

Chapter One

Jeremiah Stokely sat cross-legged on his bed. The morning sun streamed through the cracked window of his room, making dust particles dance to the music from his boom box. The boom box really belonged to Todd Miller, Jeremiah's all-time best friend. When Todd had moved six weeks before, he had asked Jeremiah to keep it for him.

Todd was coming next Monday – one week from today – for his long-awaited visit. They would have just six days to catch up on all the things they had missed. Jeremiah had prepared a long “Things We Gotta Do” list for Todd's visit, starting with an overnight fishing trip with Bill Loker.

Now, he rifled through a soup box his mother had brought home from Mason's Supermarket where she worked. It was labeled “Todd's Stuff” and was filled with remembrances, odd bits of this and that, clippings and photographs. A picture of the two of them taken on their twelfth birthday was taped on the front.

He looked at the picture and smiled. He remembered what Todd had said when he first saw it.

“Do you think we were switched at birth? I mean, we were born the same day. It happens.”

“That's dumb, Todd,” Jeremiah had said.

“I'm serious. Your mom has dark hair and eyes just like mine. My mom's blond like you. Your mom's tall and mine's short. Or maybe we're both adopted.”

“We weren't switched at birth and we aren't adopted. Sure, we were born the same day, but you were born three hundred miles from here.” Todd had brought up the subject more than once since then. As silly as the idea was, Jeremiah didn't need one more reminder that he was shorter than most of the kids his age.

He looked at a newspaper clipping with a picture of Todd, Meaghan Phillips, Stacy Hunter and himself. It had been in the newspaper when the four of them won awards at their fifth grade field day. Jeremiah had known Stacy even longer than he had Todd. She lived across the street from Jeremiah before his dad left for a job in the Pacific Northwest. That was three years ago and Jeremiah hadn't seen him since then. That was when he and his mother moved into the house down the alley from Bill and Ruth Loker.

Meaghan and Stacy were best friends. Just like Todd and Jeremiah. You almost never saw one without the other.

The second item on his list was almost as important as the fishing trip. Jeremiah's friend Rita Cuzak was the veterinarian at Rescue House. Rita's job was

to nurse injured wild animals and get them back into their natural home. She had invited him and Todd to come see the animals and help her with some chores.

Jeremiah liked Rita a lot. She was a Miami Indian and Jeremiah spent a lot of time when he was little pretending to be an Indian. She knew all the legends of her people. It seemed to Jeremiah that she always knew something that she wasn't telling. Other things about her puzzled Jeremiah, like the times she and her Uncle Leland came to the shop for long quiet talks with Bill. It was like they had some secret Jeremiah didn't know.

Rita was also a potter and this summer she was teaching Stacy and Meaghan how to make things from clay.

Bill had promised that he would close the antique repair shop and take Todd and Jeremiah fishing. Actually, Bill liked to fish a lot better than either of the boys did, but the idea of staying overnight in the wild appealed to Jeremiah. You never knew what might happen.

Jeremiah heard the back door slam.

"Jeremiah," his mother called. "Come help carry in the laundry."

He loaded the things on his bed back into the box and ran to the stairs. Placing his hands on both railings, he slid to the bottom without touching a single

step.

“Take this basket, hon, it’s your stuff. There are three more baskets in Ruth's van.” Todd was right about one thing. His mother was tall and she had dark, wavy hair. Bill often told him how much his mother looked like her mother, Jeremiah’s Grandmother Holliman.

Bill and Ruth Loker's van was parked at the curb. On the side it said, “Loker and Stokely Antiques – East Newport's Best.” Jeremiah smiled when he saw his name on the van. Just a month ago, Bill had made him a “partner” in his antique refinishing business. The van had just come back from the sign painter.

The van itself was an antique. It came out the year Jeremiah’s mother was born. Bill often said, “They just don’t make vehicles like this anymore.” He kept the engine purring and frequently worked on the cranky standard transmission that tended to get stuck in reverse gear.

Ruth opened the door of the van and stepped to the pavement. “Do you like the new paint job, Jeremiah?” she asked.

