stopped, but the clouds remained a threat. No keys were missing, no papers were reorganized, and I wondered why we'd had those problems to begin with. I could tell that it was bothering Liam that I still had something to tell him, but I was wondering if maybe I should let it bother him a little longer, just to mess with him.

When we arrived at school and were grabbing our bags from the car, my mother just sat there, staring through the window.

"Something wrong, Mom?" I asked her while grabbing the door to close it.

"I want to talk with both of you when you get home. It's about that guy Gene. I asked the neighbors about him, and there's some issues we need to discuss, later, about you two going out in the desert by yourselves." She sounded concerned and upset. "You're not in trouble or anything. I just want to go over some things, okay?"

"Alright, Mom. Don't worry. Okay," I said, starting to close my door.

"I love you guys. Jesus bless you and have a good day," she said as usual right before my door closed the rest of the way.

"So?" Liam asked anxiously as we walked off into school. "What did you want to talk about?"

I told him what happened, and it seemed like he didn't believe me because he didn't remember any of the windows fogging up. He looked disappointed, as if he had waited for nothing. He suggested it was a neighborhood kid, but I reminded him of how unlikely that would be. He still decided to drop it and changed the subject.

"Remember, it's a half day for teacher grading today and tomorrow, and then we have five days off."

"I totally forgot. How are we getting home? Did Mom say anything?"

"With Betty," Liam said before we parted ways in the courtyard.

By lunchtime, I was more than ready to go home, anxious to get to the Three Trees with so much time left in the day. On half days, the cafeteria staff usually served prepared sack lunches in the courtyard so they could avoid extra work. I found a comfortable spot under a false cherry tree where I could see the parking lot. This was a nice spot on the grass away from everyone else, but the fruits that fell from the tree often stained clothes, so I had to be careful when sitting down.

Two of the tree kids found a spot nearby, but we didn't talk. Then I saw Krystal and Susan eating their lunches and looking at me. When they noticed me looking, they shied away; I kind of liked that. I thought Krystal was pretty, and she was always nice to everyone, even me.

As I saw Betty's van pulling in, I started packing my stuff, but I didn't see Liam as I began to walk toward the parking lot. Krystal and Susan intercepted me, and I tensed a little; Susan could be somewhat rough around the edges, at least when it came to bullies at school. I didn't really expect any problems with them, but they both seemed to be scrutinizing me.

"Hi, Caleb. How're you doing?" Krystal said.

"Okay, I guess." I wasn't comfortable talking with most people, but especially girls.

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“We were talking about that guy Gene and wondering why you wanted to know about him, He drove to Susan’s house the other day and had a . . . confrontation with her dad. Do you know anything about that?”

Krystal usually excelled at school, like me, but probably even more, and had a tendency to incorporate new words she had learned into her conversation. But she also had a tic when she talked sometimes, like she was trying to think of more impressive words to use before giving up and deciding to talk like a kid our age would normally do.

“No, but he came to our house too. He wanted to talk with my mom. They didn’t argue or anything.”

Susan looked angry.

“Why’d you tell people that I told you about him, Caleb? I thought we were friends and that you’d keep this on the down low. You got me in a lot of trouble with my parents. That’s not cool.”

Because Susan was older than me and was known to throw a punch or two when she disagreed with people. I was beginning to worry.

“I didn’t say anything. I swear. After he came over, we told my mom we saw him in the wash. I never mentioned you, Honest.”

“Are you sure?” Susan looked like she was trying to read my mind or perhaps getting ready to punch me. “I’d hate to find out you showed anyone that note or said I told you something that I really didn’t.”

“No, I didn’t. Liam and I talked about it but that’s it—the note I mean. I’m sorry you’re in trouble, but we didn’t say anything. What’s the big deal with this guy anyways? Why’s everyone freaked out about him?”

