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BETTY LOU AND THE HOWL OF THE ROUGAROU
Elementary Detective Agency Mystery No. 1

By Rebekkah Ross

PROLOGUE

Michael had been running around the yard playing Lone Ranger all morning. His cheeks were bright pink and sweat made his hair stick in clumps to his forehead as he tied one last knot in his jump rope, securing the imaginary bad guy he'd just caught to the maple tree. He brushed off his hands and let them drop to his sides with a sigh. He could usually talk his big sister Carole into joining him for this game - she was really good at coming up with bad guys for him to fight and didn't mind playing them too. His favorite was a grouchy old miner she invented named Horrendous Hugh. She said he was 200 years old and could breathe fire on account of all the coal in the mine he'd been living in for so long. She used a shovel like a sword, chasing him all around the yard with it. But lately she'd begun to push him off, telling him she didn't have time for little kid games. She was in a particularly bad mood today because she blamed Michael that she had to miss a birthday party this afternoon. She stormed into her room and told him through the bedroom door to stay outside and play by himself. He'd been on his own in the yard for what felt like forever, so he decided to do what any intrepid four year old would do and headed out into the neighborhood to look for bad guys who needed a heaping helping of justice.

It was a sunny Saturday morning and Michael wandered for several blocks but the streets in Fairview, Washington were still sleeping in. He squatted down to inspect a caterpillar inching its way along the top of a newspaper. The paper was a little soggy with dew, waiting to be brought in from the walkway that led to the Lenhart house. Michael held out a finger and let the tickly little bug crawl up onto his hand as he sounded out, "Miss Ah...Ah-pull. Apple! Miss Apple Blah... Blah...ssss-some. Miss. Apple. Blossom. One. Nine. Five. Seven. 1957." The headline sat atop a photo of a girl with the biggest smile Michael had ever seen. Someone was

placing a beautiful, sparkly crown on the top of her head. He stood up with a grin, proud of himself for figuring out the words all on his own. “Didja hear that?” he asked, depositing the caterpillar on the Lenhart’s hedge. “I got it all on my own!”

He watched as his tiny new friend scooted away with indifference into the thick leaves, leaving him alone again. Michael closed his soft brown eyes and sighed. Then he had an idea. He popped his eyes open and snapped his fingers. He wasn’t supposed to leave the neighborhood on his own, but it was a such a nice day and he was pretty sure that he’d run into someone he knew sooner or later. There were plenty of places he could find an adventure. If it wasn’t around here, he could look for dragons at the dump, work on his secret fort down by the creek, or play Tarzan on the monkey bars over at Mission Park. But which one? He would let his airplane decide! Digging into his back pocket he pulled out his cardboard airplane. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and scrunched his upturned nose in concentration making the soft dusting of freckles on his cheeks seem to gather in anticipation under his long, dark eyelashes. He raised his hand, gripping the airplane, spun three times, and threw as hard as he could! But the plane must have gotten stuck to his fingers because it fell lamely in a nosedive just a couple of feet from his blue denim Keds, landing with a *thunk* next to an old bean can by the curb.

He bent down and picked up the plane, turning it over in his small hands and inspecting it for any damage, before carefully stuffing it into his back pocket. He toed the rusty can with his shoe, rolling it under his foot before giving it a good, hard kick. It bounced and clanged merrily down the street and he chased after it playing kick-the-can towards downtown. His curly brown hair tumbled down over his eyes and he would stop every now and again to lick his palms and try to tame it back, but inevitably it flopped back down again. He had made it a couple of blocks when he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He glanced up and spotted a little scruffy

dog across the street, foraging in the tall grass in front of the old butcher shop. It was a small dog - maybe even a puppy. Its coat was black and shaggy except for a brilliant flash of white fur running down the right side of its face and over its eye. The dog looked friendly enough and, from the way it was digging through the long grass, seemed pretty hungry.

Michael patted his leg as he called out to it, "Come here, little dog! That's right! Hey there!"

He tried to whistle to get the dog's attention, but he hadn't quite figured whistling out yet and was only able to manage a soft *whooo*. He patted his knees instead and called out, "Come on over here!" The dog looked up and smiled at him with its long tongue lolling out of its slobbery mouth.

"Hey little fella! Come 'ere and let me pet ya!" Michael crossed the street and followed the dog behind the row of buildings that ended with the butcher's on the corner. The two story brick buildings had been there since long before Michael was born and backed up onto a huge stretch of land planted with orchards.

"Come on, now," he coaxed. "That's it! Where'd you come from anyhow? Hey - you wanna play with me?"

The dog responded with a good humored "Woof!" and lowered its chin near the ground between its two front paws, tail in the air wagging excitedly.

"Yeah, boy! That's it! I'm Michael. Let's be best friends and find bad guys together! Wouldja like that?"

"Woof!"

Michael moved closer tentatively, then stopped and waited to let the dog come to him. Soon enough it approached him and sniffed at his hand which was still sticky with residue and a

little fuzzy with lint from the candy he had been snacking on out of the front pocket of his overalls. He knew from his uncle (who had lots of dogs and knew about these things) that you should always be slow to approach a strange dog and let them decide to meet you first.

“That’s it...that’s a good boy! Only exceptin’... hey! I think you’re a girl dog. That’s okay, little girl! You can still help me find bad guys and go adventurin’ if ya want.”

The dog again replied with a “Woof!” and moved closer to inspect the boy’s sticky hands. She sniffed him for a moment and Michael held still. Then her tail began to wag wildly as she started licking him all over - thoroughly enjoying the last remnants of the sugar on Michael’s hands and chin as he giggled and ran his hands over the soft fur of her face. She took a step back, happily licking her chops, then danced in a circle before springing off through the trees.

“Wait for me, girl!” Michael shouted and laughed with glee as he sprinted after the bounding dog.

He had to keep a close eye on her because she was small and the grass almost hid her completely in spots as her black fur blended into the shadows. He thought to himself that she was going to be a really good crime fighting partner if she could disappear like that - even if she was a *she* and not a *he* like he had supposed most crime fighting dogs were. She cut through the trees like she was late for supper. Boy could she run fast! Every once in a while she’d stop and turn around, tongue lolling, to see if Michael was still with her, then she’d spin and break back into a sprint.

Michael ran as fast as he could to try to keep up with her, not paying attention to where he was going or much else for that matter. He didn’t notice that his precious airplane (his favorite that he had ever made *ever*) had inched its way up and fallen out of his back pocket as he ran. It fluttered to the ground at the base of a tree as he chased the dog through the rows of apple and

cherry trees in Mr. Jake's orchard. He also didn't notice that she had led him all the way to the end of Mr. Jake's property and had now gone onto someone else's land entirely. He just couldn't believe how fast and far she could run!

As he struggled to keep up with her and keep his hair out of his eyes so he could see, he tried to think of good sidekick names for his new partner. He had narrowed it down to three of what he figured were the very best names ever as they splashed across a small creek heading toward the edge of the hollow. The scrubby brush grew thicker here where the lower land met the crags. Long fallen boulder-like rocks rested at the base of the mountains surrounding the valley where the town of Fairview lay. Now the going was harder than it had been in the gently rolling land of the orchards. There were lots of knobby tree roots and rocks and the canopy of old-growth pine trees made it harder to tell which way you were heading as the ground began to steadily rise.

"Wait for me, girl! How 'bout...how about Windy?," Michael managed between gulps of air. "'Cause you're fast as the wind! Is that your name? Or else I was thinking - what about WonderDog?"

She spun again and gave him the now familiar "Woof!" before disappearing through a huge, rotted out tree trunk.

Michael sank to his knees and crawled through after her. *Lightning*, he decided as he happily huffed along. With the white mark across her face and her super-speed she was definitely a *Lightning*. He felt the soft moss under his hands and the coolness on his knees as the legs of his overalls slowly soaked up the moisture inside the log. What a swell adventure they were having already and they hadn't even started looking for bad guys yet!

He had just gotten through the other end of the log and was finally catching his breath when he came up short. There was a fast moving stream right in front of him but somehow Lightning had made it to the other side and didn't even look wet! After searching for a moment he spotted some slippery looking stones just breaking the surface of the swift current. That must be how Lightning had crossed! He thought if he was very careful, he could make it across by using them as a kind of bridge.

Michael was a little nervous, but he remembered the swimming lessons he had taken the summer before with his big sister and knew that if he got in over his head, all he needed to do was float. He took a deep breath for courage and then scooted forward very carefully to the edge of the bank. He had gotten so close to the stream that the toes of his shoes were being licked by the rushing water and the rubber soles of his sneakers made squeaking noises on the wet grass as he shifted his weight from foot to foot, trying to gauge the distance. But the first rock was much further than he could step. He knew he'd have to jump for it.

One.

Two.

Three...

jump!

He made it! First rock done. He twisted up his face and stuck his tongue out in concentration as he measured the distance to the next rock.

“Woof!”

“I know, girl! I'm coming! W-wait for me, okay?”

Lightning wagged her tail and started up the bank on the opposite side, quickly disappearing from site. “Lightning? Hey Lightning! Wait for me, girl!” Michael rushed, leaping

forward three more times from stone to stone. He almost lost his footing and slipped on the fourth rock, but was able to regain his balance just in time. With one last jump he made it safely to the other side of the water, landing on all fours and gripping the grass on the far side with his hands as he pulled himself up and away from the water's edge. He had only stopped for a moment to wipe his muddy hands off on his pants, but already Lightning was out of sight again. He climbed up the bank in the direction that he was almost positive he saw the whirlwind of a dog go and called to her as he went, "Lightning?! Hey girl, where are you?!"

He spotted movement in the ferns just in to the right and up the hill a little, so he headed that way. He still couldn't see his partner so he took a big breath to call out for her again, but before he could make a sound there was a terribly loud CRACK. He wasn't sure where the noise came from but he felt an awful stinging pain in his head as the air left his lungs in a rush and his little knees buckled beneath him. He fell to the ground, landing with a quiet thud on the soft layers of wet leaves on the forest floor. He thought he heard a voice, then everything went dark.

#

The light overhead had shifted, casting the long shadows of late afternoon. Footsteps slowly approached and two large pairs of muddy shoes came to a stop just next to the crumpled body of the little boy. The leather of the shoes was cracked and worn with age and had come away from the soles in several places. The crudely knotted laces had broken and been cobbled back together with mismatched pieces of string.

One of the men stepped closer and his feet twitched, toes curling and rubbing against each other in rhythm with the thoughts racing through his head. His hairy hands hung from

frayed sleeves that were too short, exposing half his forearms which ended in fingers with long, dirty nails. The fingers started dancing now, opening and closing nervously like a snake's tongue testing the temperature of the air.

The hands drifted down slowly toward the boy's peaceful face. They lingered by his nose, feeling for the soft puffs of air that meant he was still alive. The bloodshot eyes that hovered above watched as the small body rocked slowly with each tiny inhale and exhale.

The man stood to his full height then and slowly scanned the scene, senses sharp, listening and watching for any signs of other people who might have borne witness to what had happened to the little boy lying in the leaves. Alert to anyone who may have noticed he was missing and would be searching for him. He listened for the cries of a worried parent or neighbor. But there was no indication that anyone knew he was missing. Only the two men and the little dog who nervously danced in circles behind them, waiting for her supper.

With a grunt of impatience, the man bent his large frame low and lifted the boy up and over his shoulder easily - as if he were a feather pillow and not a rough and tumble four-year-old.

He jerked his head and let out a low growl, signaling to his companion that it was time to move. Then he headed off, making his way deeper into the woods with his prize. The other man lingered for a moment to scan the scene carefully. When he was satisfied they had left no trace of themselves behind, he too headed off, calling the dog to heel.

As they retreated, the forest became quiet once again. The only sign that anyone had been there at all could barely be seen. Half-buried in the thick debris on the ground was a small, tin star.

CHAPTER ONE

Betty Lou

Betty was grumpy as she walked back toward home. It was hot and she was wearing what was quite possibly the itchiest dress ever made. It was a hand-me-down, as almost all her clothes were. Such was the fate of a ten (*almost eleven!*) year old girl who had an older sister. Somehow being worn by other people and washed a million times never seemed to make the clothes any softer or more comfortable. This dress was made even worse by being pink and covered with ridiculous amounts of lace and frilly doo-dads. She felt like an angry, sweaty lampshade walking down the street, her sandy-blond hair piled on her head in a high ponytail of curls and bows set carefully by her mother that morning.

She moved her pet chameleon Elizardbeth Bartholomew from the lace front pocket of the dress to her shoulder so the lizard could stretch her thin, brownish-green body in the warmth of the sun that fell there. Betty grumbled to her about how unfair this entire day was going to be.

“Stupid Susie’s birthday party. Stupid Susie’s stupid dress. Why can’t she have a normal party like a regular person with games and dirt and fun?! How is a person supposed to have any fun anyhow when they gotta sit proper like it’s church or something and can’t...even... raise their *arms*... over their... ugh... *head!*”

She yanked at the lace collar of her dress and scratched furiously at her neck as she spotted a nice, rocky patch along the side of the road with just the right amount of mud. She lowered herself into a squat ever so carefully - so as not to disturb Elizardbeth’s sunbath - and began turning over rocks, looking for roly-pollies to feed her small friend. As her bright blue eyes scanned the shadows under the rocks for the little bugs, she failed to notice that the back of

her dress had spread gracefully, blooming like a flower in a particularly spectacular puddle right behind her.

This was usually the start of her favorite day. The weekend meant freedom to run around town with her dog Pedro and Elizardbeth. Together they'd team up with her best pals Denny and Butch to find adventures. All of Fairview, Washington was their playground. They took full advantage of everything the valley had to offer in the way of pirate coves, battlefields, monster hideouts, and secret lairs, and generally reveled in the freedom of being allowed to get as dirty as humanly possible before heading home exhausted when the street lights came on for a hot bath, dinner, and bed.

She had been especially excited about *this* Saturday because it was the day they were supposed to start work on naming their detective agency and converting her treehouse from a pirate ship into their officially-official office for detecting business. Way back in January they helped figure out who stole Pauline Miller's bicycle at school in what Denny recorded in his notebook as "*The Case of the Vanishing Schwinn.*" Ever since, she and Denny had been pouring over their copies of Sherlock Holmes's adventures every single night before bed.

During the day, they kept their eyes peeled for new mysteries to solve. Soon enough, she and the boys had a whole passel of puzzles they'd honed their sleuthing skills on like: "*The Mystery of the Missing Milk Bottles*" - when Mrs. Youngblood was convinced her neighbor was stealing her milk deliveries, but it turned out that she actually just had a whole family of racoons living in her attic with a serious addiction to dairy; and "*What Happened to Mrs. Spillman's Chicken?* -or- *The Killer Strikes at Midnight*" which ended satisfactorily, if a little gruesomely, when the friends were able to vindicate a beloved neighborhood cat and pin the crime on the actual perpetrator - a hungry coyote that had ranged down from the mountains.

Betty had read every Holmes mystery, as faithfully recorded by his friend Dr. John Watson, so many times that she practically had them memorized. Those stories inspired her to work hard on her skills of observation. Holmes was always going on and on to Dr. Watson that you can't just see things, you have to *observe* them. That meant you really had to pay attention. It was just like Mrs. Skidmore was always saying to them in class at school: you can't just hear if you want to learn something, you have to *listen*. Betty had been practicing by observing the bedroom she shared with Susie, then walking out and having her sister change one object. When Betty came back into the room she had to figure out what changed just by observation. She had gotten pretty good at it.

At the same time, Butch was perfecting his tracking skills. He had been the best in his scout troop at tracking, and now he could find and follow trails that most folks couldn't even see. (Betty was especially proud of him for finding the coyote's footprints in Mrs. Spillman's henhouse and knowing how to tell that they weren't from a cat.) Denny was practicing code breaking and deduction and methodically writing down all their adventures in a notebook that he carried with him at all times.

Plus they had Pedro who, even though he was only a little chihuahua, had the heart and nose of a bloodhound. And Lizzy who was even better at observing and clue spotting than Betty on account of how she could move her eyes in two directions at once. Now they finally felt ready to take on bigger cases - real, actual mysteries they could be hired for instead of ones they just stumbled upon - and today they were going to start detecting in earnest. Instead, as she was reminded all morning by the constant itchiness of her too-pink, too-frilly, too-*everything* dress, she was only allowed out for a short while before having to make the dreaded march toward home and her older sister's thirteenth birthday party. *Yuck.*

“Why do I even have to go, Lizzybee?” Betty grumbled. Lizzy navigated around the piles of tulle at Betty’s shoulder to give her a tender touch on Betty’s warm cheek with her cool lizard nose. Betty sighed. “She doesn’t care - I know she doesn’t! She prolly wouldn’t even notice if I wasn’t there. Too busy talking about *boys* with her friends. What’s so great about boys anyway?”

Lizzy lifted each front foot in two tiny lizard stomps. “*I know* Denny and Butch are boys, Lizzy, but they don’t count. Not like that. They’re my pals.”

She tugged at her poofy sleeves, trying to make more room for her armpits to breathe, earning her a scolding look from Elizardbeth.

“Sorry, Lizzy. I know it’s not your fault. Here you go, girl.”

She didn’t exactly know how lizards picked their bugs, but handed her what she thought was the most delicious looking of the roly-pollies that were scrambling for cover in the sudden absence of their rock home. She decided she must have chosen well because Elizardbeth gobbled up the offering eagerly. Still, the chameleon looked at Betty with a side-long glance. This was normally Elizardbeth’s favorite part of the week too after being cooped up in Betty’s book bag all week during school days. But Betty was making it difficult for her to enjoy herself properly with all the fidgeting, scratching and tugging at her dress.

“Hey, Betty Lou. Whatcha doin’?”

Betty scrunched her face up into her most ferocious scowl. The last thing she wanted was for her friends to see her in this froofy get-up. The one saving grace of her Saturday being ruined had been that none of her friends at school would see her looking like a walking Little Miss Revlon doll. She let out a big sigh of defeat as her scowl fell away. It wasn’t Butch’s fault she looked ridiculous. Still, it made her mad that he saw her so she kept her back to him and didn’t look up.

“Hey, Butch. Just gettin’ bugs for Elizardbeth and waiting for Pedro to come back from his walk.” She decided she’d better collect extra roly-pollies for later in case Susie’s party dragged on all afternoon and attempted to drop a few into the lace pocket on the front of her dress. This was proving to be a difficult task as they very determinedly kept crawling back out again, but it did help to have a task to keep her mind off her humiliation.

Just then Pedro came trotting up the street and greeted them both with affection. Butch lifted the sleek, tan chihuahua to his chest and let him give his face a good licking before he released him and plopped down in the dirt next to Betty. He picked up a stick and began carving gouges in the mud to help her trap the scrambling bugs. The roly-pollies teetered over the edges into his trenches and curled up into tiny balls, rolling as they fell and making them easier to grab.

“What’re you doin’ over this way anyhow, Butch?”

“Nothin’ much. I thought we could go play pirates in the creek today since we can’t go detecting - I got a really good stick for fighting and Denny said he’d be the good guy today so I could practice my swashbucklin’.” He paused before adding carefully, “ Nice dress by the way.”

Betty stood up and spun around so fast that Elizardbeth nearly went flying off her shoulder and scurried up into Betty’s hair for better purchase. Butch scrambled to his feet and took a step back. Pedro wasn’t sure what had set Betty off, but knew there was trouble and growled as Betty put her scowl back on. She tilted her chin up toward Butch and balled her hands tightly into fists in front of her. Butch stood a full foot taller than Betty, not even including his white-blond hair which perpetually stood on end in a halo around his head no matter how his mama cut it. But when Betty had her scowl on, he knew she meant business and he nervously took another step backward.

“What did you just say to me, Bernard Cassidy Shaw?”

“Nothin’! I - I... it’s only that I saw you’ve got a dress on. That’s all!”

The last time she used his full name he ended up with a broken nose. That was the day Butch had commented on the fact that she got a new haircut. He covered his nose now reflexively with both hands, taking yet another step back.

There were many unwritten rules in their small group of friends but the biggest was never to notice anything girly about Betty. In fact, just to be on the safe side, you probably shouldn’t notice anything about her, period. And if you happened to *accidentally* see something, you’d better keep it to yourself. Butch rubbed his nose at the memory of her fury and lowered himself back down, gently turning over another rock with his stick.

Betty let her scowl slip, but only a little, and turned her attention to the bugs trying to escape her pocket. Her muddy dress was now dripping black trails down the backs of her dusty legs, soaking into the white, lacy socks folded neatly at her ankles and pooling in her saddle shoes.

She sighed as the rush of anger left her and her shoulders slumped again. “I wish I could pirate today, Butch. It’s Susie’s birthday party, remember? And Mama says I have to be there even though Susie won’t care if I’m there or on the moon on account of being only ten. She thinks I’m a baby even though I’m nearly eleven! ‘Sides, I thought Denny couldn’t play at the creek anymore because his mama says he can’t swim.”

“He can’t,” said Butch, shrugging his shoulders and handing six roly-pollies to Betty. “But Denny says that he only can’t play in the creek when he’s *not* playing pirates. But it’s okay when he *is* playing pirates ‘cause pirates live on the water and it doesn’t matter if they can’t swim or not on account of how they have boats. That’s just facts.”

Betty nodded, impressed with this logic. Denny was probably the smartest boy in their whole grade and he was very good at fixing problems, even if he was bad at other things like swimming. It made her wish for just a second that he was here right now, even if it would mean he would see her in this stupid dress. If Denny were here he could probably think of at least a million, jillion reasons why she shouldn't have to go to Susie's party *and* help her come up with a way to explain it to Mama.

But Denny wasn't here. And while Butch was helpful when it came to building forts, catching bugs, and helping her up over the higher neighborhood fences and tree limbs, he wasn't great at plans and schemes. Besides, he was more scared of Betty's mama than even she was. She sighed again and scratched at the bows on her head, causing Elizardbeth to nip at her finger and scurry back down to her shoulder. She pulled her hand away quickly and sucked at the tiny bite.

"Ouch!... I guess we'd better get home. I prolly have about a thousand roly-pollies now anyhow. Or at least twenty. Thanks for your help with the bugs, Butch. Come on, Pedro." Betty started off toward home with Pedro happily trotting at her heels.

"You want me to walk with you?"

"No thanks. I gotta think about stuff. See ya tomorrow, Butch."

"See ya, Betty Lou." Butch gently rolled the rest of the roly-pollies in his hand back to the dirt, pulled an eye-patch out of his pocket and secured it over his right eye, then headed off in the direction of the creek.

Betty waved dejectedly and wiped her hair up off her sweaty forehead, leaving the top half of her face a smudgy mess. Her bangs stood straight up in the air as her sweat dried and her hairspray from this morning's beauty ritual set again. She grabbed some fresh tar off the road and

popped it in her mouth like chewing gum. Chomping the soft gunk helped her think things through as she kicked rocks down the sidewalk toward home.

It wasn't that her sister Susie was so bad - she was a nice enough person. It was only that she was so *perfect* that Betty couldn't stand it. Susie never got in trouble for talking during class. She never came home and got scolded for tearing holes in her clothes. She never accidentally always came home with stray animals and hid them in her underwear drawer so mama and daddy didn't find them and make her take them back outside again. Nope. It seemed to Betty that the only name ever shouted first-middle-and-last at home was her own:

"Betty Lou Cockram, did you track that mud in here?!"

"Betty Lou Cockram, what on Earth have you done?! And where are your pants?!"

"BETTY LOU COCKRAM, if I catch you sneaking baby skunks into this house one more time!..."

It was so unfair! She always got into trouble even though she had the best excuses for everything! The mud that one time was from helping Niki DeLorey get her bike unstuck from the old road off the back of Mr. Jake's orchard. She could've been trapped there for ages if Betty, Butch, and Denny hadn't been climbing trees looking for abandoned birds' nests nearby and jumped down to help.

She only lost her pants on that one particular day because she took them off to save them from getting soaked when she waded out to save a kitten that had fallen into the river near the old papermill. She couldn't *exactly* remember where she'd left them in all the excitement of rescuing the kitten. And anyway, it was a lovely afternoon for walking in your underwear as *anyone* could tell you who was out that day.

And the baby skunk? She'd honestly thought mama would be more understanding of the whole situation. Especially when she explained how her Sunday School teacher Mr. Steve had taught her that The Bible said we were supposed to take care of the earth and all the critters on it. She argued that skunks definitely counted even if The Bible didn't say skunks *exactly*.

She let loose another sigh and kicked the rock ahead again. She had only made it past three houses or so when an awful commotion behind her made her stop dead in her tracks. There was a scream and the hairs on her arms stood up on end. Betty spun around just in time to see a girl running at full speed straight for her, tears streaming down her face.

“LOOK OUT!”

CHAPTER TWO

Practically Professional

Betty's cry of warning came too late and the girl knocked her backward to the ground. The wad of tar sailed out of her mouth, through the air, and into the lawn. She skinned her elbows painfully on the dry grass of the yard, but thankfully, Elizabeth landed safely on Betty's puffy pink sleeve and Pedro skittered clear of all the flailing arms and legs. The roly-pollies, on the other hand, went everywhere. Betty scrambled to scoop them back into her dress pocket before dusting herself off and getting back onto her feet.

Betty looked down to see that her dress was now a complete and total disaster. But she barely had time to think about how much trouble she was going to be in as the girl, who had also fallen, was now standing and sobbing in front of her.

"Betty Lou is that you? I'm so sorry! I didn't see you! I was just running for help! I couldn't...I couldn't..."

She burst into tears again before she could finish her sentence. Betty recognized the girl even though her face was red and puffy from crying. It was Carole Ingram. Carole was two grades above her in school but in the same homeroom as Susie, and she and Susie were friends. Betty also knew her because her parents owned the movie theater downtown and she often worked there selling popcorn and candy at the concession stand.

"Hey there, Carole. That's alright. We're all a little dusty is all. Are you okay? Did something happen?"

Carole tried to control her tears, but her voice was shaky and garbled as the words tumbled out. "Mom and dad left me and Michael alone while they went to a big meeting for the

movie theater. I was s'posed to watch him but I got mad at'im because he's the reason I couldn't go to Susie's birthday party and anyway he's always so annoying and trying to play with my stuff. So I yelled at him to just go outside and play until Mom and Dad came home but now he's gone and I've looked everywhere and I can't find him! I don't know what to do. I just gotta find him before Mom and Dad get back or I'm in so much trouble. He's so little and I'm the one in charge! I'm the one in chaaargh..."

Betty let Carole keep talking for a bit even though most of what was coming out now was gasps and sobs. She reached up and wrapped her arms around the older girl and patted her thick, almost black hair, trying to help her calm down, but it was honestly taking forever and Betty finally came to the conclusion that if she let her, Carole would *never* stop crying. She took her by the arms, looked up into her brown, red-rimmed eyes and said in her best adult sounding voice, "Carole! You gotta pull it together!"

Carole must've been a little shocked at this because she stopped sniffing mid-sniff and froze, staring at Betty while a tear rolled off the tip of her small, upturned nose and dropped down onto the Peter Pan collar of her white blouse.

Betty smiled up at her reassuringly, "Now that's better! Listen, Carole. I know you're scared right now, but you're doing the right thing. Me an' the boys are practically professional detectives, so you definitely came to the right place."

Carole shook her head in confusion, a dazed look on her tear-stained face. She nervously balled fistfuls of her plaid circle skirt in her hands and choked out, "Bu-but I didn't come to any place, Betty. I ran right into you outside my--"

"That doesn't matter! That's only details! Listen, Carole, this here road is practically at my house and my house is near enough to my treehouse and my treehouse is our club and that's

where you prolly would have found us eventually anyway. Crashing into me just saved you a whole lot of time! And we're gonna help you find your brother."

Carole looked at Betty, then behind and around her. "Who's "we" Betty? You got frogs in your pockets?"

Betty laughed. "Well, me and Denny and Butch of course! We solve mysteries and find all kindsa missing stuff all the time around here. Denny and I have both read every Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew book in the library *twice*. Plus, I know all the ins and outs of every single case that Sherlock Holmes ever set his big ol' brain to - Denny and I practically have them memorized. Nothing gets by Denny - he's great at sleuthing and puzzles and making sure we keep a record of everything - kinda like our very own personal Dr. Watson. On top of that, Butch is the best tracker his Scout Troop has ever had *ever*. He knows this valley even better than I do! Us three are the best in town!" A light nip on her neck and a whine at her feet let her know that she had omitted two key members of the group. "Ow-wouch! Sorry, you two."

She cleared her throat and presented her shoulder to Carole. "Also, you should know that you are in the very good hands...er... eyes and nose of Elizardbeth and Pedro: the best *animal* detectives in town." Lizzy licked her eyeballs in greeting in what she thought was a most professional manner while Pedro dutifully plopped his bottom down and nosed at the air with grave seriousness as if to put his formidable sniffing skills on full display for their new client.

Carole eyed them warily. "I...I don't know, Betty. Maybe I should go ask Mrs. Cook over at the store for hel--"

"Are you kiddin'? Old Mrs. Cook? She's only one person - and she can't leave the store and search around like we can! Besides, just the other day we helped her with "*The Case of Button Bamboozlement!*" Betty put her hands on her hips and smiled at Carole as though this

were a perfectly obvious explanation, but Carole looked completely confused so she continued. “She had Pedro, Lizzy, an’ me look for some old fabric and notions that she’d been searching for for weeks and we found ‘em straight away, buttons and all! What I mean to say is: she can tell you herself how good we are at detecting. And once we have Butch and Denny with us, I bet we find your brother in no time at all!”

Carole considered this new information. “Well, I suppose. As long as we find him before Mom and Dad get home. I guess he couldn’t have gone that far, and if you’re sure —”

“Of *course* I’m sure! Now come on! We gotta get down to the creek!” Betty spun on her heel and headed in the opposite direction of home, Susie’s party, and her Mama who would be expecting her arrival any minute now.

“The creek?”

“Yep! We just need to grab the boys - they’re down there doing pirate stuff. As soon as we tell them about your brother they’ll take off their eye patches and come along directly. You’ll see. We’ll find Michael, bring him home, and no adults ever even need to know about it!”

Betty spoke with such confidence, and Carole had to admit to herself that Pedro did seem awfully good at sniffing. On top of that, Lizzy could look in two different directions at once, which was a whole lot more than she could do. She wiped her eyes and nose on the back of her hands, nodded, and followed as Betty marched off confidently toward the creek.

#

“AVAST YE SALLY-WAG!”

“*Sallywag.*”

“That’s what I said: SAH. LEE. WAG!”

“No, Butch. If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a million times, it’s *scally*, not Sally. Scuh. *Scuh!*”

Butch let his stick-sword drop to his side in a huff and pushed his eyepatch up on his forehead making his halo of blonde hair splay out in fantastic new shapes. “Aw, come on, Denny. I can’t pirate proper if you keep breaking my concentration with all these rules!”

Denny adjusted the driftwood parrot on his shoulder and pushed his glasses back up his nose carefully with his non-sword hand. “Well *I* can’t pirate if you keep calling me Sally! It makes me think of my sister. ‘Sides, I thought we were s’posed to be on the same pirate crew this time. Why do you keep avasting me?”

Butch snapped his eyepatch back down and charged with his sword menacingly. “Pirates! Ain’t! Got! Teams! Denny!” He paused for air then charged again. “Errybody knows that!”

Denny rolled his eyes and blocked another of Butch’s wild swings. He was pretty sure pirates also never had peg legs made from plungers they stole from their dad’s garage, but it was no use arguing with Butch - especially in the middle of a battle scene involving ill-gotten pirate treasure.

“AHOY THERE, YE SCOUNDRELS!”

Both boys spun around and looked up to the edge of the embankment to see Betty waving down at them.