She took two steps back from the van, put her hands on her hips and studied the new paint job as if it were a work of art. Her steel gray eyes sparkled. “It's just right, don't you think?”

“I love it! I bet I'm the only kid in town who has his name on the side of a truck.”

“Don't let it go to your head, kiddo,” his mother said. “Here, grab this basket.”

Jeremiah put the remaining basket of laundry on the sidewalk and slammed the door shut. He took another long look at the sign on the van.

Ruth climbed back into the van and slammed the door. She stuck her head out the window and said, “Bill's looking forward to Todd's visit.” She turned the key in the ignition and put the van into gear. “When is he coming?”

“Next Monday. I can hardly wait.”

Jeremiah's mother lifted a basket onto her hip. “Thanks again for the use of your washer and dryer, Ruth. I don't know what I'd do without you.”

“Any time, Nina,” Ruth said. She patted her graying hair and looked at herself in the rear view mirror. “After all, you did my hair this morning. It's an even trade, I'd say.”

She drove to the corner and vanished. Bill and Ruth lived just half a block down the alley from Jeremiah. Their house was a second home to Jeremiah. It had

been the same for Nina. She had known Bill all her life, too.

Jeremiah dragged a basket of towels into the bathroom.

“The towel drawer's full. Where do you want these?”

“Just leave them in the basket, hon.” She pulled the tail of her white blouse out of her jeans and tied it in a knot in front. “It wears me out to do the laundry. Oh, how I wish we had a washer and dryer. I could do a little every day. Did we get any mail?”

“Just junk. It's on the TV.” Jeremiah picked up his basket of laundry and struggled with it toward the stairs. He dropped it at the top of the stairs and slid back down.

His mother shuffled through the ad sheets from the mailbox.

“Not even a Publisher's Clearinghouse thing that tells me I might have already won a million dollars?” she muttered.

“Not even that.”

“You know, of course, that I'm going to inspect your room to be sure the health department won't close us down while Todd's here.”

"It's not that bad."

"Don't forget to take the sweeper up there. I mean it, now. You're going to have to do something with all those *National Geographic* magazines Bill keeps giving you. Can't you take some of them to the basement?"

"I read those magazines all the time, Mom. I don't want them in the basement."

"Well, you'd better do something. There are so many of them, they'll probably come crashing through the floor and end up in the basement anyhow."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Nina looked through the rest of the mail and found a letter from Community College, where she was a part-time photography student.

"How long has it been since you really cleaned up there – mean washing windows and scrubbing floors?"

"Not long. Besides –"

"Besides, nothing," Nina interrupted. "I'd think you'd be ashamed for Todd to

see the pig-sty you call a room.” She tore open the envelope. “I wonder what this letter is from Community College?”

“Don't worry. I'll do it before he gets here.”

“*Now, Jeremiah. Do it now.*”

“Crumb!” Jeremiah pulled the sweeper from the closet under the stairs. It was an ancient machine, one that Bill had picked up at an auction. Jeremiah had patched the cord several times where it pulled apart near the plug.

“Jeremiah!” his mother said. “Do you remember that photo contest I entered?”

“Sure. You got honorable mention. I wouldn't forget that.”

Jeremiah was proud of his mother's photography. He felt that he was partly responsible for her success. After all, he had worked hard in the antique shop to scrape together enough money to buy her a new camera.

“Well, guess what? The first prize was a scholarship to a week-long workshop with one of the country's leading nature photographers.”

“So?”

“I was named as an alternate, and the person who won can't go!” Her voice had that little bubble of laughter in it that it always had when she was happily surprised. She sat down suddenly on the couch.

“What does that mean?” Jeremiah balanced the shiny sweeper wand on his index finger.

“Stop that, Jeremiah! You'll break something.”

She read the letter aloud.

Dear Ms. Stokely:

This letter is to inform you that the winner of our recent nature photography contest is unable to attend the ten-day seminar in Phoenix, Arizona.

As alternate, you have the option of attending in his place. We apologize for the lateness of this notice. We were just informed of the change. We hope that you will be able to take advantage of this opportunity.