“My parents said he was normal when they first met him a while ago,” Susan said, finally calming down. “He said he was studying some archaeological stuff in the area for the university, but then he

began to distance himself from everyone. He kept a few close friends, but they all started behaving like him, acting weird and not talking with their families or anyone. He lived in a house up by us, the one falling apart, and we heard he needed to get rid of something. That's all he would tell people. They thought he was into drugs; most people still do and that's why my dad got mad with him and then me."

"So he's a druggie and a thief?" I said, looking for a reaction.

"No," Krystal said. "Well, Susan and I don't, err...concur on that. He was into some weird stuff, and people say he's the reason some of the other people around him disappeared with no trace. Some say it was some plants in the area he was eating—at least that's what Susan's parents said. Like a drug or something."

I scratched the back of my head, a sign of insecurity I get before asking a question. "How do you think he found out? I mean, about us talking about him?"

"I don't know." Susan looked around and saw Betty beckoning us to get in the van. "But we better get in before she takes off without us."

"Yeah, we can talk about it later. I'm sorry you're in trouble, but I promise we didn't say anything."

"I believe you, Caleb. I have no idea how he found out, but I believe you." Susan said.

"Why's it such a big deal anyways?" I asked her as we began walking to the van.

"I guess it's like an omen or something. He makes people uneasy, so talking about him puts evil in the air or something."

Liam was already inside the van and working on his homework to get it out of the way; I must have missed him when Susan and Krystal were talking to me. Krystal was riding with us today because she was going to Susan's. I could tell that they didn't want to talk about it anymore, so I left it alone. However, I wondered how much

desert shadows

trouble Susan had really gotten into because she could still have a friend over. Soon, most of the kids were dropped off, and our next stop was Susan's.

"What's going on here?" Betty said as we turned into Susan's driveway and saw the sheriff's car. The lights weren't flashing, which was perhaps good news, but it still gave me a bad feeling. Betty got out and went to talk with the sheriff and Susan's parents. We couldn't hear what they were saying with the engine still running and the radio on. Susan and Krystal went over to the adults but didn't seem to be part of the conversation.

"What are they talking about? Did something happen?" Betty's youngest boy asked. His older brother told him to mind his business.

Knowing not to eavesdrop, Liam and I went back to what we were doing until we got to our house and noticed that our mother wasn't home.

"Where's your mom?" Betty asked.

"I'm sure she'll be home in a minute. We have a key and will wait inside till she gets home," Liam answered.

As we began getting out, Betty kept asking us if it was okay with our mother for us to be home alone. Liam assured her that's why he had a key.

"Did Mom really say it was okay for us to stay here if she wasn't home?"

"Yes, but only for emergencies or if she's running late, like today. She probably had to work a little late, but she knew about the half day. She's the one who reminded me of it this morning."

"Okay, then. By the way, I know more about Gene."

"You heard more about him? I had a weird dream about him last night, like he was standing in some spiraling smoke or something. Just when I thought the smoke was going to touch me, I woke up. I was okay, but it was still a little creepy."

I didn't tell Liam that I also had a similar dream; he still wouldn't believe me about the window. While eating a snack, I filled Liam in about Gene, reminding him not to say anything to anyone.

"Don't you think it's strange that Gene freaks everyone out, but they don't do anything about it?" I asked.

"I guess he doesn't really do enough to do anything. Like call the sheriff."

"I think we should make sure everything's secure around here from now on. Do you think...?"

"Think what?" he replied, biting his cookie.

"Well, what about the stuff we took from the old house? Suppose he finds out and comes after us, you know, like revenge. He also knows where our fort is. What if he goes looking around down there?" I was getting myself worried now.

"The knife's way up in the tree," Liam said slowly, "and so are those little trinkets. He could find those pretty easily."

I began realizing where the conversation was leading. One of us needed to retrieve the items and hide them somewhere else before our mother came home. Problem was, we had no idea when that would be.

We decided that Liam would wait on the roof as a lookout, and we placed the rickety old ladder up on the back side of the house to be less obvious. I was pumped up and ready to run as quickly as I could down to the Three Trees. Once Liam was positioned on the roof and made sure that I was clear, I took off running. I barely looked for cars when I made my way across the road and then headed down the wash, running at full speed.