“Ahoy, Black Betty - Terror of the Seven Seas! Pirate Queen and...wait. I thought you had your sister’s birthday party. Man oh man is your mama gonna be mad.”

“Yeah, yeah Denny - but listen! I can’t worry bout that right now. We got more important things!” Betty hollered.

“Like what?,” yelled Butch, now blindly swinging his sword in Denny’s general direction as his eyepatch had somehow slipped to cover both eyes.

“We’ve got ourselves a case, boys! A big one with a real client and everything! Come on up and I’ll tell you all about it! But hey - leave your pirate stuff, ‘cause this is *official* detecting work.”

Official? Butch pushed the eyepatch up and the boys looked at each other for a moment with wide eyes and huge grins. Then they quickly stashed their pirate gear in the hollowed out tree that served as their secret hiding place by the creek. They scrambled up the embankment to where Betty was impatiently pacing back and forth, waiting for them. She stepped to the side to reveal Carole, who’s tear-stained face told them quickly whom they were meant to help.

“Carole, this is Denny and Butch. Boys, this here’s Carole. She’s got a little brother who’s pretty annoying, but that’s not what’s important. What *is* important is that he’s up and gone missing. Carole looked everywhere she could think of close by their house but he’s gone than gone and we need to find him before her Mom and Pop get home so she doesn’t get grounded for the rest of human time.”

Denny reached into his back pocket to pull out his notebook and pencil. Betty knew she could always count on him to keep track of their clues when it came to detecting. That notebook had become invaluable to them as it was a record of every case they had encountered so far, as well as the place they had compiled all their knowledge of the valley and the people in it. That’s why Denny always carried it with him, just in case they stumbled upon a new mystery. He licked the tip of his pencil and looked at Carole seriously. “What can you tell us about your brother? Are there any places he likes to go?”

Carole answered with a shrug of her shoulders. "I dunno. All sorts of places, I guess. He usually stays pretty close to home unless he's with me or his friends. But the Lees are out of town at their Grandma's house this weekend, so he won't be with them. Sometimes he wanders around Main Street looking for dropped coins for candy. He likes to play pinball and loves skeeball at the penny arcade, but he won't have money for that till next week's allowance. He's only four and..." She began to cry again and struggled to speak. "I-I'm sorry. I'm just so worried, it's hard to think."

Denny patted her shoulder. "It's okay. Take your time."

Betty was impressed with how quickly Denny could change from scourge of the high seas to practically professional detective. He was always able to put people at ease with his calm demeanor and was a much more patient listener than she was. She made a note to herself to try to work on that in the future.

Meanwhile, Butch was wrestling violently with his eyepatch, trying to untangle it from his hair while still panting from the recent exertions of the sword fight. As he finally freed himself from the string and tucked the eyepatch into his pocket he asked, "What was he wearin' today? That'll be important so we can recognize him."

Carole squeezed her eyes shut, she rubbed her temples trying to remember. "Let me see...he was wearing his favorite denim overalls and a white tee shirt with...with a blue collar I think. Oh! He was playing Lone Ranger so he was definitely wearing his tin star and probably his sneakers and-" she choked on a sob again. "He just wanted me to play with him. W-why didn't I play his st-stupid game?"

Betty tried to console her. "It's okay, Carole. I'm a little sister so I know what it's like to get on my big sister's nerves. I do it practically *all the time*." Betty said with a wave of her hand.

Lizzy tilted her head and blinked in affirmation. If she could speak, she could attest that many of their adventures started with just such an altercation between the sisters. “Sometimes I wander off when I get mad at Susie for hollerin’ at me, but I always come back. We’re gonna find him - so try not to worry.”

Denny looked up from his notebook and pushed his glasses up again. He used the pencil to scratch his scalp through his dark brown, buzz-cut hair. “Now that’s a good point, Betty: you *do* always come back home. Carole, if your brother makes it back to your house on his own you won’t know if you’re out detecting with us. It’s probably best for you to go back to wait for him there just in case. That’s what I would do.” Butch and Betty murmured in agreement.

Carole’s mouth fell open. She couldn’t believe they were trying to send her back home. “But I want to help! It’s my fault he’s missing and I should be out looking with you three. What if he’s lost somewhere? He’s probably so scared.”

Pedro put his front paws on Carole’s leg and stretched up to lick her hand to comfort her. She reached down and pet him tenderly on the head in return while trying to fight back the fresh tears that had sprung to her eyes.

Betty spoke up. “I really think Denny’s right, Carole. The best way for you to help is to go home and wait. When we find him, we’ll come straight back to your place. And if he beats us home, even better! Either way, we all three gotta be back at our houses when the streetlights come on or we’re in deep trouble, so you know we’ll see you by then for sure.”

Butch, who had a healthy fear of his Mother’s wrath, nodded vigorously and rubbed at his backside remembering his last missed curfew.

Carole sighed. “You’re right, I guess. I’ll head home to wait for him. But please promise to hurry straight back if you find him first.” As the three friends crossed their hearts and Pedro

yipped in agreement, Carole took a deep breath and managed a small smile. “He probably just got carried away playing somewhere. I’m sure you’ll find him. Oh! I almost forgot! I know one good place you can look - Michael used to play with his friends at the dump all the time, but...no. Nevermind. I’m so stupid - that’s no good.”

“Why not?,” Denny asked with a look up from his notebook.

“Well, Mom got really mad at him because he kept coming back home covered in rust and grease with all kinds of rips in his shirts and pants and,” she clutched at an invisible necklace and dropped her voice to mimic her mother, “*smelling like Lazarus!*,” making them all giggle.

“The last time he came home like that she wouldn’t let him listen to his radio shows for a whole week, so I don’t think he’d risk going there again.”

Betty snorted. “Are you kiddin’? The dump is just about the single greatest place in the whole wide world. No amount of ripped pants or mad moms would keep a person from going there.”

“She’s right. I got all sorts of patches on my pants on account of the dump, but it’s always worth it,” Butch chimed in, holding out his perpetually too-short pants by a newly-added knee patch for emphasis.

“But he promised he wouldn’t ever—”

“*Trust* me, Carole. He’s prolly there right this minute, looking for buried treasure or building a fort outta old tires, or somethin’ super fun. And if he isn’t, then that’s one more place to cross off our list!”

Denny jotted this new information into his notebook and asked, “Is there anything else you can think of? Any other games he likes to play?”

“Well, he always takes his favorite paper airplane with him in case he comes across a good spot for flying so I’m sure he’ll have that.”

“What kind of airplane is it?,” Betty asked, while Denny was writing furiously.

Carole hesitated, trying to remember, then snapped her fingers in triumph. “Oh! I know! It’s a - a comet! It’s special because it’s the first one he got from the back of a Corn Flakes box and put together all by himself. He colored it blue with red stars, I think, and wrote his name on the bottom with his crayons too.”

“That’s great,” Denny encouraged her. “Really good details. And Butch and me know all the best flying spots in town so we’ll check those too if we don’t have any luck at the dump.”

“We sure do!” said Butch enthusiastically. “The very best is over on top of the irrigation canals on account of the height and the wind off the water. And since the snow’s been melting the water’s really rushing through! It’s the best spot in the world for flying so long as you don’t slip and fall off the concrete wall and break your neck. Or get carried off by the current and dro-”

Betty cleared her throat loudly and spun around to give Butch her best *you’d-better-hush-up-right-this-second-Bernard-Cassidy-Shaw-or-I’ll-knock-ye-block-off* look. His mouth hung open mid “-own” and he closed it slowly as his cheeks burned bright red.

Betty turned to Carole with an easy smile. “We play there all the time. Like I told my mama: it’s perfectly safe, long as you’re careful.”

“Yeah. We’ve played all kinds of games there loads of times. And none of us got swept away yet. Honest.” Butch offered sheepishly by way of apology, for which he was rewarded with a sharp elbow in his ribs from their petite leader. Betty was irritated that he was spooking their

new client, but she knew his heart was in the right place. Silently she prayed that Michael hadn't gone anywhere near the irrigation canals.

The deep channels were dug so that every spring, melting water from the snowy mountain tops could be directed down into the drier valley below. From there, it could be used by farmers to water the orchards and gardens that flourished around Fairview. The concrete creeks always reminded Betty of the slippery tracks in her Chutes and Ladders board game and she knew that they were extra dangerous this time of year. The spring sun had begun to warm the mountaintops and the snow-melt water was flowing fast and deep. Her own mother had made her promise just the other day not to play there until the water went back down.

Less than a week ago a high school boy had slipped on the wet concrete, fell into the water and nearly drowned. She heard all about it because her dad worked with the boy's father at the concrete yard. He told them over supper that the boy was in the hospital because he needed surgery for a broken ankle and the doctors said he almost died. She remembered daddy saying, *"That boy was lucky to be alive - lucky that he was there with friends who could go get help and get him to safety."*

Betty shuddered at the thought of a four year old going through something like that. And all by himself. Lizzy snuggled into her neck and Betty absentmindedly stroked her tail. She took a deep breath to shake off the fear. After all, there was no use being upset over something you didn't know had happened. Like her mama always said, *"Don't borrow trouble, Betty Lou."*

She turned to Carole, doing her best to look confident and brave. "I'm just sure Michael is at the dump. Like I said, it's the best place in the whole wide world. Why would you want to go anywhere else when you could go there?"

Pedro could sense the sinking ship and started running in circles, wagging his tail and yipping his most encouraging yaps. All four children burst into laughter at his display.

“See?” Betty said through giggles. “Even Pedro knows the dump is the greatest!”

Carole sighed. “I’m sure you’re right. If I think about it, every game he wants to play always involves looking for adventure. The dump sure sounds like a good place to find it. Good boy, Pedro.” She knelt down and let the chihuahua cover her face in kisses. “When this is all over, you’ll have to come to my house for a big treat. And I know Michael will want to meet you. He just loves puppy dogs.”

“Oh, you bet!” Betty said, reaching into her front dress pocket and offering Lizzy a rolly-polly for the road.

Suddenly, Carole’s eyes lit up. “I just remembered! I found this in the backyard and put it in my pocket before I left the house.” She reached into the pocket of her skirt and pulled out a red bandana. “It must have fallen off when he was playing. Michael always wears it when he’s playing Lone Ranger. Will this help?”

“It sure will! Good work, Carole!” Betty said with a huge smile. “Now we’ve got something for Pedro to get a good scent from in case we need to do some tracking. For now though we’ll head straight for the dump, and you better get back home. And try not to worry. Remember - we’re practically professional!”

CHAPTER THREE

The Town Spy

Betty, Denny, and Butch watched as Carole finished saying goodbye to Pedro with a generous rub of his belly, before she stood and started back toward her house to wait for Michael there. They waved encouragingly until she was almost out of sight, then Betty turned and, to the boys' surprise, headed off in the exact opposite direction of the town dump.

"Hey... Hey! Where are you goin'?", Butch hollered after her. "The dump's this way!"

Betty didn't miss a step as she yelled back over her shoulder at him, "You think I don't know the way to the dump blindfolded and dizzy, Butch Shaw? We gotta make a quick stop first."

Denny and Butch ran to catch up with her and Denny panted out, "Whaddaya mean? I thought you told Carole we were going to start our search at the dump."

"We *are*," Betty sighed impatiently. "But before we head out that direction we need to talk to Granny Jackson."

"Granny Jackson?! Aaaaaw, shucks." Butch whined. "What do we have to go and see her for? Last time Granny Jackson saw me she ratted on me for skipping school. I had to do the dinner dishes for two whole weeks on account of her."

"To be fair, you had about as much sense as a fencepost for hiding out in her shed," Denny said with a chuckle but Butch only replied with a grunt.

Betty laughed. "Well what did you expect, Butch? You know she's the town spy. She has a reputation to uphold."

“I know *that*. Only I suppose I thought that she was on our side. She spent the whole of last summer teaching us about plants and rocks and things - we had a grand old time with her. I thought for sure she'd understand that sometimes a person can't be expected to stay cooped up in a boring old classroom on a perfectly good, sunny afternoon.”

“Well, I'm sorry you're sore at her, Butch, but like my Mama says: a dog can't fart in Lincoln County without Granny Jackson hearing about it first. So before we go out running all over tarnation, I figure that the smart thing to do is to check in with her first. You know, to see if she hasn't seen or heard-tell about someone seeing Michael somewhere else.”

“Like Sherlock Holmes' irregulars!” Denny exclaimed with excitement and jotted her name down in his notebook.

“Elementary, my dear Bellingham!,” Betty beamed.

Butch's nose screwed up in confusion. “Sherlock Holmes's what now?”

“His *irregulars*. That's what Holmes called this group of street kids that he used as his own spies around his town. See, he was kinda famous and so he might be noticed lookin' suspicious if he went nosing around places himself. But the irregulars knew the streets and could blend in without anyone thinking they were keeping watch on account of how they were only kids. Holmes said they were as sharp as a needle, and if anyone around here fits that description, it's Granny Jackson. She's always got her eyes and ears open.”

Granny Jackson's house was down one block and across the street from Betty's own house. It was one of the oldest homes in town and, despite its leaning porch, squeaky door, and peeling paint, it had a distinctly cheery character, much like the lady who owned it. When the children approached, Granny Jackson was sitting in her customary afternoon perch in a rocking chair on the front porch. She was wearing her usual uniform of a floral patterned house dress and

stockings that were rolled down to just above her ankles. Her feet were kicked into slippers embroidered with flowers that matched her dress. On the end of her upturned nose were a pair of rimless reading glasses that Betty always suspected were worn for effect rather than necessity as Granny's eagle eyes never missed a thing.

When it came down to it, Betty wasn't sure if Granny Jackson was forty years old or *one hundred* and forty years old. She asked her Mama about it, but as far as anyone knew, her exact age was a complete mystery. Her hair had been gray for as long as everyone in town could remember and she always moved about slowly and deliberately. But Betty was just certain that if she needed to, Granny Jackson could spring like a cat. She grew up in Louisiana and loved to tease that her people were, "half Cajun, half Creole, and the rest 100% alligator." Betty loved to hear her stories about growing up in the swamp and marveled at how she knew more about plants and animals and living off the land than a whole library full of books.

Granny Jackson appeared to be completely absorbed in the sock she was darning in her lap, and hadn't looked up once as the three friends made their way up the porch steps.

Betty had just cleared her throat and was about to greet her when the old lady said, "Bon jour, ma cher. How can I help the *practically professional* detectives of Fairview on this fine afternoon?"

Betty's mouth dropped open. No matter how many times Granny Jackson beat Betty to the punch, it was always a surprise. She put her hands on her hips. "Granny Jackson, how in the sam hill did you know we were—"

"Do you think I can't tell when you're on a case? For one, Monsieur Denny has his notebook at the ready. And Monsieur Shaw never looks so serious unless he is on a case... or in trouble with his Maman," she added with a smirk and a twinkle in her eye.

Butch's shoulders dropped as he moaned a soft, "Aww, shucks."

"So!" Granny said, finally looking up from her sewing. "If you are missing your sister's birthday party today, this must be some serious business indeed. And if you are here, you must need my help!"

"Do we ever! This is our biggest case yet, Granny Jackson. See, there's a little boy that's gone missing. Michael Ingram. Do you know him?"

"Bien sûr! He is a sweet little thing. Always playing games and he sometimes brings in my newspaper from the curb for a penny for the pinball games."

Betty smiled, "I just knew you'd know him! His sister Carole was supposed to be watching him today while their folks were at work, but he ran off and she couldn't find him anywhere. That's why she hired us."

"Then she is a very smart girl," said Granny Jackson and Betty blushed at the compliment. "But I'm afraid I can't help you much. I know he was playing near the old butcher's shop this morning, but I have not heard word of him since. If I were you, I would check the park and the dump for him. I'm sure you'll find him playing and he's perfectly fine. Unless, of course...no. No. Nevermind."

"Pardon me, but unless what, ma'am?," Denny asked.

"But it's impossible! No. No, I'm just being a silly old woman for even thinking of it," Granny Jackson replied, shaking her head and turning back to her sewing. "All the way up here? And besides - it's daylight! Although, there are the shadows... No! No. No one has even heard of such a thing 'round these parts. Not as long as I've lived here and that is saying something."

"Heard of what sorta thing?," Butch asked, nervously rocking from foot to foot.

Granny Jackson put her sewing down and looked out over the houses to the mountains surrounding their valley. The look on her face gave Betty the heebie-jeebies, but she tried to tamp the feeling down. Granny Jackson slowly scanned the horizon before turning to look down over her glasses at the children. "I don't like thinking about it, let alone saying it out loud. It's bad juju is what it is. But where I come from, whenever a child goes missing, one always fears that it could mean there's a Rougarou on the prowl."

"What's a roo-guh-roon, Granny Jackson?" Denny asked, even though he wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer.

The old woman swung her head toward Denny, her deep brown eyes piercing his own. She spoke slowly and with fear they'd never heard in her voice before, "Roo-gah-roo. A Rougarou is a fearsome creature - far bigger than any normal man. They can be well over eight...well, some say even ten feet tall. They walk on two legs like a man, but rougarous are only *half* human. Their other half is wolf. The rougarou have long, black fur that covers their whole enormous body, right down to their huge, hairy feet. They have broad chests and long, powerful arms to wrap around and trap their prey. Their hands look like tremendous paws with claws more terrible than a grizzly bear's. Rougarous have long tails that they can *snap* like a whip!" She clapped her hands together and the three friends jumped! Pedro tucked his tail and softly whimpered and Betty gathered him into her arms.

Granny Jackson leaned in closer to them and continued just above a whisper, "But their faces are the most hideous of all. When they transform, their noses streeech out into a snout and their teeth grow and curve until they claw up out of their horrible mouths. Their lips snarl back into a ghastly grin. Their ears spring up and their eyes glow in the dark - the color of a blood moon. Huge, mysterious, and deadly, cher. They are mostly known to be solitary creatures in all

the stories I've heard of them. But some of the older folk I grew up with used to swear that they had seen whole packs roving together in the larger swamps and forests where they had more room to hunt. The true danger is that we could have a Rougarou among us right now and never know it. During the day, they look like any other man or woman, but at night...at night is when the Rougarou hunts. They can transform themselves at a moment's notice."

"Like a w-werewolf?!" Denny stammered.

"Oh come on," Betty anxiously laughed, chucking Denny on the shoulder. "Granny Jackson's just trying to scare us, aren't you Granny? You know there's no such thing as—"

"Exactly like a werewolf!," Granny Jackson cut her off. "Except the Rougarou does not need a full moon to complete their transformation. They can change their shape at will. They might escape notice for years - working and living alongside you and me. Maybe she is that nice, quiet neighbor lady who keeps to herself, or the drifter coming through town on his way to who-knows-where? They may only take farm animals to avoid detection by normal folk, easy prey whose loss can be blamed on a cougar or coyote."

"*Mrs. Spillman's chicken!*" Butch whispered nervously, nudging Betty and Denny painfully in the ribs with his elbows. "What if it wasn't a coyote after all?!"

"But!," Granny Jackson said, silencing Butch with a pointed finger. "The one thing a Rougarou cannot resist is children. If you cross their path you can try to hide, but the Rougarou will find you. They can smell you with their long, hairy snouts. They have such sharp ears they can hear the very trembling of your body as you cower in fear, hear the blood pumping tha-thump...tha-thump... through your veins. They can dig you out of your hiding place with their sharp, fearsome claws, and snatch you up with deadly teeth. I hope you never hear their howl, mes amis."

She raised her chin and let out a mournful, “*Wooooo-ooooooooou! Wou-wou wooo-ooooooooou!*” before fixing the children again with her gaze.

“If you do, it may well be the last thing you ever hear.”

Butch swallowed down a lump in his throat. “H-how do you know so much about them, Granny Jackson?”

“Ay, me. That is a sad story, cher.” Her gaze returned to the distant mountains and it looked as though she was seeing right through them and into her own past.

“It was a long, long time ago now, but something I will never forget. Back home in Louisiana, my best friend Etienne lived right across the road from me. We shared a birthday, were born only half a day apart, and our mamans liked to joke that we were twins. We were best friends from the day we were born and that’s the truth. He was big like you, Monsieur Butch, but his hair was black as night and his eyes were the color of the summer sky on a cloudless afternoon. He heard tell of the Rougarou, just like I did from the time we were bitty babies. But Etienne didn’t believe in Rougarous. He thought it was just an old story to scare little children into being good for their parents.”

“There are many dangers in the swamps at night and, Rougarou or no, Etienne’s mama and daddy warned him on no account to leave their house after dark - especially on his own. But it was deep into summertime, see? And Etienne wanted to go frog hunting, which everyone knows must be done at night to get the biggest and best frogs. It was the first night of the new moon and Etienne begged his daddy to take him out to the swamps, but his daddy was too tired to go with him that night. He told him to wait until the next night and then they’d go together. If only he had listened,” she said, wringing her hands, utterly lost in the memory.

“Thick clouds covered the sliver of moon the night my best friend vanished off the face of this earth. The sky was as black as tar. The swamp was so still it was like it was holding its breath. So when Etienne’s maman heard a frightful howling somewhere in the night that woke her from her sleep, she thought it must be just a dream. A dark, *terrible* dream. She was uneasy, but went back to sleep because she was sure that her Etienne was safe, sleeping in his own bed. But when they woke up the next morning, Etienne was gone. He was never seen again.”

“How do you know it was the Rougarou?,” Betty asked, arms holding Pedro protectively over her chest. “Couldn’t it have been an alligator? Or a snake or something?”

“We never did know for sure, that’s true. They searched the swamp with boats and nets. The adults from three parishes around formed parties and picked over every acre of woodland. When a gator attacks, it’s a messy scene, see? It may take awhile to surface, but there is almost always something left behind. And snakes don’t make a person just disappear. They never found a scrap of his clothing, nor hide nor hair.” She shook her head sadly.

“The only thing they ever found were Etienne’s footprints by the edge of the swamp. And beside them? Pawprints five times larger than a grown man’s hand that led off into the brush and were lost. For many years after that, the nights were filled with a mournful howling that could be heard piercing the darkness. A howling that woke you from a dead sleep and chilled you to the bone on a hundred degree night.”

Granny Jackson trembled then and Betty shivered despite herself. “And you think that one of these...these Rougarou could be hunting around here somewhere? In Fairview?”

Granny sighed and turned to her. “I would say that it is not impossible. What is it your most favorite detective says? ‘When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains...’”

“...*however improbable*, must be the truth.” Betty quietly finished for her.

“Ah! So. And if it is possible, then you should protect yourselves! Especially if you find that you are away from home and it is past dark.”

Denny, who had been making copious notes as Granny Jackson spoke, looked up from his notebook. “Protect ourselves? How do we do that, ma’am?”

Granny Jackson stood up from her chair and went into her house without a word. When she came back outside, she had three small bundles of light blue fabric tied with ribbon clutched in her hand. She handed one to each of the children as she spoke.

“You cannot *outrun* a Rougarou. You cannot *hide* from them. But you can *outsmart* them. A Rougarou can’t count past the number twelve. No one knows why, exactly, but it’s said that it is part of their curse. If you come across one, take this bag of rice, untie it, and throw it at the Rougarou. He will try to count all the grains and will have to start over again every time he reaches the number twelve. That will hopefully be enough of a distraction to give you time to escape.”

Betty looked at the small bundle in her hand, “I dunno, Granny Jackson. It doesn’t seem like much of a weapon to hold off a ginormous beast that’s eight feet tall.”

Granny Jackson took Betty’s face in her hand and brought her gaze up to meet her own. She smiled mischievously and gave Betty a wink as she said, “Big things come in small packages, cher.”

She stood to her full height then and shooed the children off the porch. “Allons! Quick quick! Go on and solve this case! If you’re not back by dark, I’ll have to call your mamans, so *hurry*.”

CHAPTER FOUR

A Dishonest Person

Michael awoke to discover that he was in a room he had never seen before. He was confused because he couldn't remember how he had gotten there. The space was dark, but there was some light breaking through between the old boards that made up the walls. Little pieces of dust danced through the weak beams of light. He was so hungry that his stomach was aching and his head hurt. His limbs felt tired and the room was very damp and cool. He was shivering, but he couldn't tell if it was because he was cold, scared, or both. He wrapped his arms tightly around himself, trying to find some comfort.

As his eyes adjusted to the light and he took in the room around him, he realized that he had been lying on an old burlap sack on a dirt floor. There were no windows, but an ancient looking iron stove sat in the corner, cold and unlit, and more light came in from cracks and holes in the ceiling where the trees seemed to be trying their best to grow right into the room.

There was a table with one leg missing. The corner was being held up by two old milk crates turned on end. Next to it was a chair with a rotted out seat. In the corner of the room was a bedroll that looked kind of like the sort Michael had seen the hobos down around the railyard carry. The kind that you could quickly pack up and take with you when you had to jump the next train.

Other than that, the room was bare. No food, no water, no other signs of life. Michael stood up on shaking legs and crept to the door. He rose up onto his tippy toes and reached up to grab at the knotted rope that hung from a hole in the door as a handle. He tried to tug it open, but

the door wouldn't budge. He thought it may have just been stuck, so he pulled on it with all his might, but it must've been locked or blocked somehow from the outside.

He called out softly with a tremor in his voice, "Hello? Is anyone there?... I think I maybe got lost somehow. I wanna go home. Hello? C-carole? Lightning? Liiiiight-niiiiing! Are you there girl?... Anyone?... Hello?"

The only response to his cries was the sound of creaking tree limbs, gently bending with the wind outside.

He was trying to figure out how to get out of the room so he could remember where he was and how to get back home, but the throbbing in his head was making it hard to think. He reached up to gingerly rub his tender scalp but his hair felt funny, and when he pulled his hand away to look at it, his fingers were dark and sticky with blood. Michael's heart started pounding quickly in his chest and he broke out into a cold sweat. He wished very much that he hadn't wandered quite so far from home. He edged his way along the wall of the strange room and sank back down in the corner, hugging his knees to his chest and making himself as small as possible. He tried and failed to keep back the tears that were springing to his wide eyes.

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Betty sniffed at the strange little rice bundle. It sure smelled funny. She couldn't put her finger on why, but it wasn't like any rice she had ever smelled before. It was kind of spicy. Lizzy came in for an inspection, but backed away from it and rubbed her nose against Betty's shoulder to clean it.

Betty, Denny, and Butch pocketed the weird parcels of rice, thanked Granny Jackson and headed off down the leaning steps of her front porch. Betty turned to look back at the old woman over her shoulder and found that she was looking at Betty too, staring at her intently and whispering something over and over. Was it a prayer? Some kind of magic swamp spell? With Granny Jackson either were equally possible. Whatever it was, it did nothing to dispel the gloom that had settled around Betty's shoulders. She smiled weakly and waved goodbye again before her eyes settled on her shoes as she moved forward with the boys down the street.

It's not that she believed in rougarous *exactly*, but something about the story and the way it made Granny Jackson tremble so made it's way down into the pit of Betty's stomach and sat there like a cold, heavy stone. Granny Jackson never got spooked - not even when there was something dire happening like a huge storm rolling in or when a rabid dog was spotted roaming the valley. Betty had been so caught up in the excitement of landing their first official case, that she hadn't stopped to think that they may be walking right into a very dangerous situation. The sound of Denny's pencil scribbling on his notebook as they walked brought her back to herself. She turned to see that he was frowning with the effort of trying to write while not tripping over cracks in the sidewalk as he walked.

"You still making notes?"

"Mm-hmm," he mumbled before circling something and then putting the book and pencil back into his pocket. "I don't want to miss anything, seeing as how it's our first official case and all. Watson always wrote down all the details."

"Who's Watson?," Butch asked, tossing his bundle of rice up into the air and catching it like a baseball.

Denny and Betty stopped in their tracks and stared at him in disbelief. “WHO’S WATSON?” they said in unison. Butch turned around to find his two best friends looking at him like he had three heads.

“Butch Shaw, if I didn’t know you since we were three, sometimes I just wouldn’t believe you were real. Who’s *Watson*?!” Betty said again, shaking her head and laughing. “Dr. John Watson is Sherlock Holmes’s best and only friend. He lives with him in the famous apartment at 221B Baker Street in London and helps him solve his cases. They interview all their new clients together. Watson is his back-up in all the really dangerous scrapes and adventures that they get into. Plus he helps fill in all the blanks on stuff that Holmes doesn’t bother cluttering up his brain with. Then Dr. Watson writes down all of their adventures so that people all over the world will know that Holmes is the best detective who ever lived!”

Butch threw his arms around their shoulders with an easy grin and said, “See? If I knew all this stuff already, who would you guys have to tell your stories to?”

Laughing together, they turned off and headed for the dump. They weren’t exaggerating when they said it was a place they knew well. The three went there all the time and found all sorts of amazing things they couldn’t believe people had thrown away.

One time, Butch had even found a *perfectly good* dead gopher - it wasn’t squished or anything. He carefully carried it all the way home in his arms, but when he proudly held it up by a stiff back leg to show it to his mother she screamed and promptly fainted away onto the kitchen floor. Needless to say, he wasn’t allowed to keep it. Still, it was an incredible find and the three friends searched often to try and discover something else that could possibly measure up to epicness that was *The Gopher*.

They decided to walk the railroad tracks to the dump. It was the quickest way and one of their favorite routes because they could look for hobo hieroglyphics - symbols the travelers used to communicate with one another on the road - on the way. The men would leave marks along the tracks and around town to let others on the rails know if there was food, work, or shelter available.

With a simple sketch they could let someone know when they'd been there, leave a warning about a farmer who had mean dogs, or even if there was a particular house that needed to be avoided because the people there were sick. Sometimes the markings reported that a town had been spoiled all together because of too many other hobos around. If you knew how to read them, you'd know if the road you were walking was a good thru-way or a dead end, or if there was a safe barn to sleep in and good water to drink.

Or if there was trouble.

Betty, Butch, and Denny had learned all about the drawings from the men and women her Mama would sometimes feed on their front porch in exchange for doing chores around the house or helping out in the yard. Denny had dedicated a whole section in his notebook to the symbols he and his friends had found as they traipsed along the tracks on their various adventures. The three friends would copy down any new markings they'd come across and try to guess at their meanings. Then, whenever there was a hobo waiting for their supper back at Betty's, she and the boys would pour over the findings in their notebook with them to see if they had deciphered the codes correctly. They'd pepper them with questions about their experiences living life on the rails until her Mama inevitably chased them off the porch to, "let the poor soul eat in peace!"

They looked now for any new symbols as they headed in the direction of the dump.

“I’m sorry if I scared her back there at all,” said Butch. “Carole, I mean. When we were talking about the canals I just got excited. I didn’t think about how little Michael was until I’d already started talkin’. And we’ve played along there since we were at least his age so I didn’t think she’d get so upset.”

“I know, Butch,” Betty said, nudging him with a friendly elbow. “But you gotta remember that we never go there alone. Not ever. And even with the three of us together, Denny’s mom would like as have a heart attack if she knew we were within a mile of ‘em.”

“*She’d* have a heart attack and *I’d* be grounded for a year,” Denny grimaced, his warm, chocolate brown eyes scanning the area.

As they were approaching the road to the Larsson place, Lizzy started doing little push-ups on Betty’s shoulder to get her attention. “What is it girl?,” Betty asked.

Denny followed the tiny lizard’s gaze and noticed a freshly drawn symbol left in chalk on an electric pole. “Look over there! Good eye, Lizzy!”



“Wait, wait!” Butch panted as he rushed forward and gently sandwiched himself between his much smaller friends. “It’s my turn to guess first.” He absentmindedly scratched at his slightly crooked nose, staring at the marking.