The seminar begins July 14. Please read carefully the enclosed

information sheet. Call us immediately so we can make the necessary arrangements to enroll you in the seminar.

"It's signed by the dean of the college, and there's a number to call," she said.

"That's great, Mom. Awright! We're going to Arizona! That's my favorite state."

Already images of the desert went spinning through his head. In the third grade, he had "adopted" Arizona and learned all about it. He even built a model city like the Anasazi people lived in a long time ago. He had taken to school all his *National Geographics* that had articles about the Southwest. He, Todd and Miguel Sanchez had dug an enormous hole in the vacant lot next door, looking for Indian relics. They found some, too. It wasn't until weeks later that Jeremiah found out that Bill had planted the arrowheads there for them to find.

Nina continued studying the information sheet. "What do you mean, 'we?'"

"You're not going to go and leave me here, are you?" Shock surged up his back and caused his ears to tingle. He wanted to say, "You don't go on the road and leave half the team at home," but he didn't.

"I'm not going either," she said. She sighed deeply. "It says here that the seminar and lodging are free, but I'd have to pay my own transportation. Even if I

didn't have to pay for the travel, I couldn't take that much time off from work.”

“Mom, I've wanted to go to Arizona since third grade.”

She folded the letter slowly, put it back into the envelope and placed it atop the junk mail on the TV. Jeremiah saw the sadness in her dark eyes. She desperately wanted to be a professional photographer. Instead, she was stuck in a dull, low-paying job at Mason's Supermarket. He wondered how many times she had been disappointed in her dream. It seemed that every time she made some progress, something happened to spoil it.

“There's got to be a way we can go. Mom, this is important.”

“I don't see how. Besides, that's next week. Todd will be here.”

Jeremiah had completely forgotten about Todd. She was right, of course. The most important week ever was coming up. “Well, maybe –” he started to say.

“There's just no way. You go and do your chores. I'll call the college later,” she said in a small voice.

He dragged the sweeper and assorted cleaning supplies up the stairs. He unplugged the night light in the hall, plugged in the sweeper and stretched the hose into his room.

He decided to start by dusting the dresser. It was loaded with his treasures. He moved the cigar box that contained his mineral collection and found that the rocks were covered with white powder. He turned his eyes to the ceiling. A chunk of plaster dangled there from a triangular piece of wallpaper. Bill had helped him fix the leak in the roof weeks ago, but it hadn't rained enough to know if it still leaked.

He emptied the box and dumped the fine plaster onto the floor. He picked up each specimen, dusted it and put it back into the box. He grabbed a flint arrowhead, one Bill had sneaked into their vacant lot "dig." The razor-sharp stone sliced the end of his index finger.

"Ow!" he shouted. He stuck his finger in his mouth.

"What happened, Jeremiah?" his mother called from the foot of the stairs.

"I cut my finger on a rock."

"How did you cut your finger on a rock? Is it bad?"

"Not really. I've got a Band-Aid here somewhere."

"Come on down and let me look. I don't want you to get an infection. As filthy as your room is, there's probably every kind of bacteria known to science lurking

around.”

Jeremiah looked at the cut. It was deep, and blood ran down his hand. He folded his finger into his fist and went downstairs to the bathroom. He turned on the water to wash the wound.

“That’s a pretty bad cut, “his mother said. “Let me help you. Don’t get blood all over everything, now.” Nina pushed the basket of towels away from the sink and cleaned and bandaged the cut.

Jeremiah followed his mother to the living room. He sat on the couch and draped his injured hand over the arm. It was a painful way to get a break from his room-cleaning chore, but Jeremiah took advantage of it.

Jeremiah felt his pulse throbbing in the cut on his finger. “Mom, I wish you could go. Maybe I could stay home. It wouldn’t cost as much that way.”

Nina looked fondly at him, her eyes still sad, but she had a faint smile. “It’s okay, hon. We’ll have other opportunities, but thanks for the generosity.”

Nina placed her fingertips on her lips and blew him a kiss. She walked slowly from the room and sat down in a wobbly lawn chair on the back porch. She cradled her chin in her hands, leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and stared across the vacant lot next door.