Chapter 11

REACHING THE THREE TREES was a relief. I was halfway done—well, almost—but could not stop thinking that someone was watching me and was there with me. I looked around, but no one was there, so I climbed the tree and retrieved the knife first before grabbing the other items. I waved to Liam from the top branches, letting him know I had made it, and he began pointing at something. Parked alongside the road about a quarter mile from me was Gene’s car.

There was no sign of Gene, but I knew I had to move. My heart began racing as sweat dripped into my eyes, blurring my vision as I began climbing down. Before reaching the ground, I looked around to make sure there was no sign of Gene and missed a grip, snagging my finger on a nail holding a ladder rung to the tree. Blood began dripping onto the piece of wood as I checked to see how bad the cut was.

When I reached the ground, I took off running until I heard a cough come from behind me. I dropped to the ground and rolled into the wash, lying still and listening to the sound of footsteps getting closer. I raised my head slowly to see if it was Gene and if he was coming toward me. Sure enough, there he was, walking around the tree.

He seemed to have a twitch in his movement as he circled the tree and examined the fort. He grabbed the trunk of the tree, feeling for

something, and his fingers flexed and stretched around the bark like he was trying to grasp a basketball by enlarging his hand. The minute he touched the ladder, he swiftly retracted his hand, like the feeling sickened or hurt him. He began licking his hand and groaning, like it pleased him, before he began licking one of the ladder rungs. That was enough for me.

I crouched low, making my way further up the wash until I knew I was clear, and when I finally stood up, I looked back but couldn't see Gene. Although I was desperate to put distance between us, I avoided running so I could remain as silent as possible. When I got to our driveway, Liam was already off the roof. I ran around the back of the house to help him get the ladder down.

"Did you see Gene?" Liam asked urgently from the lower rungs before he jumped to the ground.

"Yeah, but let's hide these first." I pulled the items out of my pocket and rolled the knife in the paper with the other pieces. We decided to hide them inside Max's doghouse because we were the only ones who went near it.

I showed Liam my finger, and we headed inside so I could tend to it. I told him about Gene licking his hands and the board, and as I told him, I realized that Gene was licking the same board that I cut my hand on. Was he licking my blood?

It wasn't long before we heard the familiar rattling of my mom's car trudging up the driveway. We waited for her by the door in case she needed help bringing anything in. She noticed my hand almost immediately, and I told her I cut it on Max's doghouse. She didn't ask any more about it and didn't mention Gene's car on the road. I was worried she would see it and wouldn't let us out to play. She obviously hadn't because she would have said something or seemed worried. We decided not to return to the Three Trees in case he happened to be around there. Today, our destination would be Black Rocks.

desert shadows

We knew it was possible that Gene was lurking around as we made our way over there. We looked everywhere, like hawks scanning the horizon for prey. Every rustle of a bush or a tree made us jump as we worked our way up the wash.

“You said you had a dream about some smokelike stuff?” I asked.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Where were you? I forgot if you told me.”

“At Black Rocks. Why?”

“I had similar dream.” I felt nervous about the dream again, but Liam didn’t seem to care.

“Whatever. Let’s just try to have fun the rest of the day and forget about the crap with Gene and your voices.”

I could tell that something was bothering Liam, so I didn’t argue with him. He was usually more sympathetic when I was worried. I think he was worried, too.

We reached Black Rocks with no problems, and there were two good ways to climb. The first was around the bend in the wash, where some of the rocks had fallen in smaller sections and formed a path you could climb by jumping from rock to rock. That was the easier route, but we preferred the harder way to prove ourselves: straight up the face. The rocks had indentations that allowed us to get good holds while we climbed the almost vertical rock. Our usual destination was a small area halfway up the rocks that we could hang out on.

Liam climbed first, and I followed; it was an age thing again. We reached the spot and put our stuff down while looking out across the valley for any signs of Gene.