“Hang on a minute... I’m pretty sure we’ve seen this one before.” He snapped his fingers in triumph. “I know! ‘*A dis-honest person lives here!*’”

“Well, knock me over with a feather,” Betty said in disgust, shaking her head in the direction of the Larsson house as she kept walking. She picked up her pace a little as she didn’t want to linger anywhere near the old homestead for any longer than absolutely necessary. Everyone in town knew the Larssons were the worst kind of people. Mama said Mister Larsson didn’t care about anyone but himself. “*He’s so mean, he would steal the coins off his dead mother’s eyes,*” she said. Betty wasn’t sure what that meant exactly, but she knew from her mama’s tone of voice it was no good. She’d seen herself how he yelled and threatened and raised his hands at people in town and most folks readily gave him a wide berth. But all that was nothing compared to how he treated his own kids. They were rotten alright, but Mr. Wayne Larsson made them that way by fist and foot, Betty had no doubt.

Mrs. Larsson didn’t seem quite as awful as her husband, but it was hard to tell since her personality was muted by a near constant state of exhaustion from running after her five truly *terrible* sons. Jeff, who in Betty’s estimation was the worst of all the Larssons by far, liked to brag about how his daddy taught him to kick their dogs to make them mean - that way no one would want to come messing around their place. Susie came home crying the day she heard about it and begged their daddy to go to the police.

Betty remembered mother saying that, “*trying to change people like that is like pounding sand down a rat hole.*” She meant that it was a never ending task and so it was useless to try, but even so Betty saw that Mama fought back her own tears as she said it and let her frustration out on the bread dough she was kneading on the kitchen counter for that night’s dinner.

Just the thought of it made Betty seethe even now. Who could kick a dog? Her daddy had taught her that there was no such thing as a mean dog unless a person or a sickness made them so. She scooped Pedro up into her arms then and they both held their breath as they passed the

Larsson house. None of the friends spoke until they were well clear of that dark place - it was almost as bad as walking past a cemetery.

Soon enough they made it to the dump. Their first stop was at the lean-to that served as a sort of office for Mr. Jimmy, the dump manager. He received a small salary to keep an eye on the place and also got first pick of the best metal pieces and car parts - which the friends agreed was way better than getting paid with boring old money. Betty loved Mr. Jimmy because of his kind eyes and easy going nature. He was always humming some old hymn or other and when he did, Betty could feel his beautiful, deep voice resonate in her own chest, just like the organ at church. Plus, he always directed the children to the all the best new stuff.

It was because of Mr. Jimmy that they once found twenty whole dollars in change under the seat of a fancy car that had been towed in after the owner's son drove it into a ditch and broke the front axle. They lived like kings for weeks - going to the movies and gorging on ice cream with extra sprinkles at the Fairy Queen till they got the best kind of sick.

“Well, I’ll swan! If it isn’t Betty and the boys - how are my three favorite treasure hunters? Looking for something special? Or are we playing soldiers today? I got a fresh pile of tires that’d be great for a barricade!”

Betty extended her hand and greeted Mr. Jimmy solemnly, “Thanks, Mr. Jimmy. That’d be just fine any other day, sir, only *today* we’re here on *official* detecting duty.”

Mr. Jimmy straightened up and tried to match Betty’s serious expression. “Official detecting duty?! Well then, Mizz Cockram, and Associates - in what way may I be of service?”

Betty appreciated that Mr. Jimmy knew when she meant business. She put her hands on her hips and surveyed the scene knowingly, she and Lizzy scanning the huge piles of debris as she spoke with a tone she imagined was very detective-like. “Well, Mr. Jimmy, we got a real

doozy of a case on our hands. It's a case of a missing kid. Not big like us, now. He's only a little fella. Yay high, I reckon." She held her hand up to her own shoulder in measurement. "You seen any kids of that type around here today?"

Mr. Jimmy lifted his tweed flat cap to smooth back his soft, thinning hair, placed it back on his head and rubbed at the stubble on his chin as he hummed to himself for a moment before answering. "Well, Mizz Cockram, I can't rightly say. We do get all sorts 'round these parts, as you are well aware. What does this missing kid look like?"

Denny stepped forward then, notebook in hand and ticked his way down the list he had made so far. "His name is Michael, sir. He is four years old. Brown hair. Last seen wearing overalls and a white t-shirt with a blue collar." He gestured to his own shoulder then, "As Betty mentioned, he is approximately this tall. He may or may not have been flying a blue paper airplane with red stars. He has been missing since late this morning, and is known to enjoy the dump."

The smile fell from Mr. Jimmy's face and he looked genuinely concerned. "Now wait a minute. That sounds just like the little Ingram boy. Is that who you're looking for?"

Betty perked up, "Yessir, Mister Jimmy! Have you seen him? Is he here now?"

"Well no. Not that I've seen, anyway. I don't see everything, but there isn't much that gets by me."

"Do you mind if Pedro has a sniff around to see if he can find anything?," Betty asked.

"Go right ahead, little bloodhound," Mr. Jimmy said with a wink.

Betty pulled Michael's bandana from the front pocket of her dress, carefully brushing a couple of roly-pollies clinging to it back into her pocket and held it out for Pedro to sniff. He

buried his little black nose in it for several seconds before spinning and setting off, nose to the ground.

Mr. Jimmy scanned the yard and said thoughtfully, “Now that I think on it, I don’t recollect having seen him around here in a dog’s age. He’s a sweet kid, that Michael. I’ve missed having him come by. Matter of fact, now that you mention it, the only folks I *have* seen round here today are a couple of real unsavory types.” He paused and looked at them with worry in his eyes. “The exact types you three should steer well clear of. Nothing but trouble. Mm-hmm. You hear me?”

“Yessir. We’ll be careful. Can you tell us anything about him? Michael, I mean.” Denny inquired, furiously taking notes.

Mr. Jimmy always had his white wood pipe in his mouth or in his hand, and he was usually gesturing with it to make a point, but none of the friends could ever remember seeing him actually smoke it. He pointed at them with the mouth end of it now and looked down at them from beneath raised eyebrows as he spoke. “Now listen here, you three: I mean it. I know what trouble smells like, and those two had a stink comin’ off them a mile away, slinking around like they were. Please don’t go anywhere near them.”

He waited for the three to nod their agreement before continuing. “As far as little Michael goes, he used to like coming here looking for ‘bad guys’ I think he always said. And, let me think... fighting dragons mostly. He’s usually here playing with the Lee kids. He is always polite and makes sure to thank me for letting him play here. Say, have you three told any grown folks about this? Talked to his parents or Sheriff Wilkins? If he’s gone missing, he could be in serious trouble.”

“It is serious, sir,” Butch chimed in. “His sister Carole told us all about it. That’s why we’re on the case.”

Pedro made his way back to the group and sat down with a plop at Betty’s feet, his little head hung low. “Nothing, huh, buddy? That’s alright. We’ll find him.” Betty gave him an encouraging scratch behind the ears. “How about you, Lizzy? Anything?” Lizzy had been circling Betty’s shoulders as she scanned the dump. She made one more circuit before settling sadly against her neck.

“Thanks for looking,” Betty said and gently caressed Lizzy’s back before turning her attention back to Mr. Jimmy.

“Well, thanks very much, Mr. Jimmy, but if you and Lizzy haven’t seen him around and Pedro didn’t smell him around, we’d better hurry up and keep on detecting somewhere else. We’ve got some other leads we need to follow up on.” Betty led the boys off and yelled over her shoulder, “Oh, and save any of the good stuff for us, Mr. Jimmy! We’ll be back, sir!”

Mr. Jimmy smiled and waved, but had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He made a note to himself to check in with the Sheriff as soon as he headed home for the evening.

CHAPTER FIVE

Competition

The detectives were retracing their steps back along the railroad tracks in order to follow the quickest path toward the irrigation canals - the next place on their list to search for Michael. They were disappointed, but not disheartened that they hadn't found him already. Betty was just positive he'd turn up soon. And once they saw him safely home they would return to the dump in triumph and maybe get in a good game or two before dark.

They were deep in discussion about everything they could build with all those tires Mr. Jimmy was saving for them and had almost made it back to the far side of the Larsson place. Denny was explaining how they could attach the rubber to the bottom and sides of their pirate raft to make it more seaworthy, or at least creek-worthy.

Betty was trying to keep up with the conversation, but Lizzybee was distracting her, racing from shoulder to shoulder across her chest. "Lizzybee, you are fit to be tied! What's the matter, girl?"

Just then, a huge rock came whizzing through the air and zinged by Denny's head! It barely missed him, coming close enough to make his hair fly up in the air from its wake. Betty turned in time to see Eric, the oldest Larsson boy, loading another rock into his slingshot by the side of the Larsson's shed.

"TAKE COVER!" she yelled.

The friends turned to scramble down the far side of the railroad tracks, but came face to face with two more of the Larssons: Mark and Jeff. Pedro growled menacingly and the detectives froze in place. Betty looked for another escape route but it was no good - they were surrounded.

These three particular Larssons were older than Betty and her friends. Eric was 15, Mark 14, and Jeff 13, but because they missed so much school, Eric was in Susie's class, Mark was in their class, and Jeff in the class beneath them. Betty thought this made them all even bigger bullies. Although they claimed they didn't care about school anyway, and that they only came so the sheriff would leave them be, anyone who knew them could tell they hated to see the other children move up year after year, skipping over them and happily leaving them behind. They took their jealousy and embarrassment out on the younger kids every chance they could get.

"Well, well, *well*. Whatta we got here, boys?," snarled Eric, tossing another rock into the air threateningly as he stalked up behind them. He was tall for his age with skinny arms and legs that were too long for his body and stuck out at odd angles. That, combined with his black hair, beady black eyes and pinched mouth gave him the overall appearance of a human spider.

"Buncha little bitty babies, I reckon," answered Jeff as he picked at his large and yellowed front teeth with his pocket knife and spit something foul on the ground near Betty's saddle shoes.

Pedro answered the insult with a wave of furious barking and lunged toward Jeff with snapping teeth, but the Larsson boy jumped back just in time.

He tried to cover up his fear of the tiny chihuahua with a sneer and a forced laugh. "Lucky you got friends around, mutt. You're the perfect size for kickin' and I'd make double sure you don't bite no more. It ain't so easy to bite with no teeth."

Betty stepped forward, balling her fists in fury, "You even think about it, Jeff Larsson, and you won't need braces no more 'cause I'll knock them buckteeth of yours from here to kingdom come!"

Mark and Eric doubled over with laughter and Jeff's face flared so hot his freckles turned purple all the way up to his dirty, matted, red hair. He punched Mark hard in the arm but that only made him laugh harder at his brother's humiliation by a little girl. Between gasps of air he managed, "Oooo, she got you good. Look at 'im! Madder than a wet hen!"

Butch looked sideways and gestured to Denny and Betty that they should make a run for it while the Larssons were distracted. He tried to bolt himself, but Eric was faster and caught him by the wrist with his long, spindly fingers. He pinned Butch's arm behind his back painfully. Eric was easily six inches taller than Butch, which made him a foot and a half taller than Denny or Betty. He had wrestled Butch down onto his knees now and kept twisting his arm. It was going to take more than muscle to help Butch now.

Denny held his notebook aloft and mustered up his most serious voice, "N-now you three listen here! We are detectives on... on official detecting business! You'd better let us go on our way or you'll be in big trouble."

Mark snatched the notebook from Denny's hand and held it out of reach. He too was tall, though not quite as tall as Eric, and had the same black hair and eyes. His eyebrows hung like angry caterpillars over his deep set eyes and his mouth was set in a perpetual scowl. Denny jumped fruitlessly for the precious notebook and Butch let out a howl of pain as Eric twisted his arm even tighter, pushing him forward so his face smashed into the ground.

Betty rushed forward and kicked Mark in the shin as hard as she could. He dropped the notebook, but Jeff grabbed it from the ground before she could get to it.

He sneered at her in triumph with lips that were too big for his face as he taunted her, waving the book back and forth in front of her. "What's so important about this stupid notebook, huh? What a bunch of squares." He let loose a laugh that ended in a snort. "Got some secrets in

here, do ya? Love letters I bet. Lessee...“ He scrunched up his face in concentration as he attempted to read aloud, “Mm... mm-mih-is-sing boy. Missing boy! Ha! Nuh. Nah-may. No, I know. Name. Name: Mm-eye...mm-eye...”

“Give it here, ya goof.” Mark said as he yanked the book out of Jeff’s hands. “You keep readin’ it and we’ll all have beards before you’re through.” Jeff’s face burned again with anger and he pulled his knife back out, opening it and closing it with force as he looked daggers from face to face.

Betty eyed Jeff nervously but thought that maybe she could convince the boys to let them go if she could only watch what she said and keep her temper in check. She knew these boys were rotten, but they had little brothers too after all, and who knew? They could have even seen Michael that morning. Maybe they would help if she could just say the right things and not let her anger get the best of her. Like Mama always says, *you get more flies with honey than vinegar.*

She took a deep breath and tried to sound as friendly as she could. “You’re no dummy, Jeff. Denny’s just got bad handwriting is all. Even he has a hard time readin’ it sometimes.”

Jeff glared at her and opened his mouth to get her with a comeback, but froze in confusion as it slowly dawned on him that she had actually defended him.

Denny caught on quickly and nodded ever so slightly at Betty as he joined in. “Yeah, that’s my fault. My worst grades at school are for handwriting. Mrs. Skidmore says it’s not much better than chicken scratch.” He laughed nervously, cleared his throat and continued. “It, um, it says that we’re looking for a four year old boy named Michael Ingram. He’s been missing since this morning and we’re trying to get him back home. Maybe he passed by this way?”

Mark threw the notebook down with a look of practiced boredom, but at the same time seemed to Betty to be grateful not to have been caught out for not being able to read himself. He

scratched at his head of thick black, scraggly hair, then sniffed his fingers in thought. “Ingram? Ain’t they the ones that are in that big ol’ house over on Elm? What do they have to do with you three weirdos?”

“Not much, usually.” Betty said, relieved to have moved their focus off of torture and general mayhem, if only for the moment. “I only know his sister from school. She came and asked us for help when she couldn’t find her brother.”

At that Eric released Butch’s wrist and kicked him onto his back. His side ached painfully where the kick landed, but at least his arms were now free. He stood and slowly moved back toward Betty and Denny, chiming in. “We were playin’ pirates, but she was awfully upset, so we said we’d help find her brother. That’s all.”

“Playin’ *pirates*?! HA!” The sneer returned to Jeff’s orange-tinted face and he stepped forward with the knife still open in his hand and used it to point at them menacingly. “How are a bunch of pirate playin’, frilly-pink-dress wearin’ ankle biters supposed to help anyone with anything?”

That did it.

In one smooth motion, Betty dropped down, grabbed a handful of dirt with her left hand, threw it in Mark and Eric’s faces, and on her way back up landed a solid uppercut to Jeff’s freckled jaw. The older boys were hollering and rubbing at their eyes, but Jeff recovered quickly and lunged at her with his knife. He caught the ruffle at her neck, almost hitting Lizzy, and split the fabric clean in two.

Before he could take another stab Pedro sprung and leapt forward. Jeff tried to side step out of the way, but this time Pedro’s teeth found purchase and he hung from the horrible boy’s crotch, growling and shaking his tiny body with all his might.

Jeff dropped his knife in horror and screamed bloody murder. Pedro let go at the piercing cry and jumped back into Betty's waiting arms as Jeff fell to the ground in agony yelling through groans of pain, "He's killed me! I'm dead! I'm dead and I'm gonna kill that mangy dog!"

Eric and Mark were still rubbing at their eyes but they stumbled forward, reaching out and grabbing toward the detectives, when behind them the door of the Larsson house slammed open with a tremendous bang!

Everyone froze as Mr. Larsson came storming out of the house, hurling the bottle in his hand and shattering it against the shed into a million pieces. He lurched, unsteady on his feet, as he came thundering toward them.

"I thought I told you good fer nothin's to keep it quiet! How's a man suppos' to sleep with all this racket?!", he slurred, glaring at his own children with a look of pure malice. Jeff was still rolling on the ground and sobbed through angry tears, "They sicked their dog on me, Pa! We wasn't doin' nothin' and they attacked us outta nowhere!"

Mr. Larsson swung his head toward the injured boy and sneered at him. "You let these little `babies beat you up? Quit yer bawlin' and get up or I'll slap you into next week."

Jeff scrambled to his feet and took cover behind his brothers as Eric spoke up. "But it's true, Pa! We weren't doin' nothin' and they came over here trespassin' onto our property. They claim they're lookin' for some missing kid."

At that, the swaying man stepped toward Betty and the boys, wiping the drool that had dripped from his mouth down his scraggly black beard with his dirty sleeve. He grinned wide, exposing a jagged row of teeth the color of old cardboard. "Missing kid, huh?"

Betty bravely stepped forward to face him. This case was too important not to interview everyone she could, no matter how much they frightened her. "Yessir. Michael Ingram is only

four years old. He's been missing since this morning and we're trying to find him. We're detectives." At that Mr. Larsson burst into laughter. The stench of his breath made Betty step back away from him and she held Pedro more tightly in her arms as he let out a low growl and bared his teeth at the man.

"You best be controlling that cur, little missy. You control him or *I will*." His bloodshot eyes shone with the threat.

He ran his hands through his long, greasy, black hair and swung around to face his boys again. "If you three had the sense God gave a turnip, you'd be out lookin' for that kid yer own selves. But as per usual yer about as good as an egg suckin' dog." He took a swing at Eric and caught him across the back of the head. Eric yelped with pain but quickly quieted so as not to encourage a second blow. "Didn't ya think there might be a ree-ward for a missing kid? 'Specially one from that side of the tracks.'

"No, Pa, we didn't—" Eric started.

"Course you didn't! Buncha idiots I've got. Not two brain cells to rub together between the lot of you. Now, get inside and get yer boots on! If they're handin' out money for missing kids around here, they're gonna hand it out to you," he growled, pushing Mark hard in the back and kicking at his sons as they all headed back inside.

Without missing a beat, Betty and the boys took off at a sprint, quickly putting as much distance between themselves and that awful place as they could. They moved fast, cutting through a neighboring orchard, taking extra pains to look back frequently to make sure they weren't being followed. When they were well clear of the Larssons they all three finally sighed with relief.

Butch rubbed his sore arm. "If they aren't the worst then I don't know what."

Betty shook her head. “Lizzybee tried to warn me, didn’t you girl? I’m sorry I didn’t listen.” Lizzy touched her nose gently to Betty’s cheek. She was just happy they made it out relatively unharmed.

Betty looked down then. “And Pedro - you were so brave! We definitely wouldn’t have made it out of there without you.” Pedro lifted his chin, trotting proudly at her side.

“Good job, Pedro!” said Denny. “We’re gonna need your nose from here on out, that’s for sure. And your eyes too, Lizzy. You let us know if there’s any sign that those rotten folks are following us.” He shuddered. “We’re not the only ones out looking for Michael anymore.”

CHAPTER SIX

A Clue

The sun was beginning to sink in the sky by the time Betty and the boys finally made their way toward the irrigation canal. They didn't take the fastest route there, which they knew meant they were taking a big risk. They could miss curfew as it was getting awfully late in the afternoon, but they couldn't take the chance of being followed by and possibly having to fight the Larsson boys again. That would waste even more precious time. So they wove through a couple of orchards before doubling back toward the spot they thought Michael would have most likely gone to fly his airplane. Lizzy and Pedro were on high alert and nobody spoke much as they walked.

As they approached the canal, Denny cried out in frustration as he pulled out his notebook. He angrily flipped through the pages, searching for something.

"What is it?" Betty asked.

"I knew I was forgetting something! It's the men!"

"What men?"

"I was so distracted by the plans for our raft and the tires... and then the fight with the Larssons. I never wrote down any details about Mr. Jimmy and the men he warned us about. That could be vital to the case."

"You're remembering now, that's what's important. Butch and I didn't remember either, did we Butch?" Butch was eyeing a nearby pear tree, heavy with fruit and didn't answer. She giggled, "It's a good thing Butch doesn't have the notebook. The pages that weren't stuck together would only be filled with crumbs and notes about snacks."

“Hey! I can’t help it!” Butch whined, reaching for the fruit. “Detecting is hard work. Makes me almost as hungry as pirating.”

Denny scrunched up his face as he re-read what he’d gotten down so far. “He said they were trouble, but he didn’t tell us anything more about them, did he? What they looked like or where they were headed or anything?”

Betty shook her head. “Nope. Just what you said - that there were two of them, they looked like trouble, and that we should stay far away from them. After dealing with those Larssons I’ve had all the trouble I need for today, thank you very much.” Pedro huffed in agreement - he still had a sour taste in his mouth from Jeff Larsson’s jeans and he nibbled at a mouthful of grass as they moved through the orchard to cleanse his palate.

Denny sighed and tucked the notebook back into his pocket. “Trouble or not, we may not have a choice. Michael wasn’t at the dump, the Larssons didn’t see him, and if we don’t find him at the canal, we may have to question those two men and see if they know anything. At the very least they might have seen him. And at worst: they might have something to do with him being missing.”

“We should also make sure they aren’t the rougarous Granny Jackson was telling us about. Throw some rice at ‘em or something. If they smelled funny to Mr. Jimmy, maybe that’s why,” Butch added.

Lizzy tucked herself closer into Betty’s neck and shivered. “Me too, Lizzy. I don’t fancy looking for them any more than you do.” She turned to the boys then. “I know you two are right, but why don’t we just say we’ll cross that spooky bridge when we come to it. For now, let’s file them next to Granny Jackson’s rougarou as... possible suspects.”

“Speaking of bridges,” Butch said through a mouthful of pear, “we’re here!”

He finished his snack as he led the way up the narrow walkway to the bridge that allowed dry passage across the irrigation canal and dropped the core of the pear down into the water. It was quickly carried away in the rushing current. The water was still just as high and swift from the snow melting in the mountain pass above the valley as it had been the last time they were there. They had to speak louder to be heard over the roar it caused below. The speed of the water also caused a strong wind to blow up as it sped along through the narrow concrete basin.

From the height of the center of the canal bridge they could see a fair distance all the way around them. There was no sign of Michael anywhere, but they called out for him anyway.

“Miiiiichaeel! Hey Michael - are you out here?”

“Michael Ingraaaam! We’re friends of your sister! You here, Michael?”

“Michael! Michael, it's time to go home! Come on out!”

“It’s no good, fellas. He may have been here earlier, but there’s no sign of him now,” Betty said, thankful that there was no indication that the boy had been near the water down below. “We’d best head back home for now. We can stop in at Carole’s to check and see if he made it back there and still high-tail it home before the streetlights come on if we hurry.”

“I just hate to go home with an unsolved case on our hands,” Denny sighed.

Betty put her hand on his shoulder. “We all do, but if he *didn't* make it back home, we can’t help any kind of search party that goes out lookin’ for him tomorrow if we’re grounded. Look, we can use the walk back to strategize our next steps in case he’s still out here somewhere. That way if we need to, we can head back out with a solid plan to look for him as soon as the sun’s up. And even if it turns out we don’t need it, making a plan will be good practice for our next case.”

“And if we have to look tomorrow I can bring supplies too. I have my backpack from scouts and it has room for all kinds of stuff. Like snacks,” Butch said as his stomach growled.

“Everyone knows it’s much easier to go detecting for a person when you’ve got snacks.”

Denny cracked a smile at that and pulled out his notebook again. “You’re right. Come to think of it, Holmes and Watson do an awful lot of strategizing over a good breakfast or dinner.”

“That’s pure Science! Mrs. Martinez says, ‘You’ve got to FEED your BRAINS, children!’,” Butch aped, looking down his nose at them and speaking in the shrill voice of their dreaded Science teacher.

“Alright, alright!” Denny laughed. “Let me just cross this off the list so we don’t for– HEY! *Oh no!*”

Denny scrambled as a huge gust of wind caught his notebook and took it right out of his hands and into the air. Without a second thought he lunged over the thin railing of the bridge after it, reaching out in vain to try to catch it but it had flown too far out of his reach. His body started to tip forward and down then and he swung his arms back to try to right himself and grab the railing, but it was too late! His hands couldn’t find purchase and his feet tipped up off the ground as his whole body started to tumble toward the rushing water below.

Betty and Butch jumped forward and each grabbed onto him by a back pocket. They pulled with all their might while trying to keep from being kicked in the face by Denny’s flailing feet. All three of them skittered forward dangerously, the gravel surface of the bridge sliding beneath their feet, but Betty and Butch dug in their heels and Pedro grabbed onto the skirt of Betty’s dress and pulled as hard as he could to try to keep her in place.

“Come... on... Butch... PULL!” Betty managed through gritted teeth. With one last desperate heave, they were able to yank Denny back to safety.

The friends fell back onto the concrete bridge and watched helplessly as Denny's notebook, the only record of all their clues, codes, and cases, blew wildly in the wind, flipping and jumping in the air current several times, flying up and over in a dramatic loop before finally coming to rest on the small ledge all the way down at the edge of the canal - just out of the water's reach.

Butch puffed through heavy breaths as he pushed back up onto his feet, "You two stay here. I'll get it!" and started to make his way to the edge of the trench.

"Oh no you don't, Butch Shaw! Just... just hold your horses for a minute." Betty stood and brushed off her dress while she collected herself. "We almost lost Denny. Wait a second for everyone to catch their breath and we'll work together."

"Thanks, guys. I'm awfully sorry - I thought I could catch it. I just didn't think..." Denny started, but Betty cut him off.

"Aw, it's alright - it was just an accident. What are friends for if not saving each other from certain doom! We need to get that notebook. If I think about it, I prolly would've done the same thing you did." She leaned in then, her blue eyes twinkling, and said quietly, "And between you and me, I'm glad it was you and not Butch. I don't think his pockets would've held!"

Denny laughed and gladly accepted Betty's hand to help him get to his feet.

It was only when Betty checked both shoulders for Lizzy to make sure she was okay that she noticed her own hands were shaking. That was not the kind of adventure she was hoping for. She took a deep breath to calm herself and tried not to let her mind wander to what could've happened if Denny went over that railing. She always thought his mama was silly for worrying over him so much for playing with them at the creek, but Betty knew Denny couldn't swim. And if the current took his glasses, he'd be as good as blind out there in the icy cold water. She

shuddered. He was right here, safe beside her, and she was thankful for that. She made a mental note to sign them all up for swim lessons at Mission Park this summer so Denny wouldn't have to go alone. She reached down to thank Pedro for always being there with a good scratch behind the ears before walking over to where Butch stood, looking down over the railing at the notebook sadly flapping its pages, dangerously close to the water below.

"I'll go down and get it," she said with resolve.

"But I'm the strongest! And the best climber out of the three of us hands down!" Butch protested.

"I'm not arguing that, Butch, and if I had my druthers it'd be you clambering around that slippery concrete. But the truth is, if you miss a step, I don't know if Denny and I are strong enough to haul you back out again." Butch opened his mouth to argue with her but closed it again as he looked at his two, much smaller friends. He knew she was right.

"Now then. I'm not looking to go for a swim today, so let's use our heads. Did either of you happen to see any kind of rope around here anywhere? I'd like to have something to hold onto because that ledge down there looks slipperier than cow spit."

Butch ran off back into the orchard and quickly returned with a large, sturdy looking branch. *"Here ya' go! On our way here I saw a pile of branches that were pruned off a row of cherry trees. We can anchor it from up here for you."*

"That's perfect, Butch! Now Pedro, you'll stay up here to help keep the boys steady, but mind you only grab their pants and not their legs," Pedro huffed in affirmation, spun in a neat circle and plopped his bottom down next to Butch's foot. *"Lizzy, I need you to stay up here on Denny's shoulder."* She attempted to gently maneuver the tiny lizard to her friend's shoulder, but

Lizzy deftly scampered from hand to hand, refusing to abandon her post. Betty put her hands on her hips in frustration.

“Now listen here, missy: I’m not planning on going in that water, but if I do go in, I can’t guarantee I can keep my head out. I need you to stay here so’s I know I’m keeping you safe.” At that, Lizzy reluctantly climbed up onto Denny’s plaid shirt and tucked herself into his collar. Betty offered her a roly-polly.

“Don’t worry, Betty. I’ll keep her safe.”

“I know you will, Denny. Lizzybee knows it too, she’s just stubborn like me.” She laughed as Lizzy munched the bug and tried to glare at her at the same time - it was a lot of action to be happening all at once on such a small face.

With Lizzy and Pedro both safely settled and the plan agreed on, Betty turned to survey the scene below. She took off her shoes and mud-stained socks and scrunched her toes in the grass for a minute to make sure they were warmed up and ready to grip. Meanwhile, the boys practiced how they’d hold the tree limb for her. She balled her hands up and then opened them over and over again. She was trying to make her fingers and toes as sticky and nimble as Lizzybee’s.

She gave her limbs one last shake and turned to Denny and Butch. “Okay, boys, we’re losing daylight. It’s now or never.”

Denny and Butch stood on opposite sides of the branch, holding on tight and worked their shoes into the dirt. Pedro grabbed a mouthful of Denny’s pants leg and dug in with all four paws as Betty took hold of the other end of the branch and began to carefully lower herself down the concrete wall. The upper portion of the canal duct was nice and dry and her toes gripped easily onto the rough surface of the concrete, which gave her a bit more confidence. But the wind was

wholly uncooperative - blowing her dress wildly all around her and up into her face, so she was having trouble seeing where she was going.

She tried to tuck the pink layers down around her with one hand, but it was as though the fabric had come to life and was purposely trying to blind her and make her fall. “Stupid! Dress! Just! Stop!” she bellowed.

“You okay?” Denny shouted down.

Betty tried to respond, but when she opened her mouth her dress jumped right in. She bit down hard on it and thought angrily, *at least that part can't fly around anymore*. She gave Denny a quick thumbs up with one hand before grabbing back onto the branch and slowly straightening her arms to let herself down further. She felt the wall under her feet turn cold as her toes reached the level of concrete that was constantly getting splashed with the icy water.

Finally her feet hit the small ledge at the base of the wall. The notebook wasn't quite within her reach so she carefully let go of the branch and crab-walked sideways to get closer to it. Bending slowly so as not to lose her balance, she grasped the cover between two fingers and stood back up, bringing her prize with her.

She spit the dress out of her mouth and shouted up in triumph, “Yahoo! Okay, you two, get ready! I'm fixin' to throw the notebook your way!”

“Okay, Betty! We're ready!” Butch yelled back down to her. “You keep holding the branch, Denny, and I'll catch the book.” Denny nodded in agreement, nervously gripping the rough bark with sweaty hands as Pedro readjusted his bite on the mouthful of Denny's pants.

“One! Two! THREE!” With all her might, Betty flung the notebook up toward the waiting hands of Butch. It was a great throw and the book made it safely to the top.

“GOT IT!” Butch yelled down over the sound of the racing water. Then he ran back to tuck the precious record of their cases and clues safely out of the wind at the base of an apple tree before grabbing back onto the tree limb with Denny.

Betty carefully stepped backward to take hold of the branch once again. She reached out behind her to grasp it, but just as her hand was closing around the end of the limb, a great gust of wind blew her dress up around her face, blinding her yet again. She swatted it out of her face and felt her feet slip out from under her as the branch slid through her fingers! She tried to cling to the wall of the duct, but she couldn't get a grip on the concrete and her legs plunged down into the icy water. She could hear shouts of panic from the boys above and Betty kicked with all her might, fighting the pull of the fast current. She was just able to dig her fingers into a small crack where the ledge met the wall to hang on. She was anchored for now, but she knew she wouldn't be able to hold herself there for long - the pull of the water was too strong.

Above her, the boys scrambled to try to reach her, moving sideways and swinging the limb back and forth, but the branch wasn't long enough.