Jeremiah thought about his mother's disappointment. He thought about Todd. An idea flashed into his head. He snatched the envelope from the college and softly opened the front door so his mother wouldn't hear him. He jumped from the front porch and broke out in a full run toward Bill and Ruth's house.

Jeremiah almost always wore his Cincinnati Reds baseball cap turned around backwards on his head. This time he couldn't. It was hanging by the back door, and his mother would have seen him. He ran as fast as he could, his blond hair flying every which way in the breeze.

Bill was helping a customer unload an antique rocking chair as Jeremiah arrived. The customer left, and Jeremiah held the door so Bill could carry the chair into the shop.

"I didn't expect to see you this early," Bill said.

"I've got a problem."

"You've been having a lot of those things lately, J.S."

Bill was the only person in the world who called Jeremiah "J.S." It had started the day Jeremiah was born. Bill thought Nina was going to name him James after her father. Jeremiah's grandfather had been Bill's best friend. Maybe it was

because he was disappointed, or maybe it was just the way Bill was. As far as he knew, Bill had never called him Jeremiah.

Jeremiah handed Bill the letter. As Bill read, Jeremiah thought out his new plan. What could be a better adventure than for his mother to be gone when Todd came? It would be just the two of them, free to come and go, free to sleep late or stay up late, or not take a bath. It wasn't that they would do anything wrong if his mother wasn't there, but the possibilities were marvelous. At first, he hadn't wanted his mother to go if he couldn't go along. After all, who would take care of her? Now, he saw the advantage of his mother going to Arizona alone.

"This is exciting, J.S.," Bill said. He put the letter back in the envelope and handed it back to Jeremiah. "So what's the problem?"

"She's not going."

"Why not?"

"It would cost a lot. She doesn't have the money," Jeremiah said.

"Well, that's too bad. I suppose she's right."

"*She* doesn't have the money, but I do."

“No, no and huh-uh, J.S. I know what you're thinking. You made a promise. You know what your grandfather Holliman used to say. 'A man is only as good as his word.'”

Bill had seen through Jeremiah's plan. It had only been a few weeks since Bill and Jeremiah had made a wonderful deal on a valuable piece of antique furniture. Since Jeremiah was a partner, he made a lot of money. Jeremiah promised to put half the money into a savings account for college. The other half he had spent to buy his mother a new camera.

“But you said I had to put the money in an account for education. You didn't say it had to be for *my* education. Isn't it education if my mom learns how to take better pictures?”

Jeremiah was no longer sure if he wanted to do this so his mother could go to the seminar, or whether he wanted to do it just so she'd be gone when Todd came.

“You're hedging, J.S. It's clever, though. I'll give you that. But it's not in the spirit of what you promised.”

“Crumb, Bill. I thought you'd want her to go. You know how long she's dreamed about being a photographer. You don't want her to be a cashier at Mason's Supermarket the rest of her life, do you?”

The expression on Bill's face changed. His barrel-chested figure sagged beneath his overalls and his blue eyes had a faraway look. He pulled off his cap and ran his huge hands through his salt and pepper hair.

"You're right, J.S. I *do* know how long she's had that dream."

"Jeremiah, are you down there?" Ruth called from the top of the steps.

"I'm here, Ruth."

"Your mom's on the phone. She didn't know where you had disappeared to. I'll tell her," Ruth said. She turned to go back to the kitchen.

Bill stood quickly and called after her, "Just a minute, Ruth. Let me talk to her."

Jeremiah watched as Bill went slowly up the steps. He groaned and muttered something about "arthritis," then disappeared into the kitchen.

Moments later, Bill reappeared at the top of the steps. "Come on up, J.S," he said. "Your mom's coming over."

Jeremiah had a hollow feeling in his stomach. He thought his mom would be

mad at him for telling Bill about the seminar. Bill and Ruth had come to their rescue several times. Even before Jeremiah's dad left for a job on the West Coast, never to return, Bill and Ruth were there for them. Jeremiah and his mother had been able to solve most of their own problems because they were a team. Only in an emergency did Bill and Ruth become part of the team. That was the way his mother wanted it. It was the way he wanted it, too.