“Where are you going to check out today?” he asked as he rubbed at a slight graze on his elbow.

“I think I’m going to check out those crevices higher up to the left. I dropped down in one last time, and I think I can wiggle my way in a little further.”

“Well, I’m going to go through those cat’s claw bushes and see if there’s another area to leave our stuff so it isn’t so easy to see from the road. Maybe we could make a fort up here too. Like a watch post. Think about it. You can see the whole valley from up here.”

“That’d be cool,” I said as I began heading toward the cervices.

I looked around for snakes and other critters before jumping down. The air smelled damp and sulfurous, and water trickled from cracks in the rocks. I cautiously crawled in several feet, and the light became so dim I wasn’t sure I could continue. I tried waiting for my eyes to adjust, but they wouldn’t because of the light that still shined in at the entrance.

The crevice narrowed as I moved further in, but it wasn’t tight on my body yet. I knew better than to get into a situation where I couldn’t back up if needed. I listened carefully for any movement as I crawled; the shadows were already playing tricks on me. There was more water, and the trickling sound seemed to echo, drowning out any other noise. A few feet further in, my eyes weren’t adjusting to the darkness, so I admitted defeat and started backing out. I only went a few feet before I heard it.

“Sshhh!”

I froze before my frantic reaction forced my body to contort around, and in a fast crawl on my knees, I scampered toward the opening. I tried to look behind me, but I couldn’t see anything, so I hurried out of the crevice and almost dove into daylight in one movement. Funny what the human body can do when scared.

“Liam!” I yelled out, looking around for him.

“What?” he yelled back from over the ridge.

“We got to go! Now!”

I hurried over to pick up my stuff, dropping it several times in my haste before making my way down the easier side of the rocks. Liam was trying to follow but couldn’t keep up.

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“What are you doing, man?”

“Come on. I’ll tell you later, but for now, let’s just get home.”

I got to the wash and waited impatiently for Liam, who was taking his time because he had no reason to rush. When he reached the wash, I was already walking toward home.

“What’s the matter, Caleb? Got to go number two or something?”

“I don’t know. Something. Again. A shush.”

“You look sick again. Are you okay? You’re not making any sense. Was there a snake or something?”

“Snakes don’t shush people, Liam!”

“Okay, okay. Let’s go home.”

The walk home was more of a jog, with Liam trying to slow me down. About halfway home, I finally stopped to gather myself.

“Caleb, what happened?”

“You won’t believe me. You haven’t believed me lately, so why would you now?”

“Listen,” he said, putting a hand on my arm to show he was genuine. “I was thinking when I was by myself up there that this is getting too weird. Similar dreams. Gene doing that weird stuff. Also, weird things have been happening at home lately.”

“What weird things at home?”

“You know—the missing stuff. Things being unorganized. The other day, Max was barking at his doghouse, but nothing was in there. Then he backed away from me like he was being yelled at or scared.”

“I heard the voice again, shushing me. Something’s not right,” I said quietly as we stood there, looking around. He seemed as lost as I was for any explanation.

As we made our way home, we didn’t say anything else until we reached our driveway, and that was to decide what we would do the rest of the evening. We wanted something to distract us from the crazy stuff that seemed to be happening.

Chapter 12

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, WE arrived at school a little late because once again the keys were misplaced, and my homework wasn't only unorganized this time but missing. I found my papers under my bed, and Liam's were in my backpack. We both just dealt with it and never said anything to our mother.

When we got to school, I felt really nervous, like I shouldn't go to school that day, but another part of me felt that I needed to. I just sucked it up and got out of the car.

"I think I should try talking with Krystal," I told Liam, "and see if Susan said anything else to her. Maybe there's some connection to Gene and the weird stuff that's been going on. I mean, if you think about it, it all started around the same time."

"Good idea. If I run into Susan, I'll see if she wants to maybe hang out after school or something, and then we don't have to worry about talking about it. Maybe her parents will let her come to the Three Trees."