“Grab my ankles!” Denny shouted to Butch.

“What?!”

“Just do it! I'll lower myself over the edge so we can get the branch closer to her! Hurry!”

Butch wrapped the cuffs of Denny's jeans up in his fists and Pedro scurried behind to help anchor Butch, grabbing a mouthful of his pants and pulling back with all his might. Denny slowly slid down the concrete on his belly, reaching out as far as he could with the branch.

Betty could feel the tips of the branch brushing against her hands but she couldn't get a good hold of it. She grabbed at it and grabbed at it, but only came away with a handful of leaves.

“Lower, Butch!” Denny yelled with desperation. “You gotta let me down lower!”

“I’m afraid I won’t be able to hold on!” Butch was straining, nervous sweat dripping down his forehead and soaking through the back of his shirt.

“We have to try!”

Butch and Pedro inched slowly forward and let their feet slide to the very edge of the conduit. Butch bent into a deep squat and thrust his arms out as far as he could without losing his balance. Any further, and he feared they’d all go in.

Denny looked behind him to see that Butch was teetering on the edge. He turned his attention back down to Betty and tried to stay calm. He called out, “Betty! That’s as far as we can go! You gotta kick! Kick as hard as you can! You can do it!”

Her legs felt frozen and heavy, and her mind kept racing back to the high school boy who had been swept away. She was starting to lose hope and tears sprang to her eyes, making it hard for her to see. Denny saw the look of terror on his friend’s face and yelled down with new power in his voice.

“Eyes on me, ye scallywag! You’re Black Betty, Pirate Queen of the Seven Seas! No measly canal can pull you away! You’ve faced a thousand horrors from the deep! Now look at me! Look at me and *KICK!*”

Betty locked her eyes on the branch and dug deep to find her courage. With power she didn’t know she had, she kicked herself straight up out of the water toward the waiting branch. She grabbed with both hands and as soon as Butch felt her weight like a fish on a line, he threw himself backward onto his bottom and pulled as hard as he could to haul Denny and Betty back to safety.

Once again Betty's feet were on the slippery ledge and she was standing on her own, but her grip on the branch wasn't good enough. Her poor hands were tired, wet and numb from the cold water. She shouted up, "Give me a second! Just- just let me catch my breath for a minute."

As the boys got back to their feet Betty carefully dried her hands off on her puffy pink sleeves. It was the only part of the dress that had managed to escape getting drenched by the water. Her legs were numb like her fingers and shaking with cold. Every movement was a test of her balance on the small, wet ledge that was slick with algae. Twice she had to throw her body forward onto the concrete wall to keep from pitching back into the water again. She clapped and rubbed her hands together as best she could to work the stiffness out of them. Finally she was able to get a good hold on the branch again. On her nod, the boys and Pedro determinedly hauled her back to the safety of the grass above.

All three rolled to their backs, letting the branch go, and an exhausted Pedro flopped onto his belly in a sploot. The friends looked up into the trees, panting as they struggled to regain their breath and Betty worked to open her aching hands that had cramped up from the exertion.

When they finally caught their breath, the three friends burst into peals of laughter from sheer relief. Lizzybee jumped to Betty and scurried over her face and neck, inspecting her for injuries as Pedro tried to warm her feet with kisses, and Betty laughed even harder from their tickly attentions. But her joy was only momentary. Betty sat up with a jerk and pointed at the sky above. "Oh no. Look!"

Butch and Denny peered up to see what Betty was frowning at: the sun was quickly setting now. The boys scrambled to their feet as Betty worked to get her stiff, cold feet back into her socks and shoes. "Oh boy, we've got to giddy up! Don't forget the notebook, Denny."

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. You didn’t almost set up house in Davy Jones’s locker for me to leave this in an orchard,” he said with a wink as he tucked the notebook into the safety of his pants pocket.

They headed toward home at a quick pace and the further they walked, the more the joy of their triumph at the canal fell away and the gravity of their current situation sunk in. Not only had they come up empty handed in their search, but now they were going to be late for curfew - not to mention that Betty had missed her sister’s birthday party and fairly well ruined a perfectly good, if overly poofy, dress. There was no doubt about it - they were walking straight toward a world of trouble.

Suddenly Lizzybee started darting around again on Betty’s shoulders. She ran to her right side and started doing tiny lizard push-ups in excitement. “Hang on a second, boys. Hey - stop! Lizzy sees something.”

“Aw, gee. What is it now, Betty?” Butch asked, watching the sky turn a dusky purple. He gulped nervously, “Either of you remember Granny Jackson saying how dark exactly it needs to be for the rougarous to come out? All the way dark? Or will a little dark do?”

“I dunno, but something’s got Lizzy in a tizzy. Come help us look. What is it, girl?” Lizzy gently tugged on Betty’s right earlobe then and focused her gaze on something small and blue sticking up part way out of some high grass growing at the base of an apple tree.

Betty stooped to get a closer look then spun around, whooping with joy, “Finally a clue! Hey boys - look what we found!” Betty’s face had broken into the most dazzling smile as she held aloft a cardboard airplane. It had been colored blue with red stars; and there on the bottom of one wing in scrawling red crayon, was written plain as day: Michael I.

Denny rushed forward. “Our first real clue of the case! Great work, you two!” Lizzy beamed with pride and her skin turned a brilliant lime green.

Pedro gave a quick bark then, alerting the group to something else on the ground. He froze with his tail straight and nose an inch from the dirt. There were footprints! Following their path, Butch could see that they were heading off in the direction of the valley’s edge.

Butch scratched his head as he followed the tracks for several yards before carefully doubling back to the group. “Good job, Pedro boy! These have gotta be Michael’s footprints. Looks like he was out here with a dog.” He paused for a moment, growing pale. “Unless...I mean... These... these are too small for rougarou tracks, right?”

Betty and Denny joined him and studied the tracks carefully. Denny shook his head. “I don’t think their feet would be that small, Butch. Not if they’re truly eight feet tall. What do you think, Betty Lou?”

Betty ran her fingertips over the small prints, studying them closely, before standing again. “They do look awfully small. And didn’t Granny Jackson say the rougarou walks on two feet like a man? This track looks like something walking on four feet to me.”

Butch sighed with relief. “You’re right about that. Well in that case, it looks like the dog was running forward and then circling back for him - almost like it was leading him. Unless there’s a turn off further up ahead they were both headed straight for the base of that mountain.”

Denny followed the direction of Butch’s outstretched arm and squinted through one eye, then the other, trying to see through his thick glasses in the fading light. Butch could follow it easily and pointed out the way. “It’s a pretty clear track as far as I can tell, but I don’t see how we can follow it now. We would most definitely miss curfew, and besides - we didn’t bring flashlights. We’d lose the trail awfully fast once the sun goes down. It’ll be pitch dark out there.”

Betty groaned in frustration. “Arrrrgh! I know you’re right, Butch, but doggone it! We just gotta do somethin’! If we leave now we may not be able to find the trail again.” She paced around the small clearing, being careful to avoid walking over the tracks, and looking for a way to mark the spot. “Anybody got any chalk?”

They all emptied their pockets and checked but to no avail - together they had nothing other than a few marbles, some roly-pollies, and a couple of empty candy wrappers. The only thing they had to write with was Denny’s pencil, but the markings it made were too dark against the bark of the trees to be easily seen. Butch started stuffing his eyepatch back into his emptied pocket and it gave Betty an idea. “Say, Butch, lemme see that for a second.” She took the eyepatch from his hand and quickly scampered up into the tree, securing the small triangle to a high branch before hopping back to the ground and looking back up toward her handywork.

She dusted her hands off in satisfaction and pointed about halfway up the tree to where the eyepatch swung in lazy circles off the end of a branch. “There! Now we have a marker so we can find the trail again in the morning. And even if those stinkin’ Larsson boys happen to come by this way, hopefully they’ll be looking at the ground, not up. It should be too dark tonight for them to see the eyepatch or the trail anyhow.”

She gazed off in the direction of their neighborhood and steeled herself with a deep breath. “Now let’s hurry up and get home before the rougarous start roaming, or even worse - our mamas jerk knots in our tails.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Lot of Explaining To Do

Tired, a little wet and dirty, but not too much worse for wear, the friends made their way back toward home as quickly as possible. They kept quiet, listening for Larssons, rougarous, or anything else that sounded like trouble and used all their best shortcuts - crossing through as many yards as they could. Even taking the shortest route they were still out well past suppertime and the streetlights had come on over an hour ago. They were finally climbing the big hill that led to Betty's house when their eyes caught something in the sky. Flashing on and off across the moonlit trees were the telltale spinning red lights of Sheriff Wilkins's patrol car lighting up the night.

Uh oh... They froze as one for an instant before Butch started to take off in the direction of his house. "Wait, Butch!" Betty whispered with urgency, grabbing onto his sleeve. "We're already in trouble - let's just sneak up and see what we can hear first."

Butch stammered, "B-but, Betty it's the Sheriff! I gotta get home!"

She pleaded with him, "Just five more minutes, I promise! Please, Butch!"

Reluctantly Butch followed Betty as she led them all carefully and quietly, sneaking through the shadows of Betty's side yard. They stopped just shy of where the porch light spilled out onto the grass. There were several adult voices talking at once, making it hard to tell what was going on or exactly how much trouble they were in. Betty peered through the slats of the porch rail and counted ten feet. She recognized her Mama's and Daddy's shoes right away. The two pairs of boots must belong to Sheriff Wilkins and Deputy Harris. The sheriff *and* the deputy? That meant the whole of the Fairview police force was currently standing on her front porch.

Betty gulped. She didn't know who the other black, men's dress shoes belonged to. Finally, one voice broke through all the competing noise.

"Alright, *alright!* Now I appreciate that you're all worried, and let me assure you that we are going to find the children as quickly as possible. But we need to do it in an organized fashion. And Ms. Cockram, if I know anything at all, I know that your Betty Lou will be just fine. She knows this valley better than most and has a good head on her shoulders, even if she is a bit..." Sheriff Wilkins paused for a moment and rubbed the back of his neck, searching for the right word before finally landing on, "*spirited.*"

"What my youngest does and doesn't know isn't at issue, Sheriff. Neither is her spirit." Betty heard the anger in her mother's voice and shrank back a little further into the shadows. "She *knows* to be home before dark. She *knows* where she is and isn't to go gallivanting around. And she knew..." she took a shaky breath now and Betty could tell without seeing her face that her Mama was crying, "... doggone it she *knew* how important it was to me that she be here for Susie's birthday party. She isn't here because *something is wrong*, Sheriff." She heard her Daddy murmuring now, comforting her clearly worried Mother.

It was one thing to make her Mama mad - Betty could do that with her eyes closed, standing on one foot. But hearing the fear in her Mama's voice now broke something in Betty. She never wanted her to be fearful over her - not ever. She took a breath for courage and stepped forward into the light.

"It's alright, Mama. I'm here. I'm awful sorry I missed the par—" but before she could finish her sentence she was wrapped up tight in her mother's arms. She could feel her mama's body tremble with tears of relief as she held onto her youngest daughter a little too tightly. She

covered Betty's head in kisses before holding her out at arm's length to inspect her for injuries as she peppered her with questions.

"Are you alright? Where have you been? Where are the boys? Did you find Michael? Granny Jackson said you were out looking for him. Are you sure you're not hurt? Let me see you. What in *the sam hill* happened to your dress?!"

Betty knew it was best to let her Mama run out of steam before trying to get a word in edgewise. When she was this worked up she was like a boiling kettle, so Betty didn't even attempt to answer until finally Mama was too overcome with emotion to get any more questions out and buried her face in the handkerchief Betty's Daddy handed over with perfect timing. Her daddy stepped forward then and looked down at her sternly with deep, turquoise eyes, saying nothing.

Betty had tears in her own eyes now. "We were only trying to help, Daddy. I didn't mean to ruin everything."

Her father's face was etched with concern, but his voice was kind when he spoke to her. "You have a lot of explaining to do, little missy. I think you know that. But before you apologize properly to your mother, I need you to tell the Sheriffs and Mr. Ingram here where the boys are and everything you found out about little Michael Ingram. His mother and father are worried sick about him."

"We're right here, sir," said Denny, bravely stepping forward and pulling Butch up beside him. "We didn't mean to lose track of time." He reached into his pocket to pull out the notebook. "But we gathered an awful lot of clu—"

Suddenly both he and Butch were wrapped up awkwardly in Mrs. Cockram's arms as she cried into their hair now and checked them thoroughly for bodily harm.

“Let the boys breathe, Cora,” Troy Cockram gently scolded, placing a soothing hand on his frantic wife’s shoulder.

Mr. Ingram stepped forward then. His thick, wavy, dark brown hair had great streaks of silver running through it and tumbled forward toward thick eyebrows that framed his kind, brown eyes as he knelt in front of Betty. “Betty? I’m Joe Ingram. I’m Carole and Michael’s dad. You can call me Mr. Joe if you like.” Mr. Ingram smiled even though he was clearly worried and offered Betty his hand. “Carole told us that you and your friends were out looking for our little boy and we’re mighty grateful for your help. Did you find anything? Anything at all?”

Betty scanned his kind face. She wanted so badly to give him some good news, to take away some of his worry, but the airplane she was so excited about earlier now seemed like nothing at all and she wasn’t sure how to start. She decided it was best to give him all the information she had so she began at the beginning. “Well Mr. Joe, sir, after we interviewed Carole we questioned one of our most trusted sources. Granny Jackson, that is. Then we headed straight out and checked for him at the dump first.”

“The dump is the best place in town, sir, especially for playin’.” Butch chimed in.

“Anyhow,” Betty continued, “he wasn’t there. And Mr. Jimmy - he’s the nice man who runs the dump - he hadn’t seen him either. Mr. Jimmy knows Michael, see? On account of how he likes to play dragons and look for bad guys and such.”

“But Mr. Jimmy hasn’t seen Michael in a long while which we figure is because of the ‘ripped pants incident’ Carole told us about and the resulting punishment and ‘ban on all dump activities’,” Denny said, pouring back over his notes. Their earnestness brought a small smile to Joe Ingram’s worried face.

Sheriff Wilkins stepped forward and patted Denny on the shoulder gently. “We can go over all your notes for the record, kids, but right now we need to know quickly if you saw any sign of Michael that will help us find him. We’d like to find him soon so he’s not out there on his own all night.”

Betty turned to him. “We did, Sheriff Wilkins, sir. We found his airplane by a trail in one of Mr. Jake’s orchards along with some dog tracks. But we couldn’t follow it ‘cause it was getting dark and we didn’t have a flashlight with us. It’s all in Denny’s notebook, sir.” Betty looked back to Mr. Ingram as tears spilled over onto her cheeks, “We went straight out from playing to look for him, sir. We just ran out of daylight. I’m so sorry we couldn’t bring him home with us.”

Sheriff Wilkins turned to his deputy. “Harris, why don’t you take the boys home. I’m sure their mamas are worried sick. Denny, you and Butch can tell the deputy here everything you found today on the way home.”

“But Sheriff, we haven’t even told you the list of suspects and the trail–,” Betty started.

“Hush now,” her Mama said, hugging her close before holding her out at arm’s length. “I’m grateful you’re home, but you are still in a world of trouble. Now get inside and get into the bath.”

“But *Mama!*”

“NOW.”

Betty knew it was no use arguing. The best thing she could do now was tuck her tail, do as her mama said, and try not to make things worse.

She had just opened the screen door to hustle Pedro inside ahead of her when a woman’s cry broke the momentary silence on the porch.

“Joe? *Joe!*”

It was coming toward them from down the street and the fear that rang through the woman’s voice gave Betty goosebumps from head to toe.

Mr. Ingram spun at the sound and squinted out into the darkness, “Fritzie?! Is that you?”

A pale woman with dark, curly hair ran up onto the porch. She was dressed in a navy silk skirt suit with a peach blouse and heels like the kind Betty had only seen on women who worked in the fancy offices downtown across the river when she went with her daddy to the bank. The woman was clutching a piece of paper in one hand and the hand of Carole Ingram in the other. She must be Carole and Michael’s mother, Betty thought, as she noted how much the two favored each other. They had the same deep brown eyes and thick hair. Mrs. Ingram’s eye makeup had run down her cheeks and she had a look of sheer terror on her face. “Joe! It’s so awful! What do we do?” She fell into Joe Ingram’s arms, shivering and sobbing. Carole stood stock still on the porch, staring out at nothing while her mother collapsed. Her vacant look made Betty’s knees weak with fear. Mr. Ingram gently took a crumpled up piece of paper from his wife’s hand and held it to the porch light to read.

Betty felt a familiar hand grab onto hers and turned to see Susie standing halfway out of the house behind the screen door. She must have come out to see what the noise was about. Her blue eyes met Betty’s own and her forehead was furrowed with worry beneath her dark brown hair. They held onto each other tightly and it felt to Betty like no one in the whole wide world would ever breathe again while they waited for Mr. Joe to tell them what that wrinkled piece of paper said.

Mr. Ingram’s arm fell limp to his side and the color drained from his face as he turned to Sheriff Wilkins.

“Sheriff, it... it’s a ransom note.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ransom

Sheriff Wilkins took the note from Mr. Ingram's hand. He scanned the page for a moment, cleared his throat, and began to read aloud:

*We have yer boy. If you ever want to see him hole
agin, bring \$500*

- CASH -

*to the ole papermil brige at midnite to-nite. Come
alone. Drop the \$\$\$ in a bag under the lite and go.
When we have the \$\$\$ you will git a call tellin you
whar the boy will be. No triks or youl soon find him
DED. He is smal and wuld be so easy to break. We are
watchin.*

*P.S. His favrit food is popcorn at the pikturs so you
know we have him. He is skared and wants his
momma so dont be layt.*

Mrs. Ingram sobbed again against her husband's chest, Carole's hand still gripped tightly in her own. Carole looked as though she was in a trance - her eyes focused on something a million miles away. She softly spoke. "We went out to look for him one more time. We weren't gone long. Just once around the block. It was on the door when we got back home. It's true, you

know. That popcorn is his favorite.” Fat tears started rolling down her cheeks as she whispered, “It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault. It’s all my—”

Betty’s mama took Carole gently by the hand and led her over to her own girls. “Susie, why don’t you take Carole into the kitchen and see if she’d like a piece of your birthday cake and some milk. Go on, now.”

“Of course, Mama.” Susie took Carole’s arm and smiled sweetly as she spoke to her with a honeyed voice, “Come on, Carole - I’ll find you the biggest piece. It’s chocolate with fresh strawberries from our own yard on the top. I picked them fresh this morning.” Susie led her inside, but Betty didn’t think Carole had heard a word she’d said. She just stared straight ahead and kept whispering to herself.

Seeing her like that made Betty’s stomach twist into a knot and she felt a little dizzy. Pedro stood up on his hind legs and licked her hand to bring her back to herself. She sucked in a breath and wondered how many minutes it had been since the last time she had done so. She patted Pedro in thanks on his soft, warm head and lifted him to her chest for comfort.

The Sheriff took off his hat and ran a hand through his strawberry blonde hair. He stared down at his boots in thought before looking back at the Ingrams and shaking his head with a sigh. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Not here in Fairview. I don’t like it, but I don’t rightly see as we have any choice but to follow this to the “t” and hope these no-good sons of guns are true to their word. Joe, is there any way you can get that kind of money together?”

Mr. Ingram nodded and pulled his wife even closer to him. “Whatever they want, Sheriff. They can have anything. We just want Michael back safe and sound.”

“That’s what we all want, Joe,” said the Sheriff and he turned to Betty’s father then. “Troy, you go with Joe and get the money together and meet us back here with Joe’s car. Cora,

can you take Fritzie back to the Ingram house later and wait with her by the phone for the kidnapper's call?"

Betty's mama placed a comforting hand on Fritzie Ingram's arm. "Of course, Sheriff. Carole can stay here, Fritzie. Susie will look after the girls and hopefully they'll all be able to get some sleep." Fritzie nodded with a small smile of gratitude and wiped at her eyes.

Sheriff Wilkins continued, "That would be just fine. Now once you're there at the Ingram's, I'll need you to make sure you have something to write with and don't take any unnecessary calls to tie up the line. Harris will drop Denny and Butch off at their homes, and circle back to meet me at the station. We'll drive my truck back here and then we wait. At 10 'til, Harris and I will follow Joe and Troy in my truck. Now we have to assume that they know what kind of car you drive, Joe, so you'll make the drop in your car just in case. Then you all head back to the Ingram's and Harris and I will hide out and try to follow the kidnappers when they make the pick up. We stay calm and most important: we bring Michael home safely."

Betty couldn't hold it in any longer. "But Sheriff, we *found* a *trail*! It's gotta be Michael's! We found his plane and everything. If we head back out with flashlights we'll pick it up again for sure and then we can get him our own selves! Everyone knows you never follow a ransom note! If you'd only follow our—"

"Betty. Lou. Cockram."

Betty shrank, but only slightly. "Yes, Mama?"

"You will march straight inside, get into the bathtub, clean yourself up, and get to bed. We'll discuss your punishment for missing curfew in the morning."

"But—"

“Don’t you ‘but’ me, missy.” Betty opened her mouth in protest again but her mama was faster. “*I wish you would.*”

When mama was calm and quiet, she meant business - way more than if she hollered. Betty’s mouth closed and her head dropped.

That, she knew, was that.

“*You never follow a ransom note,*” she mumbled softly as she drug her feet and sulked inside to do as her mama had ordered. She tried to linger by the screen door as long as she could so she could hear if they said anything else important, but then she heard her mama say she’d put on a pot of coffee while they all waited and Betty scurried further inside so she wouldn’t be caught trying to eavesdrop on top of everything else.

She went into the bathroom and peeled off the muddy mess that used to be her fancy party dress. She ran a hot bath with an extra cap full of bubbles for her and Pedro. They eased themselves into the sweet smelling water while Lizzy waited on the towel Betty had hanging on the hook, enjoying the warm steam that floated up off the bubble bath.

Betty gently scrubbed Pedro clean, being careful of his eyes and ears and tried not to cry. She just got so angry when she felt like grown ups weren’t listening to her. Just because she was ten (nearly eleven!) they acted like what she had to say couldn’t possibly be important. She had learned well enough by now that people in general, but adults especially, used any excuse they could to not listen to what they didn’t want to hear. It was partly why she always spoke loudly and clearly, preferably with her hands on her hips and her chin tipped up for emphasis. At least they couldn’t say they didn’t hear because she was mumbling.

She wasn't sure how long she had been soaking, lost in thought, but it was long enough for Pedro to start shivering in the cooling water, so she popped the plug out of the drain and wrapped him up with her in the towel which Lizzy had graciously vacated.

When she had dried off and put on her pajamas, Betty quietly padded down the hall to the kitchen to feed Pedro and Lizzy. She was too distracted to be hungry herself, but both of her animal friends were eager for supper and she would never let them go without if she could help it. She breathed in deep the familiar aroma of the percolating coffee and strained to try to hear the adults in the sitting room, but they were speaking in hushed tones now. If anything in their plan had changed, it was impossible for Betty to know. She left Pedro and Lizzy with an extra half portion of food for their hard work today and headed back down the hall to the room she shared with Susie.

The door had been left open a crack and Betty pushed it open further to find Susie in her bed reading one of her romantic novels by the light of the bedside lamp while Carole slept peacefully in Susie's bed on the other side of the room. Susie put a finger to her lips and scooted over to make room for Betty, patting the mattress beside her. Betty climbed in and quickly pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Oof! Your feet are freezing! How do you get so cold so fast?!", Susie whispered with a full body shiver.

"You know me," Betty chuckled, touching Susie's legs with her icy toes and enjoying making her sister jump and squirm, "I'm a lizard! You must be my warming rock!"

Susie squealed and laughed, then gathered herself. She looked at Betty with seriousness, "Stop that! You'll wake Carole. She finally fell asleep about five minutes ago, bless her heart."

“I’m sorry,” Betty whispered. “Poor Carole. She must be exhausted from worrying all day.” Betty studied the sleeping girl for a moment before turning her attention back to her sister.

“Whatcha readin?”

“*Practically Seventeen*’.” Susie said breathlessly. “It’s this swell book about a girl named Tobey who was so happy with her friend who’s also kind of her boyfriend but she’s not sure how she truly feels about him but now this beautiful blonde girl has come to the lake where they live and she’s reexamining how she feels about their relationshi—”

“BLE-ARGH.” Betty whispered loudly and pretended to throw up on the bed. “How can you read that junk? I bet there’s not a single, solitary murder or even a theft or a missing jewel in there.”

“Unless you mean a theft of the heart,” Susie giggled, elbowing Betty. She sighed. “You just don’t understand. One day *you* will be thirteen and you’ll feel differently about romance.”

“Romance?!” Betty whisper-yelled. Then she crossed her eyes and held her hands to her throat, throwing her head back and forth until she fell backward onto her pillow as though she were dead.

Susie giggled and nudged her, tickling Betty’s side with her pointy elbow. Betty squealed and almost fell off the bed, jerking away from her sister’s tickle attack. They both froze then, looking over at Carole in fear that they had woken her up, but she hadn’t stirred and was still sleeping soundly.

Betty snuggled in again next to Susie. “Happy birthday by the way, Susie. I’m awful sorry I missed your party today. I didn’t mean to. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“It’s okay,” Susie said. She looked sad for a moment but then a small smile broke across her face, “We had a real ball. We played all kinds of games and even had a little dance party with

the radio. I know parties with boys aren't exactly your thing." She nudged Betty with her elbow again. "Not yet, anyway."

"Not *ever*," Betty mugged with another grossed-out face just to make Susie laugh. She took a deep breath that made her yawn. "We weren't just out playing, you know. We really were looking for Michael. Honest *honest*."

"I believe you. I've never seen Butch and Denny look that serious before. Except maybe for that time you all came home covered in skunk spray and they were too scared to go to their own houses. Remember Daddy hosing them off in the yard?" They both laughed at the memory of that smelly afternoon. Susie tucked her knees up under her nightgown and wrapped her arms around them. "So did you three find anything?"

"We sure did! It took forever and we walked for miles and had a fight with the Larssons, and I nearly fell in the canal—"

"You *what*!?"

"I'm fine! Denny and Butch pulled me out and then we finally found a clue: Michael's favorite airplane and footprints that we just know are his. We even think we know which direction he was headed in. But we didn't have a flashlight to follow the trail and it was too dark to see proper. None of the grownups will listen to us, though. The sheriff didn't even look at our notebook of clues or even listen to our list suspects."

"I'm sorry - that sounds frustrating. But they are grown ups after all, Betty, so they must know what they're doing."

"They're following a ransom note, Suse. A ransom note! Who ever heard of anybody with a lick of sense ever following a ransom note? Any good detective knows that ransom notes

only ever lead to diddly squat.” She gripped the quilt with both hands in frustration before bolting out of bed. “I can’t do it!”

“Shh!” *Carole* Susie mouthed, then whispered, “Can’t do what?”

“I can’t sit here while they go and ruin the whole entire investigation all on account of that stupid ransom note.” She stalked over to the bureau and started digging out her clothes. “I guess I just gotta go and find Michael myself.”

“Oh no you don’t! Mama said that I’m to watch you and Carole while they take care of everything and I’m not going to let you...,” her breath caught in her throat, “...let you go missing too.” The last words came out shaky from emotion and tears filled her eyes. “We were so worried when you didn’t come home today. And then when we found out Michael was missing... I just don’t know what I’d do if you were the one out there lost and alone. I’d be so, *so* scared for you.”

Betty dropped the clothes in her hands and ran back over to the bed to embrace her big sister. While they had their disagreements and sometimes fought like cats and dogs, they’d always love each other - forever and ever. She hadn’t even thought that Susie would actually be worried about her. She figured she would be too busy with her party to even think about Betty.

Betty had been so focused on the case that she hadn’t considered how her family might worry when she didn’t come home as expected. It made her feel awful to know that she was the one making her sister cry on her birthday. She wiped away Susie’s tears and then held both of her hands in her own.

“Suse, I’m sorry I got you all worried like this. I promise you I will be safe. I won’t go anywhere without taking Denny and Butch with me.” Pedro, who had finished supper and had come quietly into the room with Lizzy skittering beside him, audibly huffed and Lizzy looked

over her shoulder at the girls in indignation. "And Pedro and Lizzybee, of course." Betty added sheepishly. "But Michael is only four years old. And he's out there all alone somewhere without a hand to hold. I can't just sit here doing nothing."

"But how will I know that you're okay?"

"Look - aw rats!" She scratched at her still-damp head in frustration. "I wish I had Denny's notebook - it's got every note, suspect and clue written down. But I'll draw you a map of where we found the trail and write down everything else for you as best as I can remember. If we're not back with Michael by sunrise, you wake up Mama and Daddy and tell them that I must've snuck out after you fell asleep, but that you found my note. That'll show them exactly where we are. It'll only be a few hours, Susie, but I've got to try. I've just got to."

"And you'll come straight home?"

"I promise."

Susie sighed. "Well, I suppose you're going to go whether I agree to it or not. I know how you get when you have that look on your face." She paused for a moment, searching her little sister's eyes. "Pinky promise you'll stay safe and stick together with Denny and Butch?" Susie held out her pinky to Betty and Betty latched onto it with her own.

"Pinky promise," Betty said with a grin and kissed Susie on her cheek that was salty from her tears. "Thanks for helping the investigation. I'd invite you to come along, but--"

"No thank you! I'm happy holding down the fort. Let me know when you have a more romantic case and maybe I'll reconsider. *The Case of the Mysterious Dreamboat*, or something?"

Betty made a gross-out face again and Susie giggled. Then she grabbed some paper and a pencil from her school bag and did her best to draw a detailed map of the area in Mr. Jake's orchard where they found Michael's airplane and trail. She wrote down every clue she could

remember from the day and any other important observations of note, including Granny Jackson's rougarou, the two travelers, Pedro's bravery during the fight with the Larsson boys, and the near-disaster at the canal. She almost scratched out the bit about the rougarous in case it was too scary for Susie, but decided to leave it in. She simply didn't believe that the ransom note was real, and if it turned out to be a fake, any piece of evidence could end up being important information. It was good for her to go over all the clues and facts again to keep everything fresh in her mind.

When she finished, they turned out the light and snuggled in together under the quilt on her bed. Betty knew she wouldn't sleep a wink as she lay in the darkness. She listened to her sister's breath as it slowed to the peaceful, steady rhythm of sleep. Then she waited impatiently for the sounds of the front door opening and the adults making their way out into the night.

CHAPTER NINE

Strangers in the Dark

Betty only got sleepy a couple of times as she lay in the darkness. Susie and Carole were silent except for a few soft snores that broke the quiet every now and again. She let her focus go blurry on the ceiling and pretended she was a bird: a great-horned owl with beautiful strong wings, soaring out in widening circles over the whole town, seeing in every direction and looking down over the entire valley for more clues. She watched from above as Michael roved this way and that, running and playing, heading off toward the mountains.

She went over all the clues they had found, letting them tumble and fall together in her mind's eye in different ways in case they missed something. She kept coming back to the two strange men Mr. Jimmy had mentioned. At the time she didn't think much of it as she was fairly well convinced that Michael had just run off and lost track of time, something she herself had been guilty of doing many times. That if he wasn't at the dump, he'd be at the canals, or at least within earshot of their cries for him. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized that she hadn't properly considered the strangers at all.