Ruth was pouring iced tea for Bill and Jeremiah when Nina arrived. Jeremiah wanted to crawl under the table. His mother didn't seem upset, though.

"Would you like some iced tea, Nina?" Ruth asked. She slid glasses toward the two "men."

Nina nodded.

"Jeremiah, you know you're supposed to tell me when you leave," Nina said. She turned to Bill. "Now, Bill, just what has my son been trying to engineer?"

"That's an interesting way of putting it, Nina. He was just telling me about the seminar, and he thinks you should go. Even offered to pay for it."

"Well, I know he's disappointed. I'm disappointed. I just don't see how I can swing it."

“It could be important to you later on, Nina,” Bill said, holding his cold, sweaty glass to his cheek.

“I know. But I don't have money for the airfare. And there's my job, and what about Jeremiah? Todd's coming to stay next week. I really would like to do it, but the timing is all wrong. It would be just impossible to work out.”

“Surely there's a way, Nina. Why can't Jeremiah entertain Todd here?” Ruth said. She put her hands on Nina's shoulders. “We'll help anyway we can, you know that.”

“You don't know what you're saying. Just leaving Jeremiah here would be bad enough. Having both of them is asking for disaster.”

“It's no problem. Bill was planning to close the shop when Todd was here anyway. He's been looking forward to entertaining the boys. They can just take over the upstairs.”

“It's very nice of you to offer. It just isn't possible right now,” Nina said.

“Think back, Nina,” Bill said. “I've heard that excuse before.” Then he leaned across the table and whispered something into Nina's ear.

Nina stared at Bill. Her eyes became misty and troubled. Jeremiah didn't

know what Bill was saying, but he could see that his mother was disturbed.

“That trick worked when I was a little girl, Bill,” Nina said softly. “I’ve grown up, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You weren’t a little girl the last time I said that to you. I told you then that we’d work out all the possibilities. The offer still stands.”

“But I can’t ask you to—”

“So don’t ask,” Bill said. He reached across the table and patted Nina’s hand. Nina smiled and nodded.

“I feel uneasy about this, but let me see what I can work out,” Nina said quietly.

Jeremiah was glad his mother wasn’t angry because he had told Bill about the seminar, but surprised that she changed her mind so quickly. He felt like celebrating, but it wasn’t quite what he had planned. He had thought that he and Todd would be staying at his house, not with the Lokers.

“Mom, we don’t have to stay here. If it’s too much trouble, Todd and I will be okay at home,” he said.

“Don't press your luck, Jeremiah. I'll call Mrs. Miller to tell her the situation. If it's okay with her for you and Todd to stay with Bill and Ruth, then we'll go ahead. If not, he can come when I get back. I'm not saying for certain that I'll go. It depends on lots of things, money being one of them.”

“I'll make the travel arrangements,” Bill said. “If anything comes up between now and the weekend, we can always cancel.” He went to the computer in the corner of the family room.

The computer was a recent addition to the Loker and Stokely Antiques business. Bill got it mainly to do the bookkeeping for the shop. Since then, he and Jeremiah were learning a lot about the world of computers and cyberspace.

Jeremiah and Bill had spent the last several weeks learning use it. They had been surfing the Internet some. Jeremiah even had his own code name so he could look up things on their online service. He and Todd had been sending e-mails every day.

Jeremiah watched Bill make choices on the screen to schedule a flight to Phoenix and get the best prices on an airline ticket. Bill charged the tickets to his credit card, printed out the travel information and handed it to Nina.

Standing on tiptoe, she put her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. “Thanks for reminding me,” she said softly.

Bill smiled.

Jeremiah and his mother walked down the alley to their house. Neither said a word until they were in their kitchen.

“What did Bill whisper to you that made you change your mind, Mom?”

He lips curled into a curious smile. “Abraham Lincoln.”

“Abraham Lincoln? What does that mean?”