"I was also thinking about what would happen if we just left it alone and see if it goes away. I mean, what if we're putting ourselves into more of a mess by looking further into it?"

"I haven't thought about that, but I think it'd be a bad idea to not know."

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I nodded my almost reluctant agreement and turned toward my classroom.

“Hey, Caleb.”

“Yeah?” I asked, looking over my shoulder.

“Be careful today,” he said. I nodded, appreciating my brother’s concern.

“You too,” I replied, and he gave me a quick wave of his hand.

I had a bad feeling as we went our separate ways but tried to shake it off before I quickly made it to my classroom door. I hoped to get inside to my safety net as usual, but the door was locked. Sometimes the teachers were in early meetings and didn’t get to their classrooms until the bell rang. I decided I’d be better off waiting by one of the tables near the courtyard so the other kids wouldn’t pile up around me by the locked door.

Just as I sat at the table, I saw the first few kids arrive and try the door.

“Hey, Caleb, where’s the teacher?” one of them yelled out.

I just shrugged my shoulders, trying to look busy with some papers from my backpack. Three of them dropped their bags by the door and approached me, standing together at the side of the table and pushing their bodies against me to get a reaction.

“I don’t know where she is,” I said keeping my eyes on my papers. Eye contact meant two things: you either were ready to fight or would be the first to shy away. I wasn’t scared of fighting. I just didn’t want to fight, at least not three at one time.

“Then why couldn’t you just say that? Are you deaf or something?” said the thinner one with spiked hair. He tried grabbing my papers. I jerked them back but not too fast, so I wouldn’t provoke them.

“Do you mind? I’m trying to look through some stuff before class.”

“Whatever, man. Why do you have to be so weird and stupid?” he sneered.

I then saw the teacher coming, and when they noticed her, they began walking away. As they did so, I noticed the talkative one had a stride to his step that he no doubt thought was cool. Actually, it made him look like he had hip problems.

I caught up with Liam at lunchtime when he joined me by the tree, and I found out that he had been pushed around pretty bad by some of the older bullies. They tore his backpack but hadn’t made him bleed so I knew he wouldn’t tell our mom. He did say that Susan and Krystal were already aware that he had been beaten up, and Susan was pretty mad about it. We looked out for them, and when they walked past, we called them over, and I asked if they wanted to eat with us.

“We’re not eating until we get home. I like it better that way, and besides, I got some business to attend to with a few punks,” Susan said. To me, she looked pretty scary. “Liam told us about those kids. They’re just punks. I think I know who it was from what Liam told me.”

“So what’re you guys up to?” Liam asked, wanting to change the subject. I knew he was trying to find out more about Gene. Susan simply began picking at the grass, like she was frustrated.

“Would there be any way you two could hang out after school one day?” I asked, surprising myself that I had the courage to ask.

“Just *one* day Caleb? As in a solitary day?” Krystal said sarcastically, but she was grinning.

“You know what I mean. Can you two hang out *sometime, outside* of school?” I said, as if she was the one that was a bit stupid.

“I guess I could ask my parents. They would want to talk with your mom first. What about you, Susan?”

“Liam already asked me. I don’t think I can until next week

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because of the situation at home,” she replied, looking fed up before she turned to me. “The sheriff was there, Caleb, because my parents saw people messing around that old house, and they just wanted to report it, but it was nothing serious. Liam told me you thought it had something to do with Gene.”

I turned, looking at Liam and wondering what else he told her. “Well, that’s good. I thought you were in serious trouble for something that you told me. I don’t know. Just paranoid, I guess. Have you heard anything about Gene or seen him around?”

“I think my parents saw his car the other day. He still knows people around here, so it’s hard to tell if he’s up to anything. My dad says he’s like a bad itch.”

“A bad itch?” Liam asked, finally joining in the conversation.

“You know.” Susan scratched her arm mimicking a bad itch. “The more you scratch it, the itchier it gets.”

“That’s not always true,” Liam said.