She pictured two faceless men, tall and lean. She gave them long beards and raggedy clothing covered in patches - and more holes yet to be patched. As she watched, suddenly their bodies began to stretch and contort. Their feet burst through the leather of their shoes and transformed into enormous, hairy paws with huge claws. Where their faces should be there were now massive fur-covered snouts with gaping jaws dripping thick saliva. She saw Michael then, racing his airplane around the orchard, playing and carefree. Suddenly the rougarous appear behind a tree, watching him. Before Michael realizes he's not alone they jump on him from

behind and carry him off, kicking and crying for help. She shivered. Could rougarous really be hunting outside her window right now? Even if they weren't the terrible creatures of Granny Jackson's childhood, could two strangers really wander into her beautiful valley and kidnap a little boy? She hated to think it could be something so sinister.

But what if... what if they were friendly strangers? Betty knew better than to run off with any strangers - friendly or not. But she was a worldly ten years old (*nearly eleven*) after all, and Michael was only four. What if he hadn't learned that important lesson yet? What if the strangers saw Michael playing by himself and felt bad for him. With nothing to do themselves that afternoon, they joined in a game of Lone Ranger and raced off toward the mountains for Michael to catch. They all lost track of the time and now it's getting late. Instead of walking all the way back in the dark, they decide to make camp. Betty pictures herself with Denny, Butch, Pedro, and Lizzy coming upon their jolly campfire and laughing with relief. The men and Michael finish the can of beans they'd been passing between them before they wish the children well and Betty leads the way with Pedro to take Michael home again in triumph.

When she felt herself starting to drift off as her mind wandered, she would pull the quilt off of her feet and let the night air hit her toes, reviving her with its coolness. Finally, a little before midnight she heard the last of the voices leave the living room and head out into the night. The screen door groaned softly and closed behind them with a quiet bounce against the door frame.

Carefully, Betty peeled back the quilt and rolled out of the bed, her feet hitting the floor as softly as possible so as not to wake Carole and Susie. Pedro and Lizzy roused themselves at her movement, stretching and yawning in the moonlight. Betty dressed herself in the clothes she had laid out earlier, put on her sneakers, and tucked Lizzy into her overalls pocket. It felt good to

be back in normal clothes again after a day of party-wear and she immediately felt like herself again. Betty silently motioned for Pedro to follow her and then held her breath as she slowly eased the door open enough to let herself squeeze out of the bedroom.

Taking just as much care, she pulled the bedroom door to behind her and snuck off down the hall. She paused at the entry to the kitchen, listening for any movement, and spied Susie's cake still sitting on the kitchen table. "I bet Michael's going to be hungry once we find him," she whispered to Pedro and Lizzy. She carefully wrapped a piece of the chocolate cake in a napkin and slipped it into her back pocket. Then she grabbed the flashlight from the junk drawer and secured it to the hammer-loop of her overalls before tiptoeing to the front door and making her way out into the quiet of the sleeping neighborhood.

Butch's house was closer than Denny's which was just good luck on a night like tonight, Betty thought as she headed toward the Shaw home with Pedro at her heels. She knew she'd need Butch's help to convince Denny to sneak out in the dark. His glasses worked pretty well during the day, but at night if the streetlights hit just right he was practically blind and not nearly as keen on adventuring. She moved quickly on a path she had taken hundreds of times, and inside of five minutes was right outside Butch's bedroom window in the side yard of the Shaw house. She tapped their secret knock on the windowpane with a pebble she left on the sill for just such occasions.

Butch's face appeared in front of her so suddenly that Betty jumped back and almost squealed in fright. With his white-blond hair sticking out in all directions, for a second Betty thought he was the ghost of a boy who must've stuck his finger in a light socket. She gathered herself and motioned for him to hurry up and open the window so she could fill him in on her plan.

Butch was immediately on board, as she knew he would be, and soon enough, he was dressed and climbing outside to join Betty. He had his scout pack on his back, which he had already filled with snacks, just in case. They crept through the Shaw garage to grab another flashlight then cut across the back alley and climbed Mrs. Petersen's fence to take a shortcut through that yard to the Bellingham house, one street over.

They had just come around the front corner of the Peterson place when they froze at the sight of the beam of a flashlight coming straight toward them. Betty quickly switched her own flashlight off and pulled Butch to duck behind the Peterson's hedge to hide. But it was too late - they had been seen! The beam of light turned sharply toward them and started closing in fast. Betty's eyes were wide, searching the darkness for a path of escape. She was trying to decide whether they should make a run for it or get ready for a fight when the light shone directly into their faces, blinding them.

"Well, well, well," drawled a familiar voice. "It appears the game is afoot!"

"Excellent!" Betty whisper-shouted.

"Elementary!" came the reply.

"What's happening?" Butch stammered.

"Denny Bellingham!" Betty quietly laughed. She stood, dragging Butch up by the sleeve with her. "I have never been so glad to hear your terrible English accent in all my days. What in tarnation are you doing out here?"

"I was coming to get you two! I got so mad thinking about the Sheriff following that ransom note that I couldn't sleep. I just know they're making a huge mistake. Everyone knows that the only thing you get from following a ransom note is--"

"Diddly squat!" Betty chimed in at the same time and all three laughed.

“So I grabbed my dad’s flashlight and army knife and headed out to get you guys,” Denny said, pulling up the leg of his jeans to show them the knife and holster tucked into his striped crew sock.

“Whelp,” said Butch, looking between his two best friends with a huge smile on his face, “what’s the plan?”

“Pedro? You’re up!,” Betty said. “Think you can take us back to that trail, boy?”

Pedro let out a yip of joy then gathered himself and stood at attention. He huffed in determination.

Denny laughed. He held a pretend pipe to his mouth and put on his Sherlock Holmes voice again, “Lead the way, Hound of the Fairview-villes!”

Pedro put his nose to the ground and circled a few times before summoning them with another yip and heading off into the darkness.

They spoke quietly as they followed Pedro’s nose, Denny and Butch taking turns telling Betty how their parents had reacted to their late return home. It turned out that all of their parents had been so relieved when they finally came home that they had escaped without much punishment. Although Butch grumbled that he hadn’t gotten his usual second helping of dessert after dinner as his mother, “*had to draw the line somewhere.*” They knew that they were taking a big risk sneaking out after dark and hoped that they found Michael quickly - before their parents’ good will ran out.

Soon enough Pedro had led them back into the orchards. Walking among the trees, the sweet scent of ripening fruit hanging in the air around them tickled their noses. It was one of Betty’s favorite smells in the whole entire world. The only thing better, she figured, was the

smell of her Mama's apple cobbler, fresh out of the oven. Her stomach growled noisily at the thought and she was finally regretting that she had skipped her own dinner.

"Say Butch - what kinda snacks you got in that pack, anyway?," she said, trying to muffle the sound of her rumbling tummy with both hands.

"Lessee...," Butch swung the bag around to his front and started digging through pockets. "I got all sorts of candy, some beef jerky, more candy, uh...candy, oh! I got some crackers..."

"You got a Big Hunk in that grocery store of a bag of yours?," she asked, craning her neck to see inside the backpack.

"Bingo!" Butch said in triumph, handing over what he knew to be Betty's very favorite candy bar, next to anything black licorice of course. Butch and Denny both thought black licorice was *disgusting* - that it tasted like licking a skunk - but they kept that to themselves. On top of the pungent smell, licorice always made Butch's tongue feel numb and tingly and he refused to carry it for fear that the skunkiness of it would rub off on his other snacks.

Betty hungrily tore open the wrapper of her candy bar and took a huge bite, wrestling the honey nougat this way and that while she gripped it firmly between her teeth before finally getting it to stretch and give way into a mouthful to chew on. Denny and Butch each popped a handful of Sugar Babies into their mouths, chewing happily beside her.

Just then Pedro stopped dead in his tracks, his ears flattened back against his head and his hackles rose up making the hair all along his spine stand up on end. His lips curled and he let out a quiet growl of warning. At the same time, Lizzy took Betty's earlobe in her tiny mouth and pulled before running back and forth across her chest from shoulder to shoulder in absolute panic.

“Quick! Puh ouh the flashlish!” Betty struggled to whisper through the chunk of candy in her mouth as she clicked off her flashlight. The boys quickly snapped off their lights and everyone froze in place trying to figure out what had Pedro and Lizzy so upset.

Once her eyes adjusted to the dark, Betty was able to pick out a faint light in the darkness ahead of them. She quietly tucked the rest of the candy bar into one of her pockets, put a finger to her lips, and with her other hand pointed toward the eerie glow. The boys nodded - they could see it too. They watched and waited to see if it was just someone passing through, but the light wasn't moving. Denny tapped Betty and Butch on the shoulders and motioned with his hand, signaling that he thought they should make a half-circle toward the left to get closer for a better look without heading straight toward whoever it was. Betty and Butch nodded in silent agreement.

It was at times like this when all their time playing soldiers at the dump really came in handy. Their very favorite soldier game of all time was one they called *Secret Mission*. The number one rule of *Secret Mission* was that no one could speak, lest they be overheard and captured as spies by enemy troops. Early on Butch had been captured *a lot*, but only because he'd get excited or tired and hungry and forget about the being silent rule. But after the third time he had to sit in the Ford of Interrogation (an old, rusty '42 Ford they used as a makeshift jail/submarine/enemy camp) and had to watch Denny and Betty play for a whole entire hour without him, he never forgot again. Now all three were excellent at communicating with each other without talking at all. They had a whole language of gestures and signs with words for almost everything.

Betty picked up Pedro and whispered, “good boy,” ever so softly in his ear so only he could hear and she gently stroked Lizzy's tail with her other hand in gratitude. She carefully led

the boys in a wide arc to the left and then slowly forward toward the dim glow. Butch tapped her shoulder and motioned that he could see a big pile of wood that would be the perfect place for them to hide behind. Betty signaled that was a great idea and they quietly picked their way through the orchard to the wood pile that must've been waiting to be chopped for firewood after the last pruning in the orchard. From behind the pile, they were able to peek out around the wood while staying close to the ground, to discover that they were now quite close to the mysterious light.

They weren't close enough to make out much, but from this vantage point they could see that the light was coming from an old oil lantern. They could tell by the way it flickered and moved instead of holding steady like the beam of a flashlight. The lantern was dim because it was being blocked by two large figures bending over it. Even in the weak light Betty could make out that the clothes the figures were wearing were ragged and patched in places. They wore hats with large brims that cast deep shadows, leaving their faces completely obscured by darkness.

It was as though they had stepped right out of her head and appeared before her. She couldn't believe what she was seeing and shook her head to try to clear it. Was she asleep? This had to be a dream! Her eyes searched the shadows, dancing in the lantern light. Could they really be rousarous transforming right before her eyes?

Their arms were swinging and moving around as though they were having some kind of an argument, but they were talking too quietly and the children couldn't hear anything from this far away. As they shifted and moved during their conversation, the children caught the silhouette of two beards in the lantern's glow.

Betty swallowed hard and gripped the arms of her friends. She could feel the boys shivering on either side of her as they all realized that they had just stumbled upon something sinister in the dark.

CHAPTER TEN

Not a Safe Place

Denny put his hand up in front of his chin and mimed smoking a pipe, their sign for Mr. Jimmy, then turned his head and pointed at the two men. Betty and Butch nodded. These had to be the two strangers Mr. Jimmy had warned them against. If this were any normal day, they would heed that warning and stay well clear of them, but tonight these strangers were suspects, and they had to get as close as possible without giving themselves away.

Betty was trying to think of a good way to signal “rougarou”, a word that was definitely not something they had ever had reason to figure out a sign for, when Butch turned to her and made signs for *big, big danger dog* and lifted his shoulders in question. She looked back toward the strangers, looking for signs that they had transformed, but they were too far away. She didn’t want to make Butch any more scared than he already looked, but she also didn’t want to lie. She gestured back: *not sure, could be*.

Denny signaled that they needed to move closer to hear what the men were talking about. Butch shook his head vigorously: *no - too dangerous. Dog!* Betty motioned that Denny was right, they had to try to get closer, but they’d go one at a time, slowly, and hide together behind a tree closer to where the men were talking. She would go first, since she was smallest, followed by Denny, and Butch. Denny and Butch nodded, both signaling *be careful*.

She moved cautiously from behind the safety of the woodpile, keeping to the shadows and stopping behind the first tree past their hiding spot. She stood there stock-still and waited, making sure the men didn’t notice her approach before springing noiselessly to the next tree and allowing Denny to take her place. They used the cover of the trees like stepping stones across a

creek. As she got closer, the low hum of the men's voices became a murmur, but she still couldn't make out anything they were saying, so she kept creeping forward until their murmurs started to transform into words. When Pedro started shivering in her arms she decided that that was as close as they should get. She hugged him gently to comfort him, then turned and gestured for the boys to join her. They carefully did so, one by one.

The friends sunk to their bellies and scooped up to the edge of the shadows, their chins tickled by grass. Once settled, all three of the children strained to pick up what was being said by the men while trying to get a glimpse of their faces as their heads passed in and out of the lantern's light, looking for any signs that they could be rougarous. They were still only picking up every fourth word or so, but they couldn't move any closer without risking being seen. The trees that were left between them were younger, their trunks not big enough to cast shadows large enough for them to hide in. Denny quickly jotted down every word he could make out into his notebook.

“...that boy...”

“...’round here...”

“...find him...”

Betty elbowed the boys and signed *airplane* and *boy* and they nodded in agreement. Whoever these men were, they were definitely talking about Michael. Butch signaled that they should go, but Betty shook her head - they needed to hear more. She reached into her side pocket and showed Butch that she had her rice bundle from Granny Jackson ready, then put a reassuring hand on his arm to try and calm him before turning her attention back toward the strangers. Rougarou or not, they definitely didn't know these men and that made them dangerous for all kinds of reasons.

“...if they catch us... police...”

“...no good...”

“...reward...”

Betty nudged Denny excitedly with her elbow and he looked up from his notebook with a grin. He heard it too and they both grabbed their wrists with their opposite hands like handcuffs, signing *caught you*. Butch was wiggling around on Betty's right and shook her to get her attention. He looked frightened and was pointing at the men, jabbing his finger in the air over and over, but his gestures weren't making sense. *Yes*, she signed. *Men. Watching*. He shook his head *no* and kept pointing toward the strangers with rising panic and irritation. She was about to tell him to calm down when they heard:

“...a trap...”

“... if we have to, then we kill 'em...”

At those last words, the man who had been speaking reached around his back and pulled out a large hunting knife from where it had been secured to his rope belt. The blade caught the lantern light and shone as the man turned it this way and that. Butch signaled: *See! See! See! Knife!* He must have seen it before the man pulled it out but in his panic had forgotten what their sign for “knife” was and that's why he kept pointing.

Butch began to get to his hands and knees, and was going to signal that they needed to leave when a twig underneath his left knee snapped. He froze in mid-movement for a split second, then dropped back down onto his belly, gluing his entire body as flat as he could to the ground and squeezing his eyes shut as hard as he could as if that could make him invisible.

The men must have heard the snap of the wood because their lantern started to swing wildly, casting light all around them as the strangers sought out the source of the noise. Betty

looked around for an escape, but there was nothing for it. If they moved even an inch they would be seen and even if they did run, the men were just too close - they'd surely be caught. She grabbed hands with Denny and Butch to hold them steady and silently prayed.

The men lurched off toward their right and Betty almost breathed again, but then they stopped. The one holding the lantern turned the wick winder up to increase the size of the flame and the lantern light became much brighter. Slowly, they started walking directly toward the children. With every step the shadows that had kept Betty and the boys hidden from view retreated. The detectives pressed themselves into the ground but they were helpless and the ring of light was only inches away from exposing them where they lay. Pedro vibrated with a low growl, but Betty quieted him with a gentle hug of her arm.

Just then, a possum came skittering through the grass between the children and the men, mouth open and teeth bared. She was as round as a turnip and had at least five babies clinging to her back as she barreled through the lantern light, toward the men's ankles, hissing and screeching angrily. The strangers yelped and jumped back, startled as the mama possum raced past their feet before lumbering off with her babies into the safety of the darkness.

One of the men slapped the other on the back and they howled with laughter, watching as the possum's rump with its bright pink tail retreated into the orchard. Satisfied that they had found the spy they were looking for, they returned to their packs which they had left laying by the tree where they'd been talking.

Betty could have cried with relief and made a mental note to be extra kind to any and all possums in the future. All three children had their hands over their mouths to keep in their giggles, but quickly turned serious as the men started talking again and they listened hard, trying to catch out any more information.

But the strangers quickly turned to gather their things from the ground and had soon moved off into the night, without giving anything else away. Luckily, they didn't appear to be following Michael's trail, but instead were heading off in the general direction of the dump.

Betty started to get up, but Denny signaled that they should wait to make sure the men were further off before they gave their position away. She nodded and the children lay where they were. They waited for what seemed like hours, but was probably closer to five minutes, before clambering to their feet and dusting themselves off. Butch started to laugh but Denny quickly shushed him.

"Sorry," he whispered. "I just never thought I'd be so happy to see a possum in my whole entire life."

"Me either," Denny giggle-whispered in reply. "For a second I thought Pedro was going to go after her."

"Oh, he tried!," Betty said as she patted Pedro reassuringly on the head. "He gen'rilly likes possums, but lately he's had a beef with one that keeps stealing his food from the shed, so it's lucky he was close enough for me to keep him quiet, eh boy?"

Pedro sulked in response, petulantly sniffing the air in the direction of the possum's retreat.

"Sorry, Pedro, but you gotta admit that that mama possum saved our skins." She knelt down and gave him some extra good scratches behind his ears, one of Pedro's particular favorite places to be scratched. "The good news is, you get to lead us on the trail to find who we're really looking for, not some silly old possum. And we'd better get a move on. We've got to make it to Michael before someone else does."

“What do we do about those two?,” Butch asked with another shiver. “I couldn’t hear much, but I surely didn’t care for how the big one was swinging that buck knife around. Not to mention if they just up and decide to turn into rougarous.”

“I couldn’t make out much of anything either. Whatever they’re up to, at least they’re headed in the wrong direction for now, which means we have the advantage.” Betty turned her attention back to Pedro. “Now let’s see if you can pick up Michael’s scent from that trail we found.”

Pedro leaned in for one more good scratch before shaking off his feelings about the possum and running to the tree where they had left Butch’s eyepatch to mark the trail. He sniffed the ground and the air several times, running in tight circles, before lifting his head and letting out a triumphant, “yip!,” his tail wagging furiously.

“Good job, Pedro! Alright boys, you heard him, let’s go find Michael!”

Betty and Pedro began to head off in the direction of the tracks but had only made it about twenty steps when she heard Butch’s voice calling behind her.

“Uh...guys? I think you’d better come over here and take a look at this.”

Butch was staring at the tree nearest to where the men had been huddled during their conversation with an expression of deep concern. The blood had drained from his already pale face and he looked ghostly in the dim light. His flashlight was aimed at the trunk and his hand was shaking as he tried to keep the beam of light steady on the tree.

Betty and Denny crowded behind him to see what he had discovered. There on the trunk, plain as day, was a hobo hieroglyph. It was about six inches long and made up of three slash marks left in bright white chalk.



“I - I know this one,” Butch swallowed, trying to steady his shaking voice. “It... it means ‘not a safe place’.”

Denny scratched his head. He pulled out his notebook and began flipping back through the pages as he wondered aloud, “Wait a minute - could we have missed it somehow? When we were here earlier, I mean?”

Butch shook his head no, his eyes still fixed on the hieroglyph.

“Butch is right,” Betty agreed. “I climbed right up this trunk to leave Butch’s eyepatch for us to find - and you two watched me. Lizzy spotted the airplane right here and it was only sticking out of the grass a couple of inches. One of us would’ve seen a mark as bold as this one for sure.” Lizzy nuzzled her cheek in confirmation - she too was sure she would’ve seen such a prominent marking.

“The question is: what did they mean by it?” Betty wondered softly. Butch and Denny turned to her as she puzzled over the symbol. She reached out to touch it, then drew her hand back quickly as though the chalk were hot to the touch. She rubbed the trace of fine white dust between her fingertips as she tried to put herself in the shoes of the strange men. *What were they trying to say?*

“Do they mean this place isn’t safe for them? Did they leave the mark here because they’re in danger somehow? Like someone is after them for something?” She took in a shaky breath and turned to her friends. “Or is it a warning? They *are* the danger.”

Goosebumps lit up the arms of the three friends, and ran all the way up to the backs of their necks.

“Could be either.” Denny gulped. “Could be both.”

“Could be rougarous,” Butch squeaked out.

Betty looked off in the direction of the mountains. “Then we definitely don’t have any time to lose.”

Butch opened his mouth to protest, but Betty stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I know, Butch. Believe me I know. I want to go out there about as much as a barn cat wants a bath, but either they’ve got Michael somewhere and they’re trying to keep him hid till they can get that ransom money, or they heard about the money and are hoping to get to him before anyone else does. Or heck! I don’t think it’s likely, but maybe they are rougarous after all. I wish we knew for sure, but in any case we can’t go back now. We gotta help Michael.”

She smiled up at him and aimed her flashlight on her own legs. “I’m scared too. Look - my knees are jumping like hot grease!”

They all laughed then, releasing some of the tension that had been building since they first spotted the men in the orchard.

“Aw shucks, Betty, you’re right.” Butch sighed. “And I know that if I were lost out there somewhere, there’s no one I’d want on my trail more than us.”

They all three fell in on each other for a giant hug for courage before training their flashlights back onto the beginning of Michael’s trail. “It’s settled then. We know what we gotta do.” Betty set a look of determination on her face and clicked twice with her cheek. She pulled red bandana Carole had given them back at the creek out of her pocket and let Pedro bury his

nose in it, inspecting it thoroughly to get a good nose-full of Michael's scent. "Alright, Pedro. Let's go save the day."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Another Clue

Pedro kept his nose to the ground as he led the detectives farther and farther into the darkness of the valley beyond the orchards. Every once in a while he would freeze in place and lift his head before huffing out a puff of stale air through his tiny nostrils to reset himself before dropping his nose and heading off again. Lizzy perched on the edge of Betty's shoulder, her tiny feet holding fast to the strap of Betty's overalls, moving her eyes from side to side and scanning the terrain from above.

They had been walking for at least an hour and were all bone tired from the danger and excitement of the long day already behind them. But they were just as determined to keep going, all with the hopes that every step took them closer to bringing Michael home. Having Butch's bag of snacks was something they were all thankful for as they took a short break to share a sleeve of buttery crackers among themselves. Betty broke a cracker into small pieces and passed them to Pedro and Lizzy. Lizzy generally preferred a nice slice of cucumber or a piece of lettuce, but the cracker would do in a pinch.

"What do you think he was doing all the way out here anyway?" Butch asked through a mouthful of crumbs as he shone his flashlight in a circle, looking around them at the unfamiliar terrain.

"I reckon he just kinda lost himself," Betty said with a sigh. "Member that time we were playing safari rangers and went out looking for mountain lions and bears and ended up on the other side of the river? I'm still not sure how we managed to hit the county line. If we hadn't

hitched a ride back to town with Mr. Rozzi, who knows how long it would've taken us to get back home?"

"How could I forget - I got grounded from dessert a whole entire week that time," Butch groused, stuffing another cracker in his mouth.

"So maybe he just got caught up in adventuring like we did. Only he didn't have the good luck of Mr. Rozzi passing by on the way back home from his fruit stand," she said with a shrug and offered more cracker pieces to Pedro and Lizzy before wiping buttery dust off her hands.

Denny stretched and yawned, rubbing his face several times and then giving his scalp a furious scratch through his short brown hair with both hands to wake up. He slapped his cheeks three times. "Alright, Michael has littler legs than we do, but he has a huge head start. We'd better keep moving. You ready, Pedro?"

Pedro reached out into the earth with his front feet and lifted his rump in the air in a stretch, then shook himself in a wave from head to tail and back again that ended with a tiny sneeze. He licked his lips and wagged his tail.

Denny smiled at the brave little dog. "That's a good boy. Let's go."

They fell in formation behind Pedro once again and steadily made their way all the way to the edge of the valley. The trees here changed from the shorter fruit and nut trees of the orchards to ancient looking evergreens with tall, thick trunks. Under their feet, the land began to rise up and transform into the surrounding mountains. The air was more humid here, moisture trapped by the canopy of trees, and the sound of their footsteps disappeared as the ground quickly became a soft, springy path of pine needles. An owl hooted in a nearby tree and they heard the sound of coyotes singing to each other in the distance. They instinctively moved closer

to each other as they walked and kept a tighter half circle behind Pedro to protect him from coyotes, owls, or any other hunters in the night.

As the forest got thicker and the trees closer together they had to walk in single file in places to squeeze between trunks where Pedro was able to dart through easily. The branches above now blocked most of the moonlight and they had to rely on their flashlights and the chihuahua's nose.

Suddenly Pedro came to a complete stop as they approached a huge, rotted out tree trunk lying on the ground directly in their path. He started to go around the fallen tree, but only made it a few feet before he stopped again, sniffing the ground and then the air. Butch scanned the ground around the tree, looking for any sign of a trail, but the way the light of the flashlight played against the leaves and moss on the ground made it hard to pick out anything. Pedro doubled back and trotted straight into the pitch dark of the trunk.

The detectives hesitated outside, but Pedro yipped impatiently for them to follow his lead. So reluctantly they dropped to their knees and crawled in after him, single file into the black dampness of the old tree. Betty tried to lighten the mood, laughing as she called out, "Anyone in here with more than four legs, kindly let us pass in peace!"

"Or anyone with no legs at all!" Denny chimed in.

Butch only gulped and focused his thoughts on the soles of Denny's sneakers scooting right, left, right, left forward ahead of him.

When they tumbled out of the far side of the trunk, they found Pedro running back and forth along the length of a swiftly moving stream. He looked frustrated as he paced back and forth, going over the same ground several times before laying down on the ground with a whine.

“Oh no,” Betty said as she knelt beside him, giving him a reassuring pat on the back.

“You lost the scent, huh boy?”

“What do we do now?” Butch asked, taking advantage of the break to sit down for a moment and stretch his legs.

Denny scanned the area with his flashlight. “Michael’s trail was probably washed away by the stream. He could’ve gone in any direction from here - left, right, or straight across the stream. You think we should split up?”

“No!” Butch almost shouted before recovering himself a bit. “Only, it doesn’t seem safe for us to be wandering around out here on our own. Seeing as how it’s dark and all.”

“Butch is right, Denny. If it were daylight that’d be one thing. Or even if we could just be extra sure of staying in earshot of each other. But none of us know exactly where we’re at and I promised Susie we’d stick together. I made a pinky promise.”

Denny nodded and didn’t argue. Everyone knew that a pinky promise was sacred and not to be broken lightly.

“But which way should we go?” Betty said almost to herself as she slowly scanned the area with her flashlight. Just then Lizzy nipped her earlobe and started bobbing her head in excitement. “What is it, girl? What did you see?” She moved her flashlight slowly back and forth along and across the stream as Denny and Butch gathered behind to look over her shoulders. Lizzy tugged Betty’s earlobe again and she froze with her flashlight. Lizzy bobbed her head up and down with her little lizard push-ups and made an urgent clicking noise with her throat as Betty’s light caught something glinting on the ground on the far side of the stream.

“There!” Butch said, pointing with excitement.

“Would you look at that! Lizzybee, you’re a regular metal detector!” Betty beamed. Lizzy chirped and swung her head from side to side in happiness.

“What is it?” Denny asked, squinting into the beam of light.

“I’m not sure, but we’d better get over to the other side of the stream to find out. Come on, boys!”

Betty picked Pedro up and tucked him under her arm. She spotted some large, flat stones sticking up out of the water and used them as a bridge to make her way carefully across the stream. Denny and Butch followed right behind her, hopping from rock to rock until they were all safely on the other side and scanning the ground together for the mysterious shiny object.

“Got it!” Betty shouted in triumph with a huge grin on her face. She held out something pointy and metal for the boys to see. “Take a look at this!” They crowded around her and aimed their flashlights at the object in her small, muddy hand.

Denny’s face broke out in a wide smile and he hooted with joy. “It’s his! It’s Michael’s sheriff’s star! It’s got to be! Good eye, Lizzy!”

Butch pulled a piece of cracker out of his pocket and held it out to Lizzy. “Wow, Lizzybee! We’d have never seen that without you!” Lizzy’s color flushed bright emerald green as she happily snapped up the cracker.

Betty turned to Pedro and held the small badge out for him to sniff. “Okay, Pedro, take a good sniff. We know Michael was wearing it this morning, so it must’ve fallen off him here. Think you can find him again?” Pedro smelled the sheriff’s star both on the front and back thoroughly before putting his nose down and searching the ground once again. He was focused on the small area where Lizzy first spotted the star and he yipped once, before putting his head down again.

“Look - I think he’s got something!” Betty said and the three detectives watched the trusty chihuahua make ever widening circles on the ground as he sniffed and rooted through leaves and pine needles with his nose. Then Pedro froze in place and stared straight ahead - his entire body rigid. His ears flattened and the hair bristled along his spine as he let out a low growl, lips curling over his tiny teeth.

Betty looked at his stiff little body and shivered. “What is it, Pedro? Is there something out there?” she almost whispered. Pedro barked and growled again, staring out into the darkness beyond their small circle of light.

“Well, I don’t exactly speak Pedro, but he doesn’t seem very happy about this,” Butch managed with a shaky voice. Betty reached down and tried to soothe Pedro, but she wasn’t able to ease the tension in his tiny body as he kept his concentration on something they couldn’t see. Pedro began to pace nervously, growling and whining.

“Maybe... and just think about it for a second before you answer me: maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea for us to go back for help?,” Butch gulped.

Denny turned his flashlight to his friend. “Sure, help would be great. But help from who, Butch? The sheriff and the deputy are out with Betty and Carole’s parents. I don’t want to wake up my mom and dad after I already missed curfew tonight, do you? Who does that leave us with?”

“I’m afraid there’s nothin’ for it.” Betty said with a small voice. “We’re on our own.” She paused and shook her head, taking a moment to gather her courage before turning to her friends. “We could go back and go to both of your houses, ring the bells, wake up your parents, your brothers and sisters too - but it wouldn’t do Michael any good. Neither of your folks would ever let us come back out here in the middle of the night, even after they finished tanning our hides.

But it's not even about gettin' into trouble anymore. Boys, I've been hoping this whole time that Michael just got lost playing and couldn't find his way back home - and maybe that's how it started. But Pedro's nose doesn't lie and we gotta face the fact that, where ever he ended up, Michael isn't alone anymore. Whoever or... *whatever*... has Pedro's hackles up is out there with him. We don't have time to go all the way back home and then come all the way back out here. He's in real trouble right this minute. We've got to keep going."

The boys nodded solemnly at Betty.

She managed a weak smile for them. "The good news is, if it's those fellas from the orchard, we've got 'em outnumbered. And we know this area better than anybody - way better than any outsider ever could. We've got Lizzybee to keep an eye out for us, and Pedro has the best nose in the whole entire state, I'd bet."

"And don't forget - no one knows we're out here. We have the element of surprise!" Denny added with a brave grin. "It'll be the best game of *Secret Mission* we've ever played! What do you say, Butch?"

"Well, there may be rougarous, but at least there's no Ford of Interrogation out here." Butch said with a sigh, but smiled at Betty and Denny. "Okay. I'm in."

It felt like a huge relief to laugh a little bit at that moment, and Betty grabbed her friends in a quick embrace. She was scared, no doubt about it. And she could think of just about a million and a half things she'd rather do than head out after whatever it was that had Pedro so upset. But if she had to pick anyone on earth to venture out into the darkness of the unknown with, it was her two best friends and most trusted animal companions.

Maybe it was all the mixed-up emotions of the moment, but at the end of their hug, as Betty looked into the faces of Denny and Butch, she felt as though they could do anything in the

whole wide world that they set their minds to. Whatever was standing between them and Michael, had better watch out!