“You don't know who Abraham Lincoln is?”

“Mom! Quit that.”

“It was something he used to tell me when I was a little girl. The last time he said it was right after the accident.”

“What happened, Mom?”

She motioned for him to sit at the table. She opened the refrigerator and peered inside to find something for lunch. She hardly ever talked about the death of her parents. When she did, she always said “the accident” and little more.

Jeremiah knew what she meant.

“Milk or pop?”

“Pop,” he said.

She poured soda from a two-liter bottle and set the glass in front of him. She took a small plate from the cupboard and arranged cold cuts on it.

“Bill was so much a part of our family that I thought he was my big brother. Our families went places together. Put some bread on a plate, please. Once when I was seven or eight, we went to Abraham Lincoln's boyhood home in southern Indiana. Bill and Ruth went along. It was just before they were married.”

Jeremiah opened a sack of day-old bread Nina had brought from Mason's and put four slices on a plate. He put the plate on the table and made himself a sandwich. He made another for his mother and pushed the mustard jar toward her.

“There was a big poster in one of the displays that had the Lincoln quote: 'I must go forward and prepare myself, for some day my chance will come.' Bill held me up and read it to me several times. Do you want anything else to eat?”

Jeremiah shook his head and waited for the rest of the story.

“After that, when I wasn't doing well in school or I wouldn't do my homework, Bill would whisper 'Abraham Lincoln' in my ear. It became our secret code.”

“Bill does things like that to me.” Jeremiah got up from the table and started to put things away.

“Bill was really disappointed when I had a chance to go to college and I didn't. He even offered to pay my tuition. Things might not be so hard for us now if I had gotten a good education.”

“How hard can this be, though? You won't have to worry about me for ten days. That should make it easy.”

“You always try to make things easy for me. You earned all that money just to buy me a camera. You're a dear, and I want you to know that I still don't feel right about that.”

“I only spent half of it. The rest is still in the bank.”

“True, but you offered to spend that for airline tickets so I could go to the workshop. That was very unselfish,” she said. She stood and kissed his cheek as she picked up the empty plates.

“Quit that, Mom!”

Jeremiah's earlobes tingled from guilt. He did want her to attend the seminar, but he selfishly wanted to spend a week with Todd on his own.

She put their dishes in the sink. "Your turn."

Jeremiah picked up an empty dish-washing detergent bottle.

"Got any more soap, Mom?"

"I brought home a damaged bottle night before last. It's under the sink. Be careful. It's yucky."

His mother collected "broken" boxes of groceries, dented cans and out-of-date products at Mason's. She got most of them free. It was one of the ways they were able to make her small salary last from paycheck to paycheck.

"Aren't you excited about going to Arizona, Mom?" Jeremiah said. He poured a little detergent and swished his hands into the sudsy water.

"It hasn't quite sunk in yet, and it still isn't certain. There is so much I have to do to get ready. I don't even know if I'll be able to get off work. I'll have to call Todd's mother. And think of the expense."

“Bill put the airline tickets on his credit card, didn't he?”

“I know. We'll have to figure out how to pay him back.”

“I have money in the bank.”

“Jeremiah, you can't go through life giving away your money.”

“Some people do. I heard about these people named MacArthur who give money to people all the time.”

“The MacArthur Foundation. They're rich philanthropists. You're not a philanthropist, Jeremiah,” she said. She hummed a happy tune and put the dishes away.

Jeremiah went to his room. He didn't see any need to clean it now since he and Todd would be staying with Bill and Ruth. He lay across his bed, opened the drawer on his bedside stand and took out his bankbook. He opened it and stared at the balance; it read “\$587.00.” As he gazed intently at the numbers, they spun before his eyes until they read: \$587,000,000, five hundred eighty-seven million dollars. Before the dazzling half-billion dollars could transport him into his fantasy world where he often hid, his mother called from downstairs.

“Todd can come,” Nina said.

“What did you say?” Jeremiah said returning to full reality.

“I *said* I talked to Mrs. Miller. I told her the situation and she said it's okay for Todd to stay with you at Bill and Ruth's.”