“Anyways, you get the point.” Susan suddenly stood up. “Come on, Krystal. Let’s get our stuff. The bell’s about to ring, and I wanna see if I can find at least one of those punks before it’s time to go.”

“See you guys by the van,” said Krystal, standing up and wiping the grass from her legs.

The bell rang, and I stuffed my unfinished lunch in my backpack before we made our way to the parking lot.

“Is Mom going to be home late again?” I asked.

Liam nodded. “She’s going to start staying another hour at work. Since nothing happened yesterday, she feels like she can trust us being alone.”

“Well, nothing happened as far as she knows. Let’s not worry her by doing anything like yesterday.”

I noticed a chill in the air on the ride home. The clouds were blocking most of the sun and were resting on the mountains and

covering the peaks giving them an eerie look. When we pulled into our driveway Max was doing his usual routine, and Betty noticed my mother wasn't home again.

"Are you guys staying alone again? You know you can come to my house anytime and play with the boys if you would like."

We didn't mind hanging out with her two boys, but sometimes they just wanted to do stuff that we didn't want to do.

"Thanks, but we're okay. I think my mom's going to call you later and let you know that it's okay," Liam said as we got out of the van.

When Betty left, we walked up to our house and carefully looked around for any intruders that might be waiting for us.

"That's funny," Liam said, reaching around in his pocket.

"What is?"

"I can't find the key."

"Did you put it somewhere else?"

"No. I swear I put it in my pocket. Maybe... maybe during the fight today, it fell out."

"Check your bag. Maybe you put it in there." We knew where the spare key was, but we didn't want to tell our mother we had already lost the key on our second day alone.

"Wait a minute. Here it is, but—"

"But what?"

"Isn't this the key you found up at the house?" Liam asked, holding it up.

"Looks like it, but I put that one in Max's house." This was getting really weird.

"Then how did it get on the key ring and in my bag?" he said, sounding like he was accusing me.

"I thought we went over this. I haven't been messing around, and neither have you. Right?"

"Right, but let's check it out after we put our stuff inside."

desert shadows

“You’re probably right. We’ll just make sure those things are still there...”

He looked at me.

“What?”

“What if mom found it somehow and put it on there to let us know that she knows.”

“Why would she do that? Anyways, she wouldn’t even know what the stuff is.”

“That makes sense.” I felt relieved. “Come on. Let’s get rid of this school stuff and get changed and then check.”

Liam opened the door and stepped in, dropping his bag in the hallway. I did the same. I reached behind to close the door, and then *bang!* The door suddenly slammed shut, and we both jumped backward, totally startled. Then the really crazy stuff started.

Chapter 13

THE WALLS IN THE house began fading to gray with black streaks, and a greenish fog flowed from the ceiling, as if the drywall were vaporizing into a gaseous cloud. The floor began cracking as the carpet receded to the walls, like a time-enhanced video of an object deteriorating on a nature show. The air grew sour and stale and cold, but I began sweating as I recognized the awful smell from the house we were in the other day.

The sound of wind and crackling came from everywhere. It was followed by glass breaking and objects falling. The windows fell down, and boards began splintering through them, blocking out the little light the cloudy day had provided. We had to get out.

We ran for the door and pulled on the handle together, but it was jammed shut from the ceiling above it moving down. I looked at the window in the hallway, but there was no way we could squeeze through the splintered boards and shattered glass.

“Let’s get to the kitchen!” Liam yelled over the noise of crashing and slamming.

The smell intensified, and the gaseous clouds grew thicker and turned a darker green, almost black. There was a wetness in the air and on the walls, making the house seem like it was melting, but the temperature was freezing. We reached the kitchen and living room

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area to find that it was in the same condition. The kitchen sink was ripped from the cabinets and pressed against the ceiling, dirt came through the floor, raising the pipes and blocking that window. The cabinets were ripped out of place and smashed into the back door, blocking that path. One of the two windows was completely blocked by something on the outside, as if the whole porch had fallen down on it, but the other was only slightly shattered, leaving wicked pieces of jagged glass.