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Picker's Cabin

As Pedro led them further into the darkness of the forest, the detectives walked in silence behind him, keeping their ears sharp to alert them to any sound that might mean danger. They walked with slow, careful steps in the blackness so as not to trip and fall over a tree root or loose rock. Lizzy kept a firm hold of Betty's overall strap as she scanned the night for any signs of life.

Suddenly Betty felt a hand clamp down hard on her shoulder and swung around so quickly that Lizzy nearly went flying! She raised her flashlight to defend herself as she turned to face her assailant but she was immediately blinded by a light shining in her eyes. She blinked and squinted, trying to see, swinging her fists wildly when the light suddenly went out. She squinted and dropped her fists. Through the spots in her eyes she was able to make out the halo of Butch's blonde hair.

"Jiminy *cricket*, Butch Shaw!" Betty whisper-yelled, shining her flashlight into his face. "Are you trying to scare me to death?"

"Sorry! I'm sorry!" Butch whispered back, his cheeks blushing a terrific shade of red. "I was only trying to let you know that I need to tie my shoe."

Betty shook her head in relief and let out a small laugh. "Maybe next time tell me with a tap, would ya? Grabbing a person like that you're liable to stop their heart from beating right in their chest!"

"Hey guys?" Denny whispered as he shone his flashlight on something in the distance. "What in the haunted house is *that*?"

Butch and Betty raised their flashlights behind Denny and in the beams of light they were able to make out the edge of an old roof with a crooked stove pipe dancing out at odd angles through the corner. They moved their lights as one and saw that the roof sat atop a ramshackle building that was so old it was barely standing up. The whole thing was leaning to one side and covered in moss and other leafy growth - so much so that it looked as though the forest was trying to absorb the small building into itself.

“Well I’ll be - it looks like it’s an old picker’s cabin!” Betty said softly. “Or used to be one anyway.”

“A what now?” Denny asked.

“You know what those are, Denny Bellingham. They’re all over the place. The orchard owners put up picker’s cabins so the workers have a place to stay when they come through for picking season. The workers live in the cabins until the fruit has all been picked then they move on when the season is over.” She paused for a moment in thought as she ran her light over the line of the roof again. “I don’t rightly know why there’d be one way up here, though. Maybe somebody built it here for mushroom hunting.”

“For ghost hunting, more like.” Denny said with a shiver. “It is kinda like the shed my Dad uses to dry out apples and apricots to make fruit leather. Only our shed isn’t *definitely haunted*.”

“Let’s get moving.” Butch whispered urgently. “The further away from that spooky old thing the better. Pedro?” He patted his leg with a shaking hand. “Come on, Pedro! Let’s go, boy!”

Pedro jumped to attention and put his nose back to the ground. But to their dismay, when Pedro caught the trail again, he was heading directly toward the rickety old building. All three

detectives stood stock still, silently hoping that Pedro would veer off away from the shack. They waited and let him continue to follow the trail, but as he walked almost out of the reach of their beams of light he was still heading straight for the creepy cabin.

“You sure that’s the right way, P?” Betty quietly called after him. Pedro stood at the edge of the light, tippy-tapping his front feet over and over in a dance of anticipation. She turned to Butch and Denny with a shrug. “Welp, the good news is, that must mean we’re getting close.”

“Wha-what’s the bad news?” Butch asked with a gulp.

“The bad news is, whatever we’re following, it looks like it decided to hole up in there.” She trained her light on the tottering picker’s cabin again as Pedro came running back up to her and began urgently pulling on her pants leg, trying to hurry her along.

“Nope. No thank you.” Denny said, shaking his head and standing firm.

“I don’t think we have a choice, Denny.” Betty said as Pedro started to whine at her feet, tugging again at her pants leg.

“Okay, *okay*. Just give me a doggone minute.” Denny dropped his head for a moment, before raising it again and training his gaze on his friends with a serious look. “I will go on one condition: if any of us sees a ghost, witch, troll, talking snake, goblin, ghoul, ogre, giant man-eating-spider, Granny Jackson’s rougarou, or any other kind of spooky thing going bump in the night in there, we don’t stick around long enough to ask its name, where it came from, or what it wants. Deal?” He held out a shaking hand.

“Deal.” Betty and Buch agreed, taking Denny’s hand in a three-way shake.

“What about a banshee?” Betty asked, just a hint of a grin teasing at the corner of her mouth. “She could have important information on the case, you know, once she gets all her screaming out and all.”

“Hardy. Har. Har.” Denny managed, but at least he was smiling again, even if it was nervously. “Everybody got their rice bundle just in case?”

Butch nodded and Betty patted her front pocket in affirmation. Then she turned back to Pedro. “Okay, boy. You lead on, we’ll follow, but let’s go slow and careful okay? If anyone is going to be taken by surprise, let’s try have it be them and not us.” Pedro sneezed in agreement. “Good boy. And Lizzy, you’re our eyes. You see anything funny, give my ear a big ol’ tug. Let’s go.”

Pedro bravely led the group the short distance that was left between them and the cabin. He had almost reached the small front porch when there was a loud creak and they all froze again and quickly doused their lights. Betty held a finger to her lips. Everyone held their breath, trying to suss out who or what made that noise. Pedro whined loudly and Betty was about to shush him when a small voice weakly called out:

“Lightning?... Is that you girl?”

Betty spun to face Butch and Denny. She quickly made the signs for *is it him?* Denny signed back *only one way to find out* and Butch nodded in agreement. She took a deep breath and called out tentatively, “Michael? Michael Ingram? Is that you?”

They didn’t have to wait for a reply as the voice instantly called back to them, “Yes - it’s me! That’s me! I – I don’t know how I got in here. I’ve tried and tried but I can’t get out. Can you please help me?”

“Hot *dog!* Good job, Pedro!” Betty exclaimed then ran to the door and tried to pull it open. She tugged and tugged as hard as she could, but it wouldn’t budge. She looked up then and saw that someone had nailed two planks of wood over it, securing it tightly. “Come on, fellas! Help me get this wood off!”

While Butch and Denny yanked and pulled at the wood planks trying to wriggle them loose, Betty found a crack in the wall a few feet away and squirmed her fingers through. “Hiya, Michael. I’m Betty Lou Cockram - your sister Carole sent me. I’m here with my friends Denny and Butch. We’re here to rescue you! Are you okay in there? How did you end up all the way out here anyway?”

Michael reached out with his small fingers to hold Betty’s hand through the crack. “My-my head hurts but I think I’m okay. I maybe bumped it on something? Or I guess I could’ve fell. I’m not sure. I know I was playing Lone Ranger with Lightning - she’s this swell dog I just met. Is that her out there with you? Did she bring you to me?”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t know Lightning, but we’re with my chihuahua Pedro. He caught your scent back in the orchards and led us all the way out here to you.”

“Lightning and I, we were looking for bad guys and running so fast and far and we crossed a stream and then... well, everything was just dark like all the lights in the world went out. I don’t remember anything else after that except that I woke up in this place all on my lonesome. I’ve been hungry and awful scared.”

“We’re gonna get you outta there, lickity split - don’t you worry! In the meantime, here - take this.” Betty reached into her back pocket and pulled out the chocolate cake she had brought from home. She carefully pushed it through the crack into Michael’s waiting hand, “I brought you some cake on account of how I thought you might be hungry being out here for so long. It might’a’ got a little squished on the way here, but it’s chocolate with fresh strawberries.”

“Wow - thanks!” Michael said, his mouth already stuffed full with a bite of the delicious cake.

“So nobody’s been out here since you woke up and you don’t know how you got here?”

“Uh-uh.” He shook his head and paused to lick his fingers before taking another huge bite of Susie’s birthday cake. Betty frowned. She didn’t like this one bit. Why would someone lock this little boy up way out here? It could’ve been to keep him safe while they went for supplies or even help, but still, something felt off about the whole thing. If it were a rougarou, could it have been saving him for a midnight snack?

“Hey Betty, you better come over here.” Denny panted out, calling her over to where they stood sagging in exhausted defeat in front of the door.

“Hang on a second, Michael, I’m just going back to the door but I’ll be right back.” Betty reassured him before joining Denny and Butch.

Butch kicked at the old door in frustration. “We’ve tried every which way, but we can’t get these boards loose. How did he manage to get in there with these boards over the door?” He took a few steps back, shining his light over the old cabin. “If it was a rougarou, they could get up on that roof and drop him in easy.”

Betty was studying the boards over the door. “I don’t think so. Look,” she pointed her flashlight at the edge of one of the boards. “The wood is old, but there’s no moss growing on this side of it. The moss is on the other side where it should be too dry for it to grow.”

“So somebody must have put him inside, then nailed the door shut.” Denny said, brows furrowed in concern. “We’d better hurry up and get him out of there somehow before they come back, but Butch and I couldn’t make the boards budge at all.”

“Well, I’m the smallest. Maybe I can get my hands underneath and wiggle them from behind to get them started,” Betty said as she carefully slipped her hands between the boards and the old door trying to keep from getting any splinters from the rough wood. She braced one foot against the wall and pulled back hard - first with her right hand, then her left, back and forth,

back and forth, doing her best to create some space between the door and the wooden planks. She strained and pulled with all her might, but it was no use. She slipped her hands back out and her shoulders drooped in defeat as she rested her forehead against the plank of wood. She spoke in whispered tones so as not to alarm Michael, “Well what do we do now? Anybody pack a crowbar?”

“That’s it!” Denny said with a grin. “Betty, you’re a genius!” He ran off like a shot back into the woods. Betty looked to Butch in confusion but he only shrugged his shoulders in response so she headed back to reassure Michael.

“Hey Michael? It looks like someone nailed a couple of boards over the door out here - that’s why you couldn’t get out. We tried pulling them off and that didn’t work, but our friend Denny has a plan to get you out of there. Don’t you worry.”

“What’s he gonna do?”

“Well, I can’t rightly tell you, but –”

“Avast, me hearties!” Denny came crashing back through some bushes with a large stick over his head and a huge smile on his face. “We’ll have that prize or crush the barnacles of anyone in our way!”

When his triumphant declaration was met with only looks of confusion, he dropped the stick to his side and explained himself with excitement. “Betty, you asked if anyone had a crowbar and it made me think about that time the door to your treehouse was jammed shut after we had all that rain and the wood swelled up. It was so stuck we thought we’d never get it back open ever again. But then we used your pirate sword to pry it free, remember?”

“Of course I remember - I nearly broke my sword, but it worked alright.”

“Well I remembered that too, and then I thought: these woods are chock full of pirate swords, aren’t they? If I can find one long enough, we can use it to pry those boards clean off!”

“Shiver me timbers!” Butch cried and Betty laughed.

“I knew you’d think of something, ye old salt!” She turned to the wall again. “Hang on, Michael! We’ll have you out in no time!” Betty jumped up then and ran to the door. “Butch - you grab onto that end with Denny and I’ll slide this other end under the top board. When I give the signal, you two pull down as hard as you can. Give no quarter, maties!”

“Aye aye, Cap’n!” Butch answered, positioning himself behind Denny and grabbing the back end of the stick. The boys lifted the heavy end and held it aloft to give Betty a good angle to get her end under the center of the top board.

She took a step back, but kept her eyes on the stick and shouted, “On my mark! One! Two! Three! *Heave HO!*”

Denny and Butch let their weight drop and pulled with all their might, bending their knees and dropping their weight toward the soft earth below them. At first nothing happened, but they kept at it and then, sure enough, a creaking groan escaped from the board and the nails began to slide and give way.

“It’s working!” Betty yelled. “Keep it up, fellas!” Betty’s arms strained to keep her end of the stick in place. Lizzy began making quick circles around her neck, nipping at her ears. “I know girl, it’s exciting, but you gotta calm down so I don’t...lose...my grip,” she said through clenched teeth.

But just as the board was almost free the stick suddenly dropped behind her. Betty was about to turn and run back to help them when she heard a shout and something went over her

head. She struggled but was grabbed from behind. The last thing she remembered was something heavy coming down painfully on her head with a crack, and then...darkness.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Captured

When Betty woke up she felt as though she needed help to pry her eyelids open. She was sure that someone must have tied five pound weights to her eyelashes while she slept and, even stranger, she couldn't remember falling asleep. She tried to rub at her eyes with her hands, but her arms wouldn't move. They were behind her back and as she twisted them and wiggled her fingers she discovered that her arms were tied together tightly at her wrists.

She was finally able to crack her eyes open and found that she was lying on her stomach on an unfamiliar dirt floor. She could make out walls and a rickety table and realized she must be inside the picker's cabin! But why was she tied up? And how did she even get in here? Did the stick work? Did they pry the boards off the door? Maybe one of them came flying off and hit her in the head and knocked her out. But why on earth would she be tied up?

She wanted to sit up, but when she tried to bring her legs up under her to do so, she could feel that her ankles were also bound. She felt too tired to even try to roll over. Her mouth was parched and her head ached, but she knew they must be in real danger and worked to wake herself up.

She could see Denny and Butch not far from her, also lying on the floor. They were both tied up too and looked so helpless in their sleep. But other than tied up and knocked out, they seemed to be okay. They were breathing anyway at least, she thought as she watched their chests rising and falling in the dim light. There was no sign of Pedro, but when she licked her lips and worked to blink some tears into her eyes so she could see better, she felt Lizzy's tiny feet skitter over her head and onto her face. She had been hiding by Betty's neck and was so worried about

her. She was only soothed by the warmth and steady pulse she could feel there at Betty's throat, telling her that her friend was still alive. Lizzy ran all over her, checking her for injuries, looking into her eyes.

"Hey there, LizzyBee," Betty croaked. Lizzy spun with glee that she was awake and alright and licked her cheek with her fat, pink tongue. "What have we gone and gotten ourselves into this time?" She swallowed hard and tried to clear her throat. "You tried to warn me, huh? I thought you were excited about the door getting open, but you must've seen something." Lizzy answered her with little push-ups. "Do you know where Pedro is? Is he here?" Lizzy dropped her tiny head and turned her body a pale brown that made Betty's heart sink with worry.

"Betty Lou?" A shaky voice quietly called out. Two small feet inched out of the blackness of a corner and slowly came toward her. "Are you alive? You're...you're not a ghost now are you?" Michael crouched down onto his knees in front of her. He bent over and put his face to the ground so they were nose to nose, only inches apart as he searched her face with eyes that were round like dinner plates for any signs of ghostiness.

"Hi there Michael." Betty tried to smile to ease the fear on his face, but the effort made her wince as a sharp pain shot across her head from front to back. "I'm pretty sure I'm alive. Unless ghosts get headaches."

"You've got a lizard on your face."

"That's Lizzybee just making sure I'm alright. Michael, meet Elizardbeth. You can call her Lizzy if you like. She's part of our team."

"Oo-oooh. Nice to meet you," Michael said with a grin as Lizzy turned to him nodded politely in greeting.

“She’s the one who found your sheriff star. It’s-” Betty strained to try to roll over again, but rocked back onto her belly with a groan. “Well, it’s in my front pocket underneath me and it’s poking me something fierce. You think you could give me a hand here and help me sit up?”

Lizzy ran down Betty’s shoulder to her side and did little push-ups there to get Michael’s attention.

He watched her with fascination. “You want me to roll her over too, Lizzy?” Lizzy spun in a circle. “Okay, watch out now. Here I go!” Michael reached out and gently pushed Betty, rolling her over so that she was on her back, being very careful not to squish Lizzy in the process.

Betty groaned at the pressure now on her arms but was happy to finally have her face off the ground.

Michael crawled around and crouched behind Betty’s head. He wiggled his fingers underneath her shoulders. “Ready, Betty?”

She grit her teeth and nodded her head. “I’m ready.”

“One, two, *three!*” Michael pushed hard and brought Betty upright then gently helped spin and tilt her body so she could lean against the wall. Lizzy jumped from Betty’s shoulder to Michael’s chest and scurried up to his cheek, planting a kiss there before hopping back to Betty. He giggled and blushed at the affection and her tiny, tickly feet.

“Betty? Where are we? Butch? What happened?” Denny was stirring across the room. “Did we get the door open? Why am I tied up?” He wriggled and pushed with his feet against the floor, kicking Butch and waking him up in the process.

“Five more minutes, mom!” Butch grumbled sleepily.

Denny rocked from side to side and was soon able to roll over onto his back and started to sit up. Michael scooted over to him and helped him the rest of the way up.

“Denny, this is Michael,” Betty said. She smacked her feet against the ground a couple of times and croaked, “Butch, wake up!”

“But I don’t wanna go to school,” Butch mumbled against the floor.

“Nice to meet you Michael. We’ve been looking for you all over,” Denny said with a smile. “Say - you think you can pick up those glasses on the ground over there and put them back on my face?”

“You bet I can! Sure thing!” Michael crawled over to where Denny’s glasses had fallen and picked them up. They were covered in dust and dirt, so he wiped them on his t-shirt before gently placing them back on Denny’s face where they belonged.

“That’s better! Now that I can actually see you, I’d have recognized you anywhere - you and Carole look a lot alike.”

“My grandma says we have a very pah-tick-yoo-lur nose. It points up this way,” Michael replied with a toothy grin and a finger pointing up in the air.

“What... what happened?” Butch grumbled, flopping over and working his way to sitting up. “Where are we anyway? And what’s the big idea - who tied me up?!”

“Good morning, sunshine. Nice of you to join us,” Betty grinned. She was so happy to see that everyone was okay that she was able to put aside her alarm for a moment and enjoy giving Butch a hard time. She put on a haughty tone and said, “We trust you found the accommodations to your liking, sir?”

“Accommo-what now?” Butch whined, confused.

Betty chuckled, but then her face turned serious. “I don’t know about you two, but somebody conked me on the head - and hard too. The last thing I remember is trying to open the door. Then I woke up like this.” She gestured with her tied ankles and wrists. “Lizzy tried to warn me, but I didn’t understand her in time. Michael - did you happen to see anything? Do you know who did this to us?”

Michael shook his head sadly and looked afraid. “I heard yelling and when the door banged open I hid over in that corner. There was an awful lot of noise but I was too scared to look. I’m sorry. When the door got shut again you three were in here with me...er, four countin’ Lizzy.”

Lizzy nodded and licked an eye in appreciation at being included.

“At first I was so happy to see you, but none of you moved for a really *really* long time. I tried to wake you up, but I couldn’t. I got so scared worryin’ you were dead and all and I was all alone again,” he finished with a shaky sigh.

“That’s okay, Michael. I bet it was awful scary. It was really smart of you to hide like you did.” Betty craned her neck with effort to Denny. “Did you see anything?”

Denny shook his head in frustration. “No. I don’t remember seeing anything either. Do you, Butch?”

Butch frowned in concentration trying to replay everything that had happened in his head, then shook his head sadly. “Uh-uh. I know the boards were coming loose. We were about to get in the door, that’s all I’ve got.”

“There had to be at least three of them, then, to get us all at once or one of us would have seen something.” Betty said, eyebrows knitting together in thought. “If it was the men from the orchard, they must’ve gone to get some help before heading back up this way. They saw us

breaking Michael out, snuck up behind us and ambushed us. You didn't see my dog, did you Michael? Pedro? He's a little chihuahua."

Michael shook his head sadly, "I'm sorry."

"That's alright. If you didn't see him, hopefully that means the bad guys didn't either. And if he's not in here with us, I bet he's gone to get help," Betty said, trying to be brave but tears were stinging her eyes. "He's got to be okay. He's just got to."

"Try not to worry, Betty," Denny said. "Pedro's fast and he's smart. There's no way they could catch him - especially in the dark. He knows the wa--"

"Shh!" Butch whispered in alarm. "Everybody quiet - I hear something. *Footsteps!* Someone's coming!"

The captives froze. They could hear the faint sounds of feet shuffling through the pine needles and leaves and they were coming toward them. Then - voices. Betty strained to pick out any details from their approach. They had come to a stop on the other side of the cabin wall she was leaning up against and were whispering to each other. The whispering made it hard to tell how many people there were, and it made their voices all sound alike. It was a blur of hushed tones. There had to be at least...three? Maybe four? They were talking over each other, arguing, but it was so muffled she could barely make out anything at all. Frustrated, she took a deep breath and held it for a moment before slowly releasing it to calm her nerves and help her concentrate.

"...way more than I signed up for. We're gonna get caught. I know it."

One, counted Betty.

"Are you kiddin' me? Quit yer yammering for two seconds and use yer dang head."

Two.

“How’re we gonna move four kids? ‘Sides, their folks is bound to know they’re missing and –”

Three.

“You goin’ soft on me now? I never pegged you for a chicken. Leastways I thought you had brains enough to see the pay day we’re lookin’ at.”

I think that’s number two again.

“I s’pose we could...”

Four.

“You s’pose? Who’s askin’ *you* to s’pose anything? Three more kids means three times more money. We didn’t even have to look for ‘em! They fell in right into our dang laps!”

There was quiet for a moment before the man Betty had picked out as being the leader continued.

“We done spread out and laid low now for the last two hours and ain’t nobody come hollerin’ for ‘em yet. Nobody knows where they are. *Nobody*. I tell you what we’re gonna do: we’ll write up that ransom with a new price, wait for the money to drop, then we skedaddle with the cash and let the sheriff worry about findin’ ‘em.”

She heard him spit then, and stomp off into the woods. There was quiet for three breaths before the rest of the men followed and the night outside the cabin returned to stillness. The children didn’t move or make a sound until they heard the whippoorwills begin to sing again in the closest trees. Then they knew for sure the coast was clear.

“What’ve you got, Betty?” Denny whispered. “I couldn’t hear a thing from over here.”

“It was hard to tell, but there’s definitely at least three of them. If I had to guess I’d bet it was four. We’ve been knocked out for two hours and from what they said, no one’s come out this

way to look for us. I heard them say they're going to write another ransom note, take the money and run. We've got to figure a way out of here and fast."

Butch smiled and let out a huge sigh of relief. "Welp, I guess that's some good news!"

"*Good* news? How do you figure?," Denny asked and Betty looked confused too. "They plan on stealing the money, running off, and leaving us locked up out here in a haunted cabin forever!"

"Well," Butch explained, "if it's people that's knocked us out and locked us up, and what they're after is money, then they're probably not rougarous, and that means that we won't end up gettin' eaten. Even if we are stuck in a creepy cabin, I'd call that very good news."

"I guess you're right." Denny squinted his eyes in thought for a moment. He tilted his head to the side and said, "*Buu-uuut...*"

"What 'but'?! There's no 'but'! No 'but' and noooo rougarous," Butch insisted, shaking his head vigorously.

"*But,*" Denny continued, "rougarous could probably use some money to get along too. Just because they're monsters part of the time, doesn't mean they wouldn't need money for the rest of the time that they're human. They must need at least a little money to buy clothes and stuff to try to fit in. The fact of the ransom doesn't really tell us either way."

"S'cuse me," Michael said softly, raising his hand to ask a question. "But what's a roo-gone-roo?"

Betty opened her mouth to answer him but paused. She didn't want to scare him any more than he was already, so she had to put this delicately. Right at that moment Lizzy started running in fast circles on Betty's shoulder. She leapt up and nipped Betty's ear in excitement.

“Hang on just a second, Michael,” Betty said and craned her neck to try to follow Lizzy’s gaze. “What is it, Lizzy? Are they coming ba—”

Then she saw it: In the corner of the room where the dirt under the cabin had started to fall away from the walls was a tiny black nose and two light brown paws. “*Pedro!*” Pedro woofed quietly and started digging furiously at the loose dirt.

“Good boy, Pedro!,” Denny and Butch whooped in unison.

Betty laughed with relief at seeing her loyal little buddy safe and sound. “That’s it, boy! Keep digging!” Betty twisted and struggled against her bindings. “If we can just get these ropes off and help him dig, we can slip under the wall. That’s our way out!”

Denny and Butch began to try to pull their hands apart as well when Denny picked up his feet and let them drop against the dirt floor. “Holy smokes! How could I forget?!” Denny said in excitement and twisted around to face Michael. “Hey Michael, can you come here for a second?” Michael nodded and popped over to Denny’s side, waiting for instructions.

“Pull up my right pant leg, would you?” When Michael looked unsure of which was right or left, Denny wiggled his foot and said, “It’s this one here.”

Betty and Butch stopped to watch as Michael struggled to tug Denny’s pant leg up from under where it had been pinned by the rope at Denny’s ankles. When he finally freed the material they were able to see that there, still tucked securely into Denny’s striped crew sock, was the handle of his father’s army knife.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Escape

“Ya-hoo! Saved by a crew sock!” Butch yelled with glee. He was so excited he nearly toppled over, but Michael steadied him using both hands and with great effort managed to get him back upright again.

“Okay Michael - you think you could pull that knife out and cut this rope off my wrists?” Denny asked, holding his hands away from his body. “If you can get my hands free, I can do all the rest.”

Michael stood looking down at the knife, sucking thoughtfully on a finger. “Well, I’m not s’posed to play with knives, but I think my mom would be okay with it this one time.” he said with a nervous smile as he gingerly pulled the blade free of its holster in Denny’s sock.

The knife looked huge in his small hands but he took in a deep breath for courage, nodded bravely, and set to work sawing carefully at the rope behind Denny’s back. His tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth and his eyebrows furrowed as he concentrated, moving the knife back and forth with both hands on the handle, slowly and carefully so as not to cut Denny as well as the rope. Denny did his part by staying as still as possible, not even looking over his shoulder to try to watch even though he was desperately impatient to be free.

Finally Denny felt the bindings fall away as Michael whispered a small, “Yes! I did it!” behind him in triumph.

Denny rolled his stiff shoulders and rubbed his stinging wrists. He worked his fingers, opening and closing his hands to get the blood flowing to them again and Michael gently placed the knife on the ground next to him. “Great job, Michael! I’ve got the rest. You think you could

go help Pedro dig over in the corner? We've got our work cut out for us if we're gonna make a hole big enough for Butch, here."

"I sure can! I'm extra good at digging! Watch this!" Michael replied proudly, leaping to his feet and running over to the wall to help.

Betty smiled as she watched him kneel down in the corner where Pedro was making good progress from the outside on the hole. Michael started to dig, but pulled up short. She was about to ask if everything was okay, when she saw him bend his face to the hole and softly say, "Hiya, Pedro. I'm Michael. It's nice to meet you, boy. I'm gonna help from in here, okay?," before sitting back up and getting to work, digging quickly with both hands.

Denny got his feet free in no time and went to help Betty first. He made quick work of the rope at her wrists and she sighed in happy relief as she brought her hands in front of her and rubbed her sore arms. "Thanks, Denny. Who knew a body could get so sore from just being still? I'm surprised my elbows aren't squeaking."

Denny stood and held his arms away from his body in front of her. He raised his eyebrows to make his face look frozen and said out of the corner of his mouth, "oil can," doing one of his very best impressions - the Tin Man in the Wizard of Oz - and making them all laugh. Betty and Butch replied in unison, "Oil can what?" The laughter energized them and Denny started in on the ropes at Betty's ankles.

Once her feet were free, she started to stretch and wiggle her body, slapping her legs to wake them up and work the blood back into them while Denny got to work on Butch's bindings. Suddenly Pedro was in her lap! His nose was caked in dirt and he jumped up and covered her face with hot breath and wet, happy kisses. She giggled and wrapped him up in her arms. "Boy am I glad to see you! I was so worried when I woke up and you weren't here." Pedro yipped and

kissed her cheek again and she grinned. “Come on - let’s giddy up and work on that hole. It’s about time we get out of here and go home, don’t you think?”

Soon enough they were all shoulder to shoulder, digging away in the small corner. They had made good progress but the hole still wasn’t deep enough for them to slip under the wall and they didn’t get much further down before the ground under their hands became hard and clay-like. It was too firm for them to dig with their hands. They sat back on their heels to assess the situation.

“I don’t think even Michael can fit through that hole as it is.” Betty said as she took off one of her shoes and tried to use the toe as a shovel to dig deeper. But the rubber sole of her sneaker was too soft and hardly made a dent in the tightly compacted earth. She sat back again in frustration, tugging her show back on. She looked around the small space, checking the walls for any obvious weak spots. “There’s just got to be another way.”

“Maybe if we pry the leg off that table we can get through this layer of dirt. It could be softer below,” Denny wondered aloud.

Betty shook her head, “That’ll take forever. That’s even if that old leg doesn’t break in two and the way it looks I’d say our chances are slim it will hold. Those men could be back any minute.”

“Hang on a second,” Butch broke in. “Maybe if I try *this*,” He reached out and grabbed onto the rough bottom edge of the plank closest to him and pulled it toward himself with both hands as hard as he could. His effort was rewarded with a slow, steady, *crrrrreeeeaaaaaak* from the old, rotting wood. He put his feet on the planks on either side of the one he was working on to brace himself and tried again, pulling hard. This time the wood made a *skeeeeeeerrrrriiiiiitch*

as the plank gave way and broke off a little over a foot up the wall creating a perfect hole for them to crawl through.

“Yeehaw, Butch!” Michael shouted with glee. He jumped up and down, clapping his little hands. As Butch got to his feet, Michael looked up at him in wonder and said, “I hope I’m as big and strong as you are someday.”

Butch turned beet red all the way up to his blonde eyebrows at the compliment and ruffled Michael’s hair affectionately before placing his hands on the younger boy’s shoulders. “And I hope I’m as brave as you are. If I had been stuck in this creepy old place by myself I’d as like to have been scared to death!” Michael grinned from ear to ear and his little chest swelled up with pride.

Betty slapped her hands together, her face all business. “Okay, boys. Look around and grab anything you don’t want to leave for the ghosts and creepy crawlers and let’s get the heck out of here. We need to be fast and we need to be quiet. There’s no telling where those roughnecks went off to but we surely don’t want to be here when they get back. Michael, you stick with Pedro and me and—”

“Oh no!” Denny moaned in frustration. “Our flashlights! They’re gone! Butch - did yours make it in your backpack?”

Butch held up his scout pack but could tell from the shape of it that it was empty. He checked all the pockets anyway to no avail. He shook his head and frowned, “Aw, gee. They even took the snacks!”

“Alright, listen up,” Betty said with determination. “I know it’s scary, believe me, but we’ll just have to make our way in the dark as best we can. I think the best idea is if we go single file: Pedro, Me and Lizzy, then Michael, Denny, and Butch, that way we can keep an eye on each

other. Now, once we make it outside on the other side of that hole, no talking! Not a peep unless it's an emergency until we see streetlights. We gotta keep our ears open and our eyes peeled. And stick together - we don't want anyone getting lost out there. I just know that if we're careful and follow Pedro's nose we'll make it home in no time." She paused and made eye contact with each boy for a moment, giving them a small smile for courage before turning to Pedro. "Alright, boy," she whispered as she scratched behind his ears, "I believe in you. Take us home."

As quickly as they could, and ever so quietly, they dropped to their bellies and squeezed through the small opening at the rear of the cabin. Betty came out last and pulled the broken piece of board up behind her, propping it over the hole and filling some of the dirt back in with her feet to try and cover any obvious evidence of their escape. If the strange men came back anytime soon, hopefully they would still think the children were tied up inside and wouldn't suspect anything long enough to buy them some time to get far away.

She brushed her hands off on her pants, reached out to take Michael by the hand, and brought him behind her in line. His little hand was ice cold and she could tell he was shaking, so she gave him a reassuring wink, fastened his tin star back onto his overalls, and slipped his hand onto the hammer loop on the pant leg of her own overalls. She wrapped his fingers around the fabric so he'd have something to hold onto. Michael looked up at her with gratitude in his fearful, watering eyes and gave her a brave smile and a nod. Then Betty nodded to Pedro to head off and motioned everyone forward behind him.

It was slow going. Even though Pedro quickly found the trail and was leading them with confidence the ground was full of hazards. There were rocks, tree roots, holes, and little mounds to catch their toes and trip them up. Several times they had to stop so Denny could pull one of his shoes back on after painful encounters when Butch's feet clipped his heels from behind. They

froze in terror at any unfamiliar sound and held their breath as they waited for silence before cautiously creeping forward again as one.

Betty had put on a brave face for Michael, but there was no doubt that she was scared and felt totally turned around. Without any recognizable landmarks and with the ground going up and down, up and down, she had no idea where she was and nothing felt familiar. She thought, *this is what Hansel and Gretel must have felt like, but they only had bread crumbs to follow*. She felt a fresh wave of gratitude for Pedro then, realizing that once again she was relying completely on the tiny, brave dog in front of her to lead her out of this dark maze.

Then suddenly it hit her! She could smell it before she even heard it: the unmistakable scent of fresh, running water. She inhaled deeply and smiled as she relished the clean, cool feeling in her nostrils. In a few more moments they were all able to hear the sound of the creek where they had found Michael's tin star. Then the ground began to dip down and the water became louder and louder. Pedro stopped a couple of feet short of the bank and the friends smiled at each other, relieved to have reached a place that felt at least a little familiar.

Betty scanned the water, glinting in the bit of moonlight that shone through the trees and was able to spy the first stepping stone, a matte black gap in the shiny, dancing water in front of her. The friends gathered in a tight circle and Betty spoke softly, confident that the rushing water would hide the sound of her voice from anyone outside their group. "Good job, everybody! I knew we could do this. Now, I can see the step stones we crossed on. If you look for where the water isn't shining, those are the places we aim for. You see?"

Betty pointed out the first stone and the boys all looked around her for the pathway and nodded vigorously in response. Even Michael was looking more confident now that they were close to reaching the edge of the unknown of the forest. Betty continued, "I'll go first and carry

Pedro with me. You all follow in the same order we've been walking in. I remember from coming this way that those rocks are a little slippery, so let's go slow and be really careful. When we're all on the other side, I'll let--"

All of a sudden, a huge bright light lit up their faces, cutting Betty off and blinding them. A terrible laugh rang out in the night, echoing off the water. "Now just where do you think you're goin'?" I thought we tied you up nice and tight, but I guess this means we'll just get us another chance. Get, 'em!"

Before they could react and scramble away, arms appeared out of the pitch black darkness from behind them, grabbing Denny and Butch around their chests and pinning their arms. They struggled and fought but the arms around them held fast. It was no use - they were helpless.

Another set of arms tried to wrap Betty up, but she quickly dropped to the ground with all her weight and was able to slip through the stranger's grasp. She crawled as fast as she could toward the water with Pedro by her side and heard an angry shout of, "Don't just stand there! GRAB HER!" Strong hands took hold of her ankles and before she knew it, Betty's knees were pulled out from under her and she was being dragged roughly back on her belly away from the water.

Terrified, she tried to kick against the hands on her ankles, but their grip was too strong and she couldn't get her knees back under her for leverage. She dug desperately at the damp soil of the stream's bank with her fingers as she tried to claw her way to an escape, but the ground was slippery and she was still being pulled steadily backward. She swung her head from side to side, trying to get eyes on Michael or the boys, but she was still blinded, her eyes swimming with spots from the bright light that had been shone into her face.

There was a snarl next to her, followed by a menacing bark, and Pedro spun and lunged, biting the stranger hard on the wrist. He let go of Betty's ankles and stood howling with pain and rage. Pedro was dangling from his flesh, growling and shaking his entire body with fury. The man let out a string of curses as he drew his arm back and flung Pedro with all his might. Pedro let out a yip of fear before landing in the stream with a splash!

"Pedro!" Betty screamed in horror, tears streaming down her cheeks and she threw herself forward into the water after him. The shock of the cold water almost took her breath away, but every cell in her body was focused on Pedro and getting him to safety. She could hear him yipping and crying just ahead of her. Betty kicked and paddled as hard as she could, swimming with the current, desperately trying to reach him as the water dragged at her clothes, threatening to pull her under. She was struggling to keep her head up, gasping for air, and it was so dark it was almost impossible to keep track of the small dog as he was spun and bobbed, this way and that, in the rushing current.

Just when she thought all hope was lost, she saw Pedro snap at a tree root sticking out into the water with his teeth. He grabbed on and held fast but she could tell he wouldn't be able to hold on for long. Betty took in a gulp of air and let the water pull her under until she felt the ground beneath her feet. With all her might, she kicked off the bottom of the stream and swam up and across to where Pedro was still clinging to the root. She was able to get one arm around his shivering body and anchor them both with her other arm by hooking it firmly around the root.

With fierce determination, Betty fought to pull them up the tree root to get them to safety. Her grip was strong, but the root was slippery and the water kept pulling at her, wrenching her legs out from under her over and over again. She knew she didn't have much time - she had to get them to dry land before her hands went completely numb from the cold water.

Then, without warning, Betty was flying through the air! The tree root and stream, all of it dipped down and away from her, making her terrifically dizzy as she was plucked up away from the water! A terrifying growl rumbled behind her as huge hands hooked under her armpits and her wet, wriggling body soared through the air. In a panic, she kicked wildly, Pedro still clutched in her arms.

She screamed in fright!

The boys could hear her cry and lunged against their captors, fighting with new strength to try to help her. She screamed again and Denny shouted, “Betty!? NO!!!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Rougarou's Howl

A huge, hairy hand clamped down over Betty's mouth, stifling her scream, and strong arms encircled her, hoisting her up and away from the rushing stream. She was frozen to the bone and her soaked clothes clung to her shivering body as water poured off of her from everywhere. Somehow in the tumult she had managed to hang onto Pedro who was clutched tight against her chest and as she felt Lizzy's four tiny, icy-cold lizard feet scramble to grab onto the hair behind her ear she closed her eyes with a quick prayer of thanks.

But whoever had plucked her from the water was now on the move and Betty realized with alarm that she was being carried backward - away from her friends. With every step her captor growled and her eyes were wide with panic and began to fill with tears, blurring her vision. The hairy hand was still clamped down hard over her mouth and she struggled to get a full breath through the water pouring out of her nose which had also begun to run. She kicked and wriggled against the large body desperately but couldn't break free - he was far too strong. The large arm pinning her to his solid chest made her feel like she was being crushed between two boulders.

Normally Betty was so self confident, so sure of herself and her ability to get out of any situation. But every step the man took farther away from Denny and Butch made Betty feel smaller and more afraid. She twisted around, trying to get a glimpse of his face, but she was pinned too hard.

Who was this...or what? No! Not a rougarou! There's no such thing! She wouldn't believe it! She couldn't breathe! Granny Jackson's rice bundle was a hard knot, pressing between

Pedro and her chest. She couldn't get to it. She tried to fight the panic as she scanned the darkness for a way out but there was no one to help her now. She was alone. Each breath she took was a battle and she felt her legs dangling beneath her getting heavier, pulling her down into darkness.

Lizzy felt Betty's head start to droop forward into the hairy hand that was still pressing over her mouth. She could see that Betty's arms were beginning to loosen, threatening to drop Pedro. The little lizard licked and licked at Betty's cheek just in front of her ear, an especially ticklish spot that always worked to wake her up in the mornings, but her eyes rolled back in her head - she was passing out! Lizzy didn't want to hurt her friend, but she had to wake her up somehow, so she took Betty's earlobe into her mouth and bit down as hard as she could.

Betty's eyes sprang back open, darting from side to side as she came to and quickly tightened her grip on Pedro. She worked to slow her breathing, furrowed her brow in determination and somehow found the strength to pull her feet up in front of her and throw them backward, swinging her legs back through the air as hard as she could. She heard a terrific *crack* as one of her heels made contact with what felt like a leg bone, and her captor jerked and skidded to a stop. He hissed sharply through his teeth in pain, but it only stopped him for a moment and he was soon moving through the brush again.

"I won't let you take us. I'm not giving up!" Betty promised herself. In one last, desperate bid for freedom, she bit down hard on the giant hand over her mouth. She gagged as blood sprang from the wound and she was dropped at once as a howl of pain rang in her ears. Betty couldn't catch herself with Pedro still in her arms so she fell awkwardly, her knees crunching painfully into the dirt before she tumbled sidelong and landed hard on her shoulder, her head bouncing off the ground with terrific force. Her ears were ringing and she felt like she was going

to be sick. Her mouth tasted like metal and her grip finally gave out. Pedro hopped up out of her arms and ran to her face, covering her in kisses to try to bring her back to herself.

Betty was dizzy but forced herself up off of all fours to stand on her wobbly legs. She lurched and turned to face her attacker. She wiped his blood off her mouth with the back of one hand and quickly dug the rice bundle out of her pocket with the other. Her vision was blurry and she struggled to steady herself, rocking from side to side. Somehow she was able to free the bundle from its string and she hurled the rice at the face of the shadowy figure. There was another howl of pain and she braced herself, waiting for the next attack, but it never came. Just as quickly as it had appeared, the huge body vanished into the darkness.

She could hear Denny and Butch in the distance through the ringing in her ears, yelling her name and fighting to free themselves. Each step was painful as she limped along toward their voices, being careful to keep away from the edge of the water. She was so dizzy, but she knew she needed to keep moving. As she oriented herself, she realized that whatever had plucked her out of the water had done so on the far side of the stream. She shuffled toward the sound of the boy's shouts, Pedro nervously following at her heels, Lizzy shivering at her neck.

Her head was slowly starting to clear and, as she got closer, Betty was able to make out Denny and Butch in the darkness, still struggling against the strange men that had grabbed them. She wanted them to know she was okay but didn't want to shout and have to fight off anyone else in her weakened state, so she crept out of the shadow of the trees and stepped out into a spot of moonlight, waving her arms above her head. The boys quickly spotted her and she slipped back into the cover of the shadows, helplessly watching her friends as they fought with new determination.

She looked from shadow to shadow across the water and realized that while she could see Denny and Butch, little Michael was nowhere to be found. She started to panic that he had been carried off again when her eyes caught on a tiny, crouching figure that could only be the clever four year old. He must have escaped in the confusion and had found an excellent hiding spot a few feet away from the fight behind a copse of young fir trees encircled by ferns.

He was safe for the moment, but behind him Betty saw that a man with a flashlight was scanning the terrain around Michael's hiding spot, looking for him and closing in fast. Michael's back was to the man, his focus on Denny and Butch, so he had no idea of the danger that was approaching from behind - another minute and he would be done for. Betty waved her hands over her head, jumping up and down and willing him to hear her thoughts, "*Come on, Michael! Over here! Just look over here!*" She picked up a rock and threw it toward him in desperation, but it landed with a quiet *sploosh* in the middle of the stream.

She tried to think of another way to warn him without giving away his hiding spot, but it was just too dark and she was too far away.

"Alright, bad guys," she whispered to herself with grim determination, "come and get me." She took a deep breath and opened her mouth to yell to draw their attention to her instead of Michael, but before she could make a sound there was a huge crash on the other side of the water! The man holding Butch shrieked, releasing him and grabbing at his own head instead. The light of the flashlight swung away from Michael at the noise and moved with urgency back toward the others.

Betty could just make out a shadow. It was tall and either had huge arms, or was holding a giant branch in the air behind whoever had trapped Butch. Butch's captor had now fallen to his knees, his head still in his hands. "*It must have hit him to free Butch! Maybe it's here to help us!*"

she thought, with hope rising in her chest. Betty saw the arm... or branch..., whatever it was, swing through the air again - this time toward the head of the man holding Denny. It made contact with a sickening thud and Denny was instantly released.

Butch grabbed Denny by the arm and they started to make a run for it, but, "*Oh no!*," Betty silently screamed. "*No! Let them go! Just let them run!*" The figure with the branch had grabbed ahold of Denny by his other arm, stopping them in their tracks and preventing their escape. Denny was twisting and pulling, trying to break free, but the stranger was immovable.

There was another crash and a howl and the flashlight was thrown... or was it dropped? Betty couldn't tell and she groaned in frustration, wishing for some moonlight to break through the darkness so she could see. As it was, all she could see was that the flashlight had flown through the air and rolled to the ground before flickering out and all was darkness again.

Darkness and chaos.

The shadowy figures had fallen on each other in an all out free-for-all that looked like a whirling tornado of arms and legs. There was so much shouting and confusion that the boys had been temporarily forgotten about and were able to slip away from the fight. Betty watched them creep to the water's edge. Michael had watched their escape as well and snuck out from his hiding place, scurrying on all fours to meet them.

Betty held her breath as Denny and Butch each took Michael by a hand and made a human chain from stone to stone across the rushing stream. When they had made it safely to the other side, Betty ran to them and pulled them back with her into the shadows. The friends wrapped each other in a swift embrace, and Denny panted out, "Betty, are you alright? We heard you scream!"

“I feel like the bottom of a bird cage but I think I’m okay. Something, er, somebody?...”

Betty shook her head. “ Look, somehow me and Pedro got pulled out of the water. Whatever it was tried to carry us off but I bit him and he dropped us. Then when he came at us again, I threw the rice at him and he disappeared. Are you guys alright? Did they hurt you?”

Denny shook his head as Butch replied, “They had us sure enough and I thought we were done for, but somebody came at them from behind. I dunno if they were helping us or fighting to get to us, but I threw my rice right at their faces. They all started howling something fierce and as soon as they let go of Denny, we made a run for it.”

Grunting and cursing filled the air around them as the strangers continued to fall on each other over and over again in the brawl across the water. It was a terrible fight - arms swinging, metal clashing against wood, wood thudding into flesh.

Betty turned back to her friends, “Now’s our chance! We’ve got to make a run for it. Let’s get out of here!”

At that, Pedro took off and the detectives followed as quickly as they could. They passed the rotted out log and kept on, the ground sloping down and steadily becoming more even under their feet. Finally they came to a clearing and Pedro was able to break into a run. They chased after him in the moonlight but they hadn’t made it very far before Michael slowed and skidded to a stop. The bigger boys almost toppled over him. Michael was panting, tears streaming down his face, and Denny called out softly, “Betty! Wait up!”

Michael looked up at the boys and managed between sobs, “I can’t run anymore. I’m sorry. I’m so tired. I’m just so tired.”

Denny put his hand on the small boy’s shaking shoulder and Butch knelt down and looked at Michael with a kind smile that helped to hide the concern in his eyes. “That’s okay,

buddy. Our legs are longer than yours and you're doing great. But we can't stop now - it's not safe here, so we hafta keep moving. Why don't you climb on and I'll give you a piggyback ride for a while, okay?"

Denny reached down under Michael's armpits to give him a boost up onto Butch's back and Michael clung gratefully to Butch's neck. Butch turned back to look at him with a grin and offered him a quiet, "*Hi ho?*"

Michael giggled through his tears. "*Silver, away!*," he whisper-yelled in response.

They were on the move once again. The way was beginning to feel more and more familiar now, even in the darkness, and soon the smell of fruit started to tease at their noses in the night air. The sweetness of it bolstered their spirits as they dashed through the neat rows of trees.

They were finally crossing into Mr. Jake's property when they heard a long, anguished howl in the distance that froze them in their tracks. Michael gripped Butch's neck tightly. "What was *that?*," he whispered. It definitely sounded more animal than human and it caused goosebumps to rise up on the necks of the children. Pedro growled and whimpered as he nosed the air on high alert, pacing in little circles by Betty's feet as Lizzy ran back and forth from shoulder to shoulder, searching the night with keen eyes.

Butch's body started shaking. The color drained from his face and his eyes went wide. "It's the rougarou. I knew it was them - Granny Jackson was right! Normal folks don't make noises like that. What do we do?"

Betty watched and waited as Lizzy continued her march, scanning the dark for danger before tucking herself back up by Betty's neck. "We don't know *what* made that noise," she replied. "But it sounded awful close. We'd better not hang around to find out. Come on, Pedro. Let's keep moving - we're almost home."

Dawn was beginning to bleed up from the horizon into the night sky, casting a red glow behind the shadow of the trees. They had no idea what could be on their trail and so the morning light that should have felt comforting instead filled them with dread as it chased the shadows back and left them with nowhere to hide. The children were exhausted and every step forward was a struggle. Their eyes burned and their bodies ached as they forced their heavy legs to carry them toward home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Something Smells Funny

Betty guessed that her head weighed just about a thousand, million pounds. It had sunk deeply into her squashy feather pillow and she was cozy and snug in her bed as the afternoon sun danced through the curtains of her bedroom window, rousing her from a deep sleep. She lay there with her eyes closed for a moment, savoring the feeling of the warm sunshine on her face. Bit by bit, she began to wiggle her toes and fingers against the soft quilt that was covering her. She groaned as she tried moving her elbows and knees, gradually testing the soreness in each part of her body. She figured that her fingers and toes were just about the only things not aching. “This must be what a bumper car feels like,” she mumbled.

She heard a voice call out from somewhere in the room, barely above a whisper, “Betty? Are you awake?”

Betty cracked her eyes open and blinked them into focus to find her sister sitting on the foot of her bed, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks. She pushed herself up onto her elbows with some effort and gave Susie something between a grimace and a grin, “Hiya, Suse. Say - have I been asleep for two years or three?”

“Oh, Betty! Thank heaven you’re alright,” Susie cried out in relief and fell onto her little sister, wrapping her up in a tight embrace.

“Oof!” Betty grumbled and Susie quickly released her, sitting up and frantically looking her over.

“I’m sorry! Did I hurt you? Are you okay? Does anything feel broken? Have I made it worse? What can I do?”

“Jiminy cricket, Susie. Give a person a minute to wake up before you give them the third degree, will ya?,” Betty grouched, but she grinned at her worried sister and Susie’s shoulders began to shake as she bounced back and forth between tears of laughter and relief.

Betty gingerly sat the rest of the way up and looked around their shared room. Pedro was dozing by her feet, his little head resting protectively on the bone her Mama had given him as a reward when they finally made it home in the wee hours of the morning. Lizzy was lying peacefully in the sunlight on the windowsill, her tiny belly pulsing rhythmically in slumber. Betty smiled at the pair of them and looked down at her hands that were still crusted with a good deal of dirt and grime from her adventure. Upon further inspection, she discovered that she was still wearing her clothes from last night which were stiff and scratchy against her tender skin.

“I guess I was too tired to get my pj’s on, huh?,” she said with a laugh. “I can’t believe Mama didn’t dunk me in the tub and scrub me with a bristle brush before she let me anywhere near her fresh sheets.”

Susie wiped the tears from her cheeks and smiled. “You all looked like you were walking with your eyes closed when you stumbled up onto the porch. I think Mama was so relieved you were in one piece she would’ve put you to bed if you’d been rolled in tar and the bed was covered in silk and not worried about it.” She took Betty’s hand in hers and paused for a moment before continuing, “I’m awfully sorry I didn’t stick to the plan. When Mama and Daddy got home a little after 2 a.m. they came in to check on us. They woke me up in a terrible fright when they saw that you were gone. I didn’t mean to tell them early, but they just looked so pitifully worried I couldn’t stand to make them wait until morning.”

Betty squeezed Susie's hand. "That's okay, Suse. I'm not sore at you - I probably would've done the same thing. But speaking of sore, I sure would love to get these bones into the tub and put on something that doesn't feel like it was washed with concrete."

Susie jumped to her feet and ran to the door, smiling over her shoulder, "Let me run the bath for you! I'll use extra bubbles - two whole capfulls!" and she dashed off to the bathroom.

"Well I'll be," Betty grinned at Pedro who had been awakened by the commotion of Susie's exit and was yawning and smacking his lips. "If we aren't the bee's knees then I don't know what." She reached over to pet him, wincing from the effort. Pedro leaned into her hand, yawned again, and stretched before plopping back down happily on the bed and started gnawing on his bone. Betty swung her legs to the side and put her feet on the floor. She slowly stood and stretched. Yep - she was right: her fingers and toes were just about the only body parts not aching. "*Well, those and my nose,*" she thought as she scratched at the dirt that was crusted on it.

She yawned and padded off to the bathroom where she found Susie standing proudly next to the steaming tub which was topped with a truly magnificent mountain of bubbles. Susie helped her get her overalls unbuckled and eased her shirt up over her head. Once she was undressed, Susie took Betty's arm and helped her lower herself into the soothing water before scooping up her dirty clothes and rushing them off to the laundry basket on the back porch.

Betty soaked in the hot bath, enjoying the bubbles that tickled her chin and watching her fingers and toes get nice and pruny. She might've soaked the day away, but she was suddenly hit with the scent of frying bacon and her stomach growled so loudly it startled her. "Okay, okay - I hear you," she laughed, carefully hoisting herself up out of the water.

When she was dried and dressed in some clean clothes, she pulled a comb through her wet hair and made her way to the kitchen where her Mother was just setting a huge plate of

bacon and eggs on the table for her. There were biscuits and homemade jam and even fresh squeezed orange juice even though it must be getting close to supertime. All of this - just for her! She tucked in eagerly but on her third mouthful of eggs, she looked up self-consciously at Mama and Susie who were hovering next to her, watching her eat with anxious energy.

“Now I know why Butch’s goldfish looks so nervous, getting stared at all day,” she said with a smile. Mama laughed but looked like she would start crying again any minute, her eyes were still red from this morning and she nervously balled her apron up in her fists. “I’m okay, Mama. Truly I am. Thank you for cooking breakfast all over again for me. Now would you two please sit down and eat? Tell me everything that I missed while you let me sleep the day away.”

Mama poured herself a cup of coffee and took a seat in the chair next to Betty. Susie sat beside Mama and held her free hand. They both looked exhausted and Betty felt sorry for them and wished they could’ve gotten a little sleep like she did.

Mama took a sip of her coffee and leaned back in her chair. “Well, I’m not sure what you remember from last night.”

“I’m pretty well sure that my brain switched off when I stepped up onto the front porch, so you can start from there,” Betty smiled through a bite of bacon.

“You all did look like you’d been in the wars,” Mama laughed, but her eyes were shining with fresh tears. “I wanted to call for the doctor, but you were asleep on your feet and nothing seemed to be broken, so Susie tucked you in and stayed with you while your Daddy and I got everyone else home. The Ingrams were so—” she choked on a sob and looked down to gather herself for a moment. When she looked back up at Betty her tears had started to spill down her cheeks. “Sweetheart, they were just so grateful. When no one showed up to collect the ransom they had started to lose all hope.”

Betty swallowed hard to keep from crying herself. She looked down at her plate and said, "I tried to tell you that—"

"*No one follows a ransom note,*" Mama and Susie finished for her in unison and they all laughed.

"I guess we should have listened to the detective in the family," Mama smiled and Betty blushed with pride.

"But what about all those men that kidnapped Michael and attacked us? Did they find them? Did the sheriff lock them up?" Betty asked before taking a huge bite of her biscuit and jam. She licked the sweet fruit off her fingers and added, "I'd like to have a word with whoever put a knot on my head."

Mama took another sip of coffee and continued, "Well, let me back up a bit. When we came home from the Ingram's and saw that you were missing, we woke Susie up and she told us what you all had gotten up to." She squeezed Susie's arm with tenderness before continuing, "Your Daddy took the notes you left for us and went straight back out to get the Sheriff and Deputy Harris. They could tell from your map that you should be headed somewhere near the trailhead that loops up toward Snake Falls. They set out after you and when they got close they heard a commotion and were able to follow the noise. It was a good thing your Daddy was with the Sheriff because they ended up walking right into a terrible fight between two strangers and four of the Larssons."

Betty nearly choked on the bite in her mouth. She sputtered, "The *Larssons*? That's who was up there?"

"Mmm-hmm." Mama nodded gravely, "Wayne Larsson and his three eldest, I believe. I thought surely you would've known it was them."

Betty was well and truly astonished. “We’d all been knocked out and tied up and someone took our flashlights,” she explained. “It was so dark and noisy - everything felt practically upside down, it was so confusing. No wonder they were whispering! They didn’t want us to recognize their voices. Still, I don’t know how I missed it!”

“Well apparently, just as your Daddy and the sheriffs made it to the scene, Mr. Larsson hit one of the strange men with a flashlight or something and gave him a pretty gruesome head wound - he knocked him out cold. The other stranger had been half-blinded by something that was thrown in his face. His eyes were nearly swollen shut, but he had a knife and was able to stab Mr. Larsson right in the belly.”

Betty’s eyes were wide as her dinner plate. “That must’ve been the yell we heard all the way in Mr. Jake’s orchard! I knew it wasn’t a rougarou!”

Mama laughed out loud with surprise, “I assume Granny Jackson was part of your investigation then?”

“Mama,” Betty deadpanned at her Mother, “if a frog sneezes in Lincoln County, Granny Jackson is the first to hear it.. Of course I had to see if she knew anything about Michael. She had Denny and Butch scared half to death with her swamp monster stories. I guess if I’m being honest, I can’t say I wasn’t a tiny bit scared myself.”

Mama laughed again, wiping her eyes and continued, “Well, Lord help me if I contradict Granny Jackson, but I don’t doubt that it was Mr. Larsson you heard out there howling and not a... a...”

“Rougarou,” Betty finished for her.

“*Rougarou*,” her Mama smiled and took another sip of coffee. “Yes. Mr. Larsson was in a bad way when the Sheriff got to him. He, the deputy, and your Daddy had to make several trips to carry both him and the stranger he had knocked out and get them to the hospital.”

“What about the rest of them? What happened?,” Susie broke in. Her eyes were wide and she was nibbling on a piece of biscuit.

“Deputy Harris has them all locked up in the jailhouse until he can figure out exactly who did what and when.” She paused and put her hand on Betty’s forearm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Now sweetheart, I know he’s as crooked as a dog’s hind leg, but Mr. Larsson told the sheriff that he and his boys only found Michael after he had already been kidnapped and locked up in some abandoned picker’s cabin up near Snake Falls. He said the strangers must have been using the cabin as some kind of a hideout and blamed it all on them. He swore up and down that he and his boys had only heard about Michael going missing and thought there might be a reward, so they went out to look for him. When they got out there they found you all with him and then they were attacked trying to rescue you all.”

“What? No. No, that can’t be right.” Betty rubbed her face with both hands, trying to organize her thoughts as she replayed the events of the night before in her head. “I mean to say, it’s not *impossible*, but Mama - I’m just not buying what he’s selling. What do the other two say happened? The two strangers?”

“I’m afraid they aren’t saying much of anything and that isn’t helping their situation if Mr. Larsson isn’t telling the truth about what happened. The one who was knocked out is still unconscious at the hospital and the other one refuses to talk,” she shook her head sadly before meeting Betty’s eyes and smiling. “I’m just so happy that you are all home safe and those men

are locked up where they belong and can't hurt anyone else. You need to rest, sweetheart. Don't worry about the men, the sheriff will find out what happened out there. He'll take care of them"

But her Mama's assurances hadn't made Betty feel any better and her breakfast had turned into a lump of concrete in her belly. As the facts of the case began to run through her mind one by one, Mr. Larsson's version of the story made less and less sense. On top of the fact that he was about as trustworthy as a fox in a hen house, if he was right and the strangers were the ones who had taken Michael and kidnapped them, then how did just the two of them manage to capture her, Butch and Denny at the same time outside the cabin without being seen?

She supposed she could have missed Butch and Denny being knocked out, she did have her back to them and was focused on getting the door open after all. But wouldn't she have heard something? Or felt the weight of the stick dropping when they were hit? Surely if that happened she would have turned around to see what was wrong before they got to her too, but she didn't even have the chance.

And the voices they heard, the footsteps outside the cabin— there were too many of them. Could the strangers have been working *with* the Larssons? If that were the case, she wouldn't put it past Mr. Larsson to try and cheat them out of their cut of the ransom money. That could've been what led to their big fight. Her head was still ringing from last night and her thoughts felt muddled. The facts just weren't lining up, and if Sherlock Holmes had taught her anything, it was that facts, not theories and wild speculation, were always what led you to the truth and helped you solve the case.

Something smelled funny about all of this alright, and she needed to talk to Denny and Butch to help her make sense of it all. She knew it would take all three of them to lay out the facts, go over them one by one, and untangle this knot of lies.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rougarous and Elephants

Betty pushed her chair back from the kitchen table and Susie jumped to her feet, “Where are you going?!”

“Geez Louise, Suse - you’re wound tighter than a tick!,” Betty put a hand on her worried sister’s shoulder and Mama laughed. “I just need to see Denny and Butch. I gotta make sure they’re alright and go over the case with them.” She gave Susie’s shoulder a squeeze. “I’ll stick close to home, promise. Like Mama said, the Sheriff is taking care of the bad guys. You don’t hafta to worry about me.”

Susie eyed her warily but then reluctantly let her out of her sight and Betty headed to the bedroom to put on her keds. She helped Lizzy up onto her shoulder and gently roused Pedro from his nap with a scratch on his belly. “Come on you two - let’s go find Denny and Butch. This case isn’t over. Something smells funny and we gotta figure out what it is.”

She had just pushed open the screen door to the front porch and stepped outside when she looked up to find Denny and Butch walking up the porch steps. She smiled ear to ear and ran the few steps between them, wrapping them both in a big hug. “Boy am I happy to see you two in the daylight and all in one piece! I was just on my way to find you! What are you doing here?”

“We heard that the Larssons got attacked trying to save Michael - it’s all over town,” Butch said, kneeling down to pet Pedro. Pedro flopped over onto his side to expose his belly and stretched out to enjoy the attention.

“Oh yeah - they’re a big buncha’ heroes alright. Really saved the day,” Denny said with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “So - we came to ask you what the plan is,” he added with a grin.

“You know, I was just saying to Pedro and Lizzy that something stinks about all this. And it isn’t me - *I* took a bath!” Betty laughed and sat down on the top step. She tipped her head back and closed her eyes, letting the sun warm her face. “I’ve been trying to think it all through, but last night was such a blur that everything’s all jumbled up in my head. But, fellas, I just feel it in my bones that Mr. Jimmy’s strangers were there to help us. I don’t think they were in on it.”

“But what about that knife they had?” Butch reminded her. “And I know we couldn’t hear all that they were saying, but the way they were talking out in the orchard didn’t seem like they were set on being very helpful.”

“Well, maybe they weren’t there to save the day, but I don’t think they were working with the Larssons, and I don’t think they just up and attacked them for no reason either. We need to go over all the evidence.”

Denny took a seat next to her and pulled out his notebook. “I was thinking the same thing. I was reading back over my notes this morning and something stuck out to me. Hang on a second, let me find it. It was about that last hobo hieroglyph we found in the orchard. Here it is! ‘A dangerous place.’ And remember - we heard them say something about a trap! You were puzzling over it last night when we first found it, Betty, and I think they were scared. That’s why they had the knife - not to hurt anyone, but to protect themselves.”

“The more I try to remember, the more that I’m pretty sure it was one of them that pulled me and Pedro out of the water. I mean, think about it: he didn’t even cuss once or hit me. And I kicked him in the knee and bit the fire out of him. I was so dizzy after hittin’ my head when he dropped me that he could’ve grabbed me again easy. I don’t see any Larsson just letting me go without at least getting a few licks in after that.”

Butch nodded in agreement but still wasn't convinced. "That's true enough. The Larsson's always give at least twice what they get. But weren't you sure he was trying to carry you off?"

"I know, I *know*. But everything was so confusing and loud out there in the dark." She stood up and began pacing up and down the length of the porch. "I keep trying to put myself in his shoes. What if he was just trying to get me somewhere safe? He could've put his hand over my mouth to keep me from hollering so the Larssons couldn't find us so easy in the dark. Maybe he would've explained himself if I hadn't bit him so hard. And then there's you two. It had to be one of them that was swinging that branch around to get you free."