“What the heck is this? An earthquake?” I yelled out.

“Don’t know and don’t care. I just know we have to get out of here!”

“Yeah, I know. Let’s get something to break out that glass, and then maybe we can crawl through,” I said, already trying to dislodge a piece of wood from the couch.

I tried grabbing a fireplace prod from the rubble, but it wouldn’t budge. I started seeing my breath in the cold air.

“Caleb, why’s it so cold?”

“I don’t know, but it’s getting colder.”

With a few more splintering noises and some final groans, the house came to a rest. The dripping fluids were now entirely black, and the gaseous cloud had stopped growing but was still hugging the ceiling. We looked at each other as the house went silent except for our breathing and the slight chattering of our teeth. We were cold, but the initial shock was wearing off. I began to feel petrified.

“Liam . . .”

He looked at me, and I could see he felt the same way. He shook his head as if to get rid of the feeling.

“We don’t have time for that. We have to get out. Okay?”

I gulped as if trying to swallow a frog, and then I nodded.

We looked around. The ceiling looked like it might fall, and so we hurried over to the shattered window. Outside, there was a reddish

darkness to the desert, and it looked like a sunset right before an evening storm, but it was only early afternoon.

“What was that all about?” I walked toward Liam. “Hey, wait a minute.”

“What?”

“I don’t hear Max barking. I hope he’s okay.”

We both listened but couldn’t hear anything beyond a loud and intense dripping noise coming from the back rooms. Suddenly, we heard a shuffling noise, like someone was pushing rocky dirt around broken glass and concrete. It echoed down the hallway and seemed to separate itself from the rest of the house and the silence.

“Liam, what’s that noise? It sounds like something moving—”

“Quiet!” he whispered harshly.

The noise kept coming. I wiped sweat from my forehead and then wiped the snot from my nose, caused by the burning sensation in my eyes and nostrils from the smell. Liam was doing the same as we listened.

Chink... chink... chink... shuff... shuff. Chink... chink... shuff. Chink... shuff... shuff... chink... chink... shuff.

Then it stopped. Everything went so completely silent, all I could hear was my heart pounding in my ears. Listening for what seemed like forever, we couldn’t hear anything. We tried looking down the hallway to see if anything was there. Nothing.

“Sshhh!”

I’m sure I stopped breathing when we heard a crunching noise, followed by what we knew were footsteps in the rubble. I rushed toward Liam, helping him pull at the piece of wood he was trying to dislodge.

“We’ve got to get out of here, Liam!”

“I know! Pull!”

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The crunching was getting louder as we tried to break the piece of wood free.

“I’ll just jump through, Liam; I don’t care. Let’s go.”

“What if you hit it wrong and it goes in your neck or something? Wait. If we have to, we will. Just pull.”

We both jerked back and forth, trying to snap the board until it finally gave way. We both fell, rolling closer to the hallway. I wanted to look to see what it was, but my instincts told me not to. Liam jumped to his feet and started breaking the glass and moving it out of our way. We almost had enough room to jump through, so I got ready. Liam jumped first, landing outside as I positioned my hands around the remaining shards of glass so I could pull myself over. I looked outside, and Liam was gone.

“Liam!” I yelled, looking around. Where did he go? The sky looked like the most bizarre sunset I’d ever seen, and in the gloom, I looked down at the ground and readied myself. But there was one problem. There were three hands where my two should be.

Two were on the window frame, and the third was by my chest, barely making contact with my shirt as it moved around. I heard something just behind my left ear and felt damp breath on the back of my neck. Terrified, I didn’t want to look because I was sure that if I did, it would get me. I kept my eyes forward.

“Sshhh!”

The hand went down my side, cutting me through my shirt. I felt blood trickle down. That was enough for me, and I flew out the window, literally, and hit the ground hard on the other side, landing on my cut. I saw Liam sitting against the wall of the house underneath the window we just came through. I stood up and turned around, forcing myself to see if the creature was in the window.