Denny looked up at that, "But he grabbed onto my arm –"

"And he let you go!" Betty countered. "He could see you and Butch helping Michael off but he didn't go after you. He stayed and fought the Larssons."

Butch shook his head. "Uh-uh. No way! He didn't set Denny loose until I threw Granny Jackson's rice at him! Laugh if you want, but I thought he was gonna carry us all off and have us for supper until right that second. He only stopped attacking us to count that rice. I said it last night when we heard them howling at the moon and I'll say it again: I still think they're rougarous and were just hungry and trying to keep us all for themselves. They fished you out of the stream to eat you, Betty Lou, not save you. They were fixing to carry us all off to their lair and have a fine old feast." Butch paused for a moment to scratch at his knee in thought. "Or... *or*, now I'm not sure how it works exactly, but maybe they wanted to turn us into rougarous just like them. They were gathering up a whole, hairy, horrible family! Either way, we were done for without that rice. Case closed."

Betty paced the length of the porch in silence. Every few lengths she stopped and mumbled to herself before starting to pace again. Finally she slumped against the porch railing, dropped her head into her hands in frustration and said, “*There’s nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.*”

“Exactly!” shouted Butch, still worked up from being convinced he had just solved the case. Then he scrunched his nose and scratched his head in confusion. “Wait. What does that mean?”

“Butch, Sherlock Holmes always says that you gotta look at all the data - he means like the clues and facts, all that stuff. You gotta follow it instead of just coming up with whatever wild ideas about what you think happened. Holmes says if you only follow your theory before you have the data, then you’re liable to start twisting everything in your case to fit together higgledy-piggledy the way you want it to instead of the way things actually are.”

“Like the blind men and the elephant!” Denny added.

“The who and the what now?,” demanded Butch. “Somebody better tell me right this second how we got from rougarous to elephants.”

“It’s an old - ugh... What did she call it?,” Denny struggled for a moment, trying to remember, then snapped his fingers. “A parable! Don’t you remember? Mrs. Skidmore told it to us in class one day. Maybe you were out exploring Granny Jackson’s shed that afternoon.” he added with a sidelong glance. Butch crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow but didn’t interrupt.

Denny cleared his throat and continued, “*Anyway*, it goes like this: once upon a time there was this group of blind men who had never seen an elephant before and they were all excited because one was brought to the town where they lived. Because an elephant is so big,

they gathered all around it and each blind man touched a different part of the elephant and tried to describe it to the other blind men. The one who only touched the trunk said that an elephant looked like a giant, wriggly snake. The one who touched the ear said that the other man was totally wrong - an elephant clearly looked like a giant, smooth, flappy fan. Another one of them wrapped his arms around a leg and said nope - an elephant looks like a tree trunk for sure. The one who touched it on its side said they were all wrong - an elephant looks like a wall. Then another man felt its tusks and said that an elephant looks like a spear when all the while the man who was around the back holding the elephant's tail said they were all crazy - an elephant definitely looks like a rope."

"So what happened?" Butch asked.

"They got into a huge fight, all hollerin' and arguing because they could only 'see' the elephant from their point of view. But they were all wrong because they weren't getting the full elephant...er, picture." Denny concluded.

"Okay," said Butch, "I think I get it, but how does that figure into rougarous?"

"It figures in on account of we don't have all the facts." Betty said, and slapped her hands down on the porch railing. "We're only seeing this thing in pieces. Without all of them, we don't know if we're looking at an elephant, a rougarou, or a Larsson. And we can't have all the facts until we talk to the suspects."

"Whoa whoa whoa," Butch stopped her. "Carole asked us to find Michael and we did. We brought him home to this very porch. Shouldn't we leave the facts and the... the talking to suspects and stuff like that to the Sheriff?"

"We could," Betty said, sitting down between the boys. "But--"

“But *what?!?*” Butch cried, dropping his face into his hands. He mumbled, “Why is there always a but?!”

Betty laid a hand on his arm and smiled. “There’s not always a but. But—”

“Ah-HA!” Butch pointed at her.

She laughed, “Bu-uuuut...Mama told me this morning that the strangers aren’t talking to Sheriff Wilkins. One of them is still passed out cold in the hospital after getting conked in the head and the other is refusing to say anything.”

Denny looked up from his notebook, “Huh. That’s strange. Why wouldn’t he talk if they were helping us? Wouldn’t he want to do something to clear their names?”

“What’s a rougarou going to say that won’t sound cuckoo nutso?!” Butch countered. “*Sheriff, we’re awful sorry but we didn’t kidnap that kid. We only wanted to eat him. We can’t help it! It’s what we do!*” He shook his head. “I don’t blame them for keeping quiet. They’re liable to end up in a looney bin or the zoo.”

“This is exactly like *The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet*,” said Denny.

“Yup. That’s just what I was thinking,” Betty nodded.

Butch stood up and stamped a foot. “Okay, listen here you two!” He whipped around to face his friends and opened his mouth to continue, but nothing came out and he plopped back down onto the porch. He dropped his head into his hands again. “I’m so confused. Will one of you please... un-confuse me?”

“Hang on a second, Butch. I’ve got you,” Betty said through a chuckle and ran inside.

When she returned she had a well-worn book tucked under her arm and a plate piled with biscuits and bacon from the kitchen in her hands. “Here,” she said as she set the plate down between Denny and Butch. “Brain food.”

“Finally something that makes sense!” Butch practically sang in joy as the boys dug into the food greedily. Betty popped a piece of bacon into her mouth, wiped the grease off her fingers on her knee, and chewed as she took her book and flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for.

“Here it is! Sherlock Holmes - *The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet*.”

“Whassah berhur cuhruhnhet?,” Butch said through a shower of biscuit crumbs.

“It’s a kind of tiara,” Betty answered. When she was met with a blank stare and a wrinkled nose from Butch she explained, “It’s like a super fancy crown with gemstones and jewels and stuff all over it.” Butch nodded, gave her a thumbs-up, and took another bite of biscuit.

“But Denny and I were both reminded about it because in this story, this man here finds his very own son stealing this super valuable crown that he was supposed to be looking after. He wakes up in the middle of the night and catches his son red handed. I mean, he actually sees him with it *in his hands* with his own eyeballs so he knows a hundred percent he did it. The son says he’s innocent and his dad has it all wrong, but he won’t explain any more, so his dad calls the police and they haul the son off to jail.”

“Whoa,” Butch’s eyes were wide.

“Yeah,” Denny agreed. “But the dad didn’t know what else to do because his son just wouldn’t talk. I mean not a *peep*. So he just had to accept that his son was guilty because he couldn’t think of any other way around it.”

“But the son’s cousin doesn’t buy it. She says there’s no way her cousin would steal like that and she asks Sherlock Holmes to go over all the facts.” Betty chimed in. “When Holmes

looks at all the evidence his investigation shows that, even though the dad saw what he saw, good ol' Holmes knows for certain that the cousin is right - son is innocent."

Butch pointed at her with a piece of bacon, "But if the son really didn't do it, why doesn't he just say what happened."

"*Because he's protecting someone,*" Denny and Betty finished in unison, and she slapped the book closed.

"He couldn't say what really happened without hurting someone he cared about, so he just kept his mouth shut. That's why we've just got to talk to them. Don't you see, Butch? If we find out who they're protecting, why it could bust this case wide open! And don't you want to know what really happened? 'Sides," she added with a grin, "with them at a safe distance and some bars between us, we could finally get a good look to check whether or not they're actually rougarous..."

Butch looked at her out of the corner of his eye, he was finally tempted by his own curiosity. "I s'pose that's true. But one of them is still knocked out and if the other one doesn't want to talk, how are we supposed to change his mind?"

"I'm not sure." She stood up and started to pace the porch again. "We need to show him that his secret is safe with us. That we can be trusted to help him protect whoever it is that he's worrying over." She sat again and rested her hands on each boy's knee. "I guess we'll just have to wing it! But no matter what, I know that I can't just sit here and watch a couple of innocent people get sent off to jail for who knows how long if I can do anything to help it. Can you?"

Denny took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. "Kidnapping. Ransom. Stabbing old man Larsson. If the judge threw the book at 'em, they could be sitting in a jail cell for who knows how long?! Twenty years? Maybe even longer."

“Twenty years?” Butch gulped. “That’s an awful long time. We can’t let that happen. I still don’t see how the three of us can stop it, exactly, but you’re right I guess - we have to try.”

Betty didn’t respond - she was distracted by Lizzy who had pulled on her ear urgently and now she was staring off down the street at something, so Butch nudged her, “You okay over there? Normally when I say ‘you’re right’ there’s a little more of a ‘woo hoo’ from you. Say, how hard did you hit your head last night anyway?,” he added with a laugh.

“What in-,” she began but stopped, still looking off down the street.

“I said-”

“Hush a second, Butch,” she said quietly. “Don’t move, boys. I think we’re being watched.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Truth Comes Out

“Don’t make any crazy moves, but look off down by the corner.” Betty whispered, her mouth barely moving. “Behind the tree there. See it? At first I thought it was a shadow, but it kept moving.” She stroked Lizzy’s tail, “Good eye, Lizzybee.” Lizzy flashed bright green but kept her eyes on the stranger.

Butch and Denny followed her gaze and saw a boy lurking behind a tree. The way his body was positioned, you could only see him when he poked his head around the tree trunk. It would have been a great hiding place to spy on the goings on of Betty’s porch had it not been for the playful dog, jumping around his legs and giving his position away.

Now the dog had moved to a sunny spot in the patch of grass in front of the boy and was happily rolling around on its back, tossing its legs this way and that and letting out some playful barks. The boy was so distracted by the dog’s antics that he didn’t notice that Betty, Denny, and Butch had left the porch and were now sneaking up behind him.

He was tall and thin with brown hair that hung down over his large brown eyes and was badly in need of a good wash. His clothes, clearly hand-me-downs that had seen better days, were far too big for him and hung off his skinny frame making him look a bit like a scarecrow come to life. As they got closer, they heard him quietly admonishing the dog. “Psst! Come here. *Here*, Lady! Get over here behind the tree. Please? Come on, heel! Oh, why won’t you ever listen when I—”

“You would think that after all the trouble your folks are in right now, you’d know better than to be lurking around here, *Samuel Larsson*.” Betty said angrily, arms crossed over her chest.

The boy froze in place, his eyes wide, body coiled like a spring ready to let fly. For a moment he looked like he was indeed going to make a run for it, but then, like a balloon with a slow leak, his shoulders slumped and he deflated right in front of them, sinking to the curb with a sigh.

He hid his face in his hands. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't be here. Not after what they put you all through. I just didn't know what to do." He looked up at them then and the anger melted out of the detectives a little as they saw that tears had sprung to his eyes and were flowing freely down his cheeks. One of his eyes was almost swollen shut and colored purple and black with a nasty bruise that looked terribly painful. "You gotta understand - I didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Anywhere else to go for what?," Denny asked, stepping forward. His face was stern, but there was no fire in his voice. Samuel Larsson's face was so pitifully sad, none of the friends had the heart to yell at him. They waited in silence for him to reply, watching his shoulders shake as his body was wracked with sobs. His dog popped up from the sunny patch and plopped down in front of him, using her nose to push his hands aside so she could lick his face.

"Aw, geez, Lady. Stop it, will ya?" He tried to move his face out of reach of her tongue, but it was a very long tongue and she was a very determined dog. He finally let out a little laugh at her attentions and ruffled the fur between her ears with kindness. He wiped the tears and dog saliva from his face with his shirt sleeve and finally replied, "You have every right to say 'no', especially after all my brothers have done. Not only last night - I know they're just terrible to you three every chance they get, but I... I need your help."

Betty rubbed at the sore spots on the side and back of her head while she considered his request for aid. Her first instinct was always to pitch in immediately when someone said they needed her help, but this? This was a *Larsson*.

Still, as she watched him tenderly stroke the energetic dog who was still laying kisses on his face, she had to admit to herself that, while she didn't like him by any means, Samuel was the least-worst of the Larsson boys. Her biggest complaint against him had never been that he was a bully himself; it was that he never did anything to stop his brothers from bullying. He hadn't ever taken an active part in any torture that she'd seen, but he never stepped in to stop it either. It always made her so mad and she just assumed that he didn't stand up to his brothers because he enjoyed watching them torment other kids. She figured he just didn't want to get his own hands dirty.

Watching him now, his battered face streaked with tears as he gently played with his pup's ears, she considered how hard his life must be if she was maybe wrong about him after all. Maybe he didn't stop the bullying of other kids because he was the biggest victim of all. She, Denny, Butch, and all the other kids in town only had to worry about his brothers on the few occasions when they bothered to turn up for school. Samuel had to live with them every single day. Betty had seen what his father was like first hand. She knew he'd never be able to go to his parents for protection like she could hers. Who knows what kind of horrors he had suffered under that gloomy old roof?

She let out a sigh, sat down on the curb next to Samuel, and Pedro jumped up into her lap. She gently put her hand on Samuel's arm. Her touch startled him and she felt his muscles tighten as his whole body flinched. She had barely touched him! Now tears were in her own eyes. How could she have been so blind to this poor boy's misery? She'd been angry with him when she should have been helping him.

"I'm sorry - I didn't mean to startle you," she said and his body relaxed again at the kindness in her voice. She watched him hold his hand out for Pedro in greeting and Pedro

rewarded him with a sweet kiss. Betty took a deep breath. “We’re kinda in the middle of a big case right now, but of course we’ll help you if we can, won’t we boys? Why don’t you tell us what’s happened?” Denny, notebook at the ready, sat on the curb on Samuel’s other side and Butch nodded encouragingly from his perch leaning against the tree.

Samuel shook his head miserably, “I don’t even know where to start. I’m in so much trouble. And when they find out what I did...” His voice faded and his body had begun to shake.

Butch stepped forward and offered him the biscuit that he’d carried with him from the porch, “Here you go, Sam. I always think it’s easier to talk when I have a snack.”

Samuel took the biscuit gratefully and immediately opened his mouth to take a bite of it but stopped when his dog let out a sad whine. She pawed gently at his knee. The three friends watched as this painfully thin, sad boy broke his food in half and shared it with his pup. Betty snuggled Pedro into her belly and dropped a kiss on his head.

Denny held up his notebook and said, “I hope you don’t mind if I take notes.” When Samuel nodded he continued, “Why don’t you just start at the beginning? It’s a little less scary than starting from the end and that way we can make sure we get all the facts.”

Samuel finished chewing and swallowed, again wiping the tears from his face with his shirtsleeve. He took a big breath and began, “Okay. Well, I s’pose the start was when I was out squirrel hunting th’other day. Lady, that’s my dog here... well Lady and I go out together with my sling shot all the time. Squirrels are a lot better eatin’ that most folks know and I can usually get a little spending money for their skins too. Anyhow, like I said, Lady and I set out together like we always do, but she got distracted and went off chasing a rabbit or something, so I was on my own for a while. I wasn’t worried, see? She runs off for hours sometimes, but she always comes back.”

“Anyway, I wasn’t having much luck that day. I had been wandering all around up near Snake Falls and I finally saw a fine, fat squirrel lazin’ on a low branch. I pulled back my slingshot and let loose, but the rock went wide because just at that second Lady came bounding back up through some bushes and surprised me. She was jumping and circling and awful keen on getting me to follow her, so I did. We headed a little ways downhill and...” Samuel swallowed hard, his eyes wide with fear at the memory. “That’s when I saw him.”

Samuel’s hands started shaking and fresh tears ran down his cheeks. “It was that little boy - Michael. He must’ve followed Lady back to me and was playing in the woods with her. When my rock went wide, I think it must’a hit him because he was knocked out cold right there on the ground and there was blood coming from his head. I was so, so scared. I – I thought I’d killed him. But I leaned down and put my hand on his chest and could feel his heart still beatin’ there.”

He looked to Betty with pleading eyes. “It was an accident - I swear! I didn’t even know he was out there! I wouldn’t never...not ever...”

“It’s alright. Of course we believe you, Samuel,” Betty assured him, and gave his arm an encouraging squeeze, while Denny and Butch nodded in agreement. “When we found Michael and asked him what happened, he told us he was playing with a dog who led him all the way out to the woods. Only he had named her Lightning.”

Samuel laughed a little then and stroked the dog’s belly as she lay at his feet almost asleep, “That’s a fine name. Suits her better than Lady does. She’s not so terribly ladylike,” he added as she lifted her head and a long trail of drool hung from her happy mouth.

“So, what happened then, Samuel? Once you saw him?,” Betty prompted.

“Well, I know getting knocked in the head is awful dangerous and so he prob’ly needed a doctor. I tried to lift him seeing as how he’s so little, but it’s a long walk. I didn’t think I could

carry him all the way back into town and, if I'm honest, I was scared that folks would think I'd did it on purpose. Who would ever believe that a Larsson boy didn't hurt another kid just for fun?" The three detectives nodded - he surely had an excellent point there.

"So I made extra sure he was still breathin' and I left him there and went to the only place I thought I could for help - I ran straight home and caught my Pa just coming in. My Pa is a mean drunk, everybody knows that, but most folks don't know that he's even meaner sober. That's why Ma never gets on him about it to stop. Once he's had enough he passes out and we all have a little peace."

"Anyhow, he hadn't started in on his drinkin yet, which I reckoned was maybe good luck for me because he was awake enough to come back out and help me get Michael to the doctor. He could explain that it was all an accident and maybe I wouldn't get into too much trouble. Only once he heard who it was that I hurt, he came up with his own plan." He shook his head and Betty saw the heat of anger rise in his cheeks.

"He told me it was my dumb luck that I hit him, and I'd be even dumber if I didn't see that we could make some easy money. All we had to do was lock him in the old mushroom picker's cabin and leave his folks a ransom note. It's this old cabin that's practically falling down - I'm not even sure who it belongs to. We use it sometimes when we're out huntin', but no one even knows about it anymore exceptin' for us."

"Well I never talk back to my Pa, but this was wrong. So I told him no - we couldn't! Michael needed help. He was so small and out there all alone. I told him if he tried anything like that, I'd go straight to the Sheriff and turn him in my own self. I didn't even care if I got into trouble anymore." Samuel's head dropped again and he held it in his hands. "He hit me so hard I saw stars."

No one said anything, but Butch stepped forward and carefully laid a hand on his shoulder in support. They waited in silence for him to continue.

“Pa told my brothers to drag me out to the shed and lock me inside so I wouldn’t get in their way or cause them any trouble. Then he and Jeff went out to move Michael to the cabin. They took Lady with them to show them where Michael was at. They said that if I made any noise or gave them trouble about it, they’d kill her.”

Betty shook her head and tried to control her anger at their cruelty. “So you were locked up in there when we came by your place?”

He nodded sadly. “I heard everything. But I couldn’t... I mean, if they killed her...” He reached out and took Lady’s fluffy paw in his hand. “You gotta understand, if she was gone, I wouldn’t have nobody. She’s the only friend I’ve got.”

“Not anymore,” Betty replied and nearly cried herself when Samuel broke down again. “Now you’ve got us, right boys?”

“Sure thing!”

“You bet!”

Denny and Butch said at the same time.

“Wait a second - can we keep going? I don’t understand,” said Denny. “If you were locked up and they all left you there, how did you escape?”

“See, that’s why I need your help. I’d been in the shed for hours when I heard voices outside. Pa and the others had been gone long enough that I figured it was safe to holler for help. When I did they came over directly, undid the latch, and opened the door to set me free. I was so happy to be outside I nearly cried,” he added with a small, embarrassed smile. “It was two fellas I’d never met before what let me out. I thanked them and introduced myself and they told me

their names were Jack and Clarence and they were looking for work. They were real nice and so I warned them that they'd better clear off before my Pa got home or there'd be trouble on account of how he doesn't take kindly to strangers on our property. But they could see how upset I was and stayed right there to make sure I was alright. They even asked what I was doing locked up in the shed and if they could help."

Samuel started twisting and wringing the tail of his shirt in his hands nervously. "I know I shouldn't have done it. I shouldn't have told. But they were so nice to me. And also big and strong. And I guess... I guess I thought that they was big enough to take on my Pa and be alright. That maybe they could help Michael the way they'd helped me."

"I would have done the same thing," Denny reassured him as Betty and Butch nodded. "I think it was smart to ask for help."

"Well, I told 'em everything," Samuel continued. "All about Lady and squirrel hunting, about the cabin and about how Pa and my brothers were looking for a ransom out of it. They told me not to worry, that it's part of the hobo code to always help children and then they left. I didn't dare follow them or stay there to get in trouble, so I camped out in one of my hunting spots. Lady came and found me there and we stayed together all night," he smiled at Lady and buried his hand in the soft fur behind her ears and she leaned into his touch.

"This morning when I woke up, I snuck back around to the house and saw that Pa and my brothers had never come home last night, so Lady and I headed out to see what we could find out around town. That's when I heard folks say that Michael was home and safe. That surely was a relief, I can tell you! Then I heard that my Pa and brothers were locked up alright, but that there's two strangers locked up with them. Mr. Ernie was tellin' folks outside the Five and Dime that the strangers won't talk to Sheriff Wilkins and so he figures they'll get sent up the river for sure on

account of the kidnapping and of stabbing my Pa who Mr. Ernie said was helping to rescue Michael.”

Tears shone in his eyes once again as he searched Betty’s with his own. “You’ve always been real decent to me, Betty Lou, though Lord knows I’ve never given you any kind of reason to be. And I seen how you stick up for the other kids at school. I know I’m an awful coward for not speaking up myself, but I can’t let Jack and Clarence take the blame for all this. It ain’t right. I just know they’re protecting me because of their code, but it’s wrong what’s happening to them! Will you help me?”

Betty smiled then and put her hand on his shoulder. “Of course we will, Samuel! You know, you’ve actually helped us.”

“I’ve helped you? But how?” Samuel asked, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

“You’ve filled in a whole truckload of blanks in our investigation. See, we were there last night at the cabin. We’re the ones who really helped Michael escape.”

Samuel straightened up and smiled. “So you know them then - Jack and Clarence! You must have seen them there!”

“Weeeeell...sort of. I mean, we def’nitely saw them, but we didn’t know who they were or if they were good guys or bad guys,” Betty admitted sheepishly.

“Or if they were rougarous or not, *which still hasn’t been proven to be true or false,*” Butch added with raised eyebrows.

“Last night was a bit of a jumble for sure, but everything you’ve told us today makes it make a whole lot more sense,” Denny said, holding up his notebook in evidence. “I’d say we’ve just about got the whole picture now. Think we’re ready to talk to the Sheriff, Betty? To present the case?”

“Elementary, my dear Bellingham,” Betty said with a grin. “But first, what would you say to a late breakfast, Samuel? My mama made enough food for an army and I don’t think she’d take too kindly to me galavanting off again so soon without at least telling her where I’m headed first.”

“Great idea! I’m starvin!” Butch yelled before Samuel could answer, jumping to his feet and letting his stomach lead the way back to Betty’s house.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Code

It had been a busy day already, and Mrs. Cockram was up to her elbows in biscuit dough for the third time when Betty came racing into the kitchen. “They said ‘yes’ and ‘thank you very much,’ ma’am!” She reached up on tiptoe, planted a kiss on her mama’s cheek, and tore off back through the house again toward the front porch before her mama could even open her mouth to reply.

Betty bounded through the screen door and skittered to a halt. “What’d I miss?” she panted out.

“Well, for one thing, they can both count to thirteen, so I guess I’m fairly well convinced they aren’t rougarous after all,” Butch grouched and Denny, Jack, and Clarence broke into laughter. Butch squinted his eyes and put a hand to his chin. “*Unless*, of course, there’s a way a person can be a rougarou and not know they’re a rougarou and just walk around all the live-long day none the wiser. In that case I have to work on this some more. I’m gonna need Granny Jackson for this.”

While Butch considered his new theory, Betty took the opportunity to ask some more questions of her own. “Samuel told us that you all weren’t tattling on him on account of a code. We’ve got a whole book of your markings we’ve been working on deciphering, but we’ve never come across a code. What does that mean, Mr. Clarence? Mr. Jack? Is it more kinds of hobo writing?”

“Just plain ol’ ‘Clarence’ is fine, young miss. As for the code you’re referring to, Jack and I are both strict followers of the *Hobo Code of Ethics* as ratified by our union. It’s part of what makes us such good traveling companions.”

Denny’s jaw dropped. “You have a union?!”

“Sure do!” answered Jack, wiping his mouth with his napkin and taking another bite of crispy bacon.

Clarence continued, “We’ve had a union for a long time and many of us have adhered to certain rules of behavior for even longer, but our official code was adopted way back in 1889. We come from every place you can imagine - I’m from Texas originally, and Jack here is from New York but was born over in England. We bunked a few weeks ago with a fella who made it all the way from Australia! Anyhow, when we find ourselves together, it helps us get along if we have a common set of rules. We have a lot of unofficial rules we follow as well, but the Hobo Code is very strict when it comes to protecting children.”

“Wow.” Betty, Denny, and Butch whispered in unison. They were completely entranced by the two men and hanging on every word.

“One of our first rules is that we are never to take advantage of someone in a vulnerable position - be it a fellow hobo or a local,” said Jack. “So when Samuel told us what his Pa was up to, we knew we needed to help. I wasn’t of a mind to speak up about everything while Clarence was still in the hospital so I was mighty thankful when you all turned up at the station to help clear our names. We’ll be indebted to you always.”

Betty blushed. “We don’t have a code, exactly, but Denny and Butch and me? We always try to help out when somebody has a need, especially the underdog.” Pedro lifted his head and let out a sleepy *woof* at that and they all laughed.

“I’m awfully sorry again that I bit you so hard. Are you sure you’re alright?” Betty asked, trying to sneak a look at Jack’s bandaged hand.

“Oh, I’ve had worse. I’ll be fine, don’t you worry. I’m just sorry I scared you! We didn’t exactly have the best introduction, now did we?” Jack said with a genuine smile.

“No sir, I wouldn’t say so,” Betty laughed. “I much prefer getting to know you while I’m not drowning in the middle of a stream. So, if you’re from England, do you read much of Sherlock Hol—”

“*Betty Lou Cockram*, would you let these poor men eat in peace?” Mama said as she came out onto the porch with two huge bowls of chicken and dumplings and handed them to Jack and Clarence. “I would think they’ve had enough of the third degree for a bit,” she added with a smile.

“Thank you kindly, ma’am,” Jack and Clarence both said and started in on the steaming bowls of delicious food immediately. They had already finished off two plates of breakfast each, which was all Butch could handle and he actually turned down Betty’s Mama when she offered him his own bowl of chicken and dumplings. Betty hadn’t ever seen anyone eat more than Butch before. She was impressed.

“You three run out back and I’ll call you when it’s time for dessert. Go on now!” Mama ordered. When Betty opened her mouth to protest, her Mama stopped her with, “They’ll be right here on the porch, I promise. And you can pester them over apple pie and ice cream.”

Reluctantly, the detectives made their way toward the back yard, but not before Betty made Jack and Clarence cross their hearts they wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye, which they did with good humor.

As they climbed up into the treehouse, Betty turned to her friends and said, “Welp, now that we truly closed our very first official case and we’re professional, I suppose we ought to come up with a name for ourselves. You know, so people know how to find us.”

She settled herself in a corner of the treehouse, Pedro in her lap and Lizzy sunning herself on her shoulder. She stroked Pedro’s belly in thought, trying to come up with the perfect name. Nothing too grown up, but nothing silly either seeing as how they were practically professional. They had to find something just right. Denny sat across from her, writing furiously in his notebook while Butch swung around on the top of the rope ladder that led to the roof.

Butch let his head roll back and looked at Betty upside down. “I figure I’ve got just about the perfect name. This whole time I’ve been thinking: Shaw, Bellingham, and Cockram - Detectives. It’s pretty perfect ‘cause it tells everyone exactly who we are and what we do, *and* I also figure it’s probably best to list us in order of height to cut down on confusion as to who’s who.”

“And what about Pedro and Lizzy?” Betty countered with an arched eyebrow.

“Well I hadn’t thought of... Wait a second. Well they’re Cockrams too, aren’t they?”

“That’s way too long. Plus, names are hard for folks to remember. I like *The Five Finders*. Or maybe *The Finders Five?*,” said Denny but then immediately started shaking his head. “Nevermind. Sounds too piratey. If they think we’re pirates they’ll never take us seriously.”

“Good point.” Betty agreed and sighed. “Say - what do you think would’ve happened if Samuel hadn’t come round to us for help? I’ve never known anyone who had to go to jail before, and Jack and Clarence, well, that’s the last place they need to be.”

“Unless they’re secret monsters that stalk the night for victims, then jail’s pretty perfect.”

“*Bu-utch.*” Betty and Denny said as one.

“I’m only saying! If rougarous made it this far, surely they coulda figured out a way to learn to count past twelve by now!”

“Hopefully the Sheriff would’ve figured out the truth eventually,” Denny said, pausing his writing for a moment. “Although, this case is so full of circumstantial evidence. We were right in the middle of it and weren’t sure what happened. If it went in front of a jury, who knows what they would believe? I’m just glad it didn’t come to that.” He bent back over the notebook in his lap.

“What are you writing over there anyhow?,” Butch swung his weight over on the rope to peer over the top of Denny’s notebook. “‘The Case of the Missing Boy’?” he read upside down and scrunched his nose.

“Don’t read it yet!” Denny said, pulling the notebook close to his chest. “I’m not finished with it. This is only my first draft. I’m working on a better title.”

Butch swung back on the rope and lowered himself down to the floor. “It should have rougarous in it, Denny. Even if they didn’t take Michael, they’re out there somewhere. Hang on a second. We already know what happened. Isn’t that what we’re talking about? So what are you working on? Wait. Is there another case I don’t know about? Is there another missing kid?”

“No, no. It’s just, every time Sherlock Holmes works on a case Dr. John Watson writes a record of it to share with people,” Denny said sheepishly and blushed. “I just figured - if we were going to start a real detective agency, one of us should keep a record of all our adventures.”

“That’s a swell idea!,” Betty jumped up and came over to take a look. “How far have you got?”

“Well, I thought about starting it when we got home this morning, but I was pretty sleepy and there was still so much we didn’t know. I only really got going on it once we got everything straightened out at the jailhouse. Before that, it didn’t feel like the case was truly closed. I’m just now at the part where we got ambushed by the Larssons and I nearly took a rock to the head,” Denny said, going over his writing.

“Make sure you write the part about Pedro biting Jeff right in the crotch!” Butch said with a hoot. “That’s just about the best thing I’ve ever seen in my whole entire life!”

“I almost forgot about that,” said Betty giggling. “See - it’s a good thing you’re writing everything down!. So much has happened in the last two days, there’s no way we’d ever remember it all. Wait a second.” She stood up and walked to the window, then let loose a holler of triumph, slapped her leg, and spun back around to face the boys. “I’ve got it!”

“Got what?” Denny asked in surprise.

“It’s perfect! I know what we—”

“Excuse me,” interrupted a small voice from the hatch in the far corner of the floor that served as a door. They turned to see a girl’s face poking up through the door. Her eyes were filled with worry and the streaks down her cheeks showed that she had recently been crying. She was jostled and scooted over to make room to let another small face appear next to her, peering up over the floorboards. He was younger than the girl and looked around at the treehouse in wonder. He looked just like the girl and Betty knew they must be siblings.

“We heard this is where you could come if you needed help,” said the girl, “And we surely do need it.”

Betty ran over and offered them each a hand to help them the rest of the way into the treehouse. She smiled warmly. “You came to the right place! I’m Betty. This here is Butch, Denny, Pedro, and Lizzy. We’re The Elementary Detective Agency. How can we help?”

THE END

(Include appendix of hobo hieroglyphics and Denny’s sketches of the rougarou, etc